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Origin and Development of Bildungsroman Novels in English Literature

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ABSTRACT

First of all, a brief introduction to development of novel is to be given. Then the meaning of Bildungsroman novel along with the origin and development of this literary sub-genre have to be examined. Various representative authors like Dickens, Goethe, Joyce, Mann, and Christoph Martin Wieland in addition to some female writers like Charlotte Bronte, Sylvia Plath are to be presented critically. Moreover, some representative works of these authors under the sub-genre Bildungsroman presented critically. The representative literary works like Great Expectations, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Sons and Lovers, Invisible Man along with Jane Eyre, Bell Jar are to be examined in terms of their Bildungsroman elements. This paper also presents common motifs and themes like 'Identity and the Self', 'Coming of Age', 'Education', 'Love', 'and Search for the Meaning of Life' along with their unique presentation styles. The movement variations are to be examined carefully. Finally the conclusions are drawn by means of the review of literature indicated.

Key Words: Bildungsroman, Novel of Education, Love, Artistic Development, Quest for Identity.

Introduction to rise of Novel:

At the outset of early 18th century many writers started writing long narratives in prose form. The modern form of the novel got development initially in England with famous writers like Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding. Most of their novels were episodic and plot driven stories such as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722) of Defoe; *Pamela* (1740) of Richardson and Henry Fielding's famous novel *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1747) were all in England. In other countries like Germany, America some writers attempted to write bildungsroman, for instance Wieland's *The History of Agathon* (1766-67), Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795) in Germany. In America, the classics in this genre like Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* are often considered as representative novels of this kind.

Origin and development of Bildungsroman:

The term Bildungsroman was coined in 1817 by Karl von Morgenstern but not commonly applied until the end of the 19th century and it flourished through the middle decades of the nineteenth century, both in England and the United States. Bildungsroman is the name affixed to those novels that concentrate on the development or education of a central character. German in origin, 'bildungs' means formation, and 'roman' means novel. In fact the sub-genre bildungsroman has many variations within its kind such as Entwicklungslungsroman (novel of development), Erziehungsroman (novel of education), Künstlerroman (development of the artist) and Zeitroman which blends the development of era in which the hero lives with his or her personal development. In fact the bildungsroman was especially popular until 1860. Mostly of the Bildungsroman intends to lead the reader to greater personal enrichment as the protagonist journeys from youth to psychological or emotional maturity. The growth and maturity occur according to a specific pattern: so the sensitive, intelligent protagonist generally leaves home and undergoes stages of conflict and growth, he or she is tested by crises and love affairs and then finally finds the best place to use his / her unique talents. German novelists basically concentrate on internal or psychological struggle on the hero where as English novelists complicate the protagonist's battle to establish an individual identity with various conflicts from outside the self. So the protagonist endeavours for a quest for the meaning of life or an instrument for writer's social and moral opinions as presented through the main character.

Representative authors of Bildungsroman:

Some of the most representative authors of bildungsroman are Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Christoph Martin Wieland, Thomas Mann, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, James Joyce, Mark Twain and Sylvia Plath etc. Though all these writers had different epochs, nationalities and social backgrounds, they could all create their own distinction in producing wonderful works of literature of which some would certainly come under the label 'bildungsroman'. Although *The History of Agathon*, written by Christoph Martin Wieland in 1766–1767, may be the first known example, it was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, written in 1795 that took the form from philosophical to personal development and gave celebrity to the genre. The protagonist's adventures can be seen from the authors as a quest for the meaning of life or as a vehicle for the author's social and moral opinions as demonstrated through the protagonist.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe published Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship (1795), a novel that is considered a prime example of the Bildungsroman. One of the greatest British writers of all time, Charles Dickens was a Victorian novelist who chose the Bildungsroman form for at least two of his most famous works such as *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. Dickens found his first success as a journalist and comic writer of the *Pickwick Papers* though he had other successful novels like *A Christmas Carol* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. One of the most famous novelists from Ireland is James Joyce, whose classic novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* depicts an artist's development. This novel established the modern concept of the artist as a bohemian who rejects middle-class values. Moreover Joyce's innovations in literary organization and style, particularly his use of stream of consciousness technique, secured his unique place in the development of the novel. A leading German novelist of 20th century was Thomas Mann who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1929. His most famous novels are *The Magic Mountain* as a Bildungsroman and *Doctor Faustus* as a Künstlerroman in which the protagonist is an artist who makes a deal with the devil to achieve creative vitality. Mostly the overall theme of Mann's works is the breakdown of civilization. Some female writers like Charlotte Bronte and Sylvia Plath also produced excellent Bildungsroman novels. Charlotte Bronte wrote *Jane Eyre* (1847), an excellent example of the female Bildungsroman. Sylvia Plath who is known as a confessional generation had written a semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar* is a Bildungsroman but it does not completely follow all of the common Bildungsroman conventions.

