



THE BILDUNGSROMAN GENRE AND ITS ROLE IN DEPICTING EDUCATION

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Abstract

The Bildungsroman has played a significant role in English literature as a genre that explores personal growth through educational and social experiences. This article examines how the Bildungsroman reflects the transformative power of both formal and informal education in shaping the identities of protagonists. Focusing on classic works such as “David Copperfield” by Charles Dickens and “Jane Eyre” by Charlotte Brontë, this paper discusses the ways in which educational settings and mentorship influence character development and facilitate social integration.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, education, personal growth, character development, English literature, schooling, socialization.

Introduction

The Bildungsroman, a term derived from German meaning “novel of formation”, has become a basis like mainspring in the study of English literature. This genre focuses on the psychological and moral enlargement. The genre has historically served not only as a narrative of personal growth but also as a reflection of societal values. The Bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel, has long served as a literary space for the exploration of personal development through education and upbringing. Originating in late 18th-century in German literature, the genre of Bildungsroman started forming its shape in English novels of the 19th century. Authors such as Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot used the form to depict the intellectual, emotional, and moral growth of their protagonists. Franco Moretti (1987) notes that- “the Bildungsroman embodies the conflict

between self-determination and social integration, a dynamic often mediated through the experience of education, where education becomes a key site of this struggle”.¹

Through characters’ experiences at school and their interactions with mentors English Bildungsroman reflects broader questions about morality, self-identity and social values. Charles Dickens’s “David Copperfield” (1850) contrasts two educational environments: the harsh, abusive Salem House under Mr.Creakle and the nurturing influence of Dr. Strong’s school².

By real descriptions Dickens criticized the cruelty and brutality of institutional education of his time. Maggie Tulliver’s thirst for learning is supposed by social expectations about femininity and he said that :- “I only want to know everything... but that is not allowed for girls³”. The Bildungsroman genre has played a central role in the community which portrayed education as not just formal schooling, but also as a comprehensive process of self-discovery, moral growth, and social integration. In this genre, education is not limited to classrooms; it involves every life lesson the protagonist encounters⁴ on their journey from youth to maturity. In his novels belonging to this genre Charles Dickens highlights the cruelty and ineffectiveness of some Victorian schools, showing how rigid or abusive system can harm a child’s development. We can support our ideas through the following words of the writer:

“He showed me the cane, and asked me what I thought of THAT, for a tooth? Was it a double tooth, hey? Did it bite? Did it bite? At every question he gave me fleshy cut with it that made me write. So I was very soon made feel of Salem House...and very soon in tears also”.⁵

In this passage, Dickens portrays Mr. Creakle, the headmaster of Salem House as a figure who uses fear and physical punishment as tools of discipline. The metaphor of the cane as a “tooth” emphasizes the biting cruelty of his methods. This vivid depiction serves to highlight the harsh realities of certain educational institutions during the Victorian era and underscores Dickens’s criticism of such oppressive system. During the Victorian age education was not universally available. Access depended on class, gender and wealth. While upper-class boys

¹ Moretti F. (1987). *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London

² Dickens, C. (1850) *David Copperfield*. London. Bradbury and Evans

³ Eliot, G. (1860). *The Mill on the Floss*. William Blackwood and Sons.

⁴ Life lesson protagonists such as Jane Eyre, David Cooperfield or Maggie Tulliver encounter on their journey

⁵ *David Copperfield*, Chapter 7: “My First Half” at Salem House”



attended elite public schools, working-class children often had to work from an early age, with little or no formal education. Girls especially, were often excluded from advanced education beyond basic literacy. Corporal punishment (such as caning) was common in many schools, working-class children often had to work from an early age, with little or no formal education. Girls, especially, were often excluded from advanced education beyond basic literacy. Harsh discipline in schools was considered as the best way of upbringing the children.

Teachers often ruled through fear rather than encouragement. This is reflected in Dickens's depiction of Salem House in "David Copperfield", where Mr. Creakle's use of the cane becomes a symbol of an education system based on intimidation rather than enlightenment.

In this work, Dickens not only portrays the difficult lives of orphaned children, but also successfully highlights issues of education, the working social class, and poverty of that era. Analysis shows that there are commonalities in the formation of the main characters and the development of events in Dickens's novels "Oliver Twist", "Great Expectations", and "David Copperfield". All the protagonists of these novels witness the injustice of society or the people around them. Nevertheless, throughout their lives, they receive unexpected help — sometimes from distant relatives, and at times even from complete strangers. Through this, the author demonstrates that society is not entirely corrupted; there are still kind and compassionate people. The writer aims to awaken a spirit of humanity in the hearts of society's members and believes in their capacity for moral growth.

Many Victorian schools were run by religious institutions, and moral education was seen as equally important as academic learning. The curriculum often emphasized Bible study, obedience, and rote memorization, rather than critical thinking or creativity.

The 1870 Education Act (Forster Act) marked the first step toward compulsory education in England and Wales, requiring children aged 5 to 13 to attend school. It reflected the growing belief that education was essential for a productive, moral, and stable society. Authors like Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot used their novels to critique the educational institutions of their time: Dickens exposed both the cruelty (e.g., Mr. Creakle in "David Copperfield") and neglect of poor children ("Nicholas Nickleby"). Bronte highlighted how girls endured emotional and physical suffering at schools like Lowood in "Jane Eyre", but also emphasized the role of kind mentors. Eliot questioned the rigid social

roles that prevented girls like Maggie Tulliver (“The Mill on the Floss”) from developing intellectually.

This criticism reflected broader concerns about the intersection of education. The Bildungsroman genre typically leads to set of powerful outcomes, both for the protagonist and for the reader. While many protagonists initially rebel against societal norms, the genre often leads them to a compromise or reconciliation with society⁶. This reflects a shift from idealism to realism- learning how to live within societal boundaries while maintaining individually. With giving example Franco Moretti states that, -“Bildungsroman is fundamentally about the compromise between the self and society”⁷. According to him, the protagonist moves from romantic idealism to bourgeois realism, learning to balance personal desires with social roles and norms.

CONCLUSION

Education in the Victorian Bildungsroman is more than a theme — it is a moral battlefield, where characters either succumb to or overcome the social expectations imposed on them. Writers of the period used literature to argue for reform, empathy, and equality in education. Ultimately, the Bildungsroman teaches the reader that education is a lifelong process of becoming an independent person, that can be taken not only in educational institutions, but also through the tests of life and cruel treatments of society. It reminds readers that growth is not liner, and that identity is forgotten through a continuous dialogue between the individual and the society they inhabit. In this way, the genre remains as relevant today as it was in the 19th century.

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⁶ Moretti, Franco. *The way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1987

⁷ Franco Moretti. “The harmony between individual aspiration and social integration is the genre’s defining tension” 1987, p. 5-7



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