Representative novels of Bildungsroman:

In Charles Dickens Bildungsroman, *Great Expectations*, the young protagonist, Pip, leaves his rural home to become a gentleman and win a girl of his dreams. In most of the Bildungsroman the heroes have to make their own way but in this novel Pip had a mysterious benefactor who provides the wealth that Pip thinks would make him happy. Eventually, Pip finds his true values and he realises that happiness comes not from money but from other sources like personal integrity, from the appreciation of good friends regardless of their social status. In similar ways, D. H. Lawrence's autobiographical Bildungsroman, *Sons and Lovers* is also the coming of age story of Paul Morel, the son of a coal miner had a controlling and ambitious mother. As a result of the struggle for sexual power and individual identity causes Paul to face many difficulties such as professional fame and establishment of good relationship with a woman of his own age. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* expresses in metaphorical language the Bildungsroman theme of searching for one's identity. The nameless black protagonist realises from white society that he has prescribed roles to live. As soon as he steps out of the assigned sphere, he becomes 'invisible' to the dominant white culture which does not allow his individuality.

Further Bildungsroman aspects are more evident in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, William Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. The Bildungsroman novels *Jane Eyre* and *Bell Jar* are from reputed female novelists. Thomas Hardy introduced the concept of fatalism into Victorian literature. Fatalism assumes that humans are subject to many arbitrary and random forces, such as chance and timing, which play a crucial role in shaping their destinies. In his Bildungsroman *Jude the Obscure*, the maturation story follows Jude Fawley's way to destruction from 'the tragedy of unfulfilled aims'. The protagonist is a stonemason by trade. He loses his spiritual and intellectual ambitions with his disastrous relational involvement with Arabella and Sue who are vulgar

and intellectual respectively. He marries Arabella and has one child with her; He does not marry Sue but he has two children by her. Finally Jude dies miserably by becoming an alcoholic. In the novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, hero Stephen Dedalus grows up, he bids farewell to his home country, family and religion. James Joyce presented a rebellious concept through this novel that the artist as an outcast and his alienation as a necessary component for his creativity. The Norton Anthology of English Literature describes this novel as portraying “the parallel movement toward art and toward exile”. Another autobiographical Bildungsroman, *Of Human Bondage* is by William Somerset Maugham. He was a physician but he abandoned medicine to write plays and novels. The protagonist in this novel is a medical student with a clubfoot and falls in love with a wanton waitress involved with obsessive and tragic love affair. But Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship is established the Bildungsroman as a novel of personal rather than philosophical development for the protagonist. The protagonist wanders through a series of love affairs, friendships, and occupations before settling down to marriage and responsible adulthood.

In addition to many male Bildungsroman writers whose works have been examined just before, there are some renowned female novelists also contributed to this sub-genre, especially Charlotte Bronte with her famous novel *Jane Eyre* is one of the first Bildungsromans with a female protagonist and Sylvia Plath with her autobiographical Bildungsroman novel *The Bell Jar*. Charlotte Bronte used many elements like natural and supernatural which transformed her novel into a kind of romantic and gothic novel. This novel is predominantly Bildungsroman in nature as in this novel traces Jane’s development from a dependent child to a matured and independent woman. The novel also depicts the love affair between Jane and her master Edward Rochester. Another well known poet cum novelist from modern American literature is the author of the novel *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath. Her novel *The Bell Jar* tells the story of Esther Greenwood who works as an editor for a magazine in New York City. Sylvia Plath used a standard pattern of Bildungsroman in this novel, which the young lady goes to pursue professional aspirations but with no traditional happy ending.

Prominent themes and motifs in Bildungsroman:

The Bildungsroman sub-genre has many common motifs and themes like ‘Identity and the Self’, ‘Coming of Age’, ‘Education’, ‘Love’, ‘and Search for the Meaning of Life’ along with some unique presentation styles. Goethe used the theme of coming of age and apprenticeship because of the distinguishing factor of this genre is learning process that brings the protagonist from immature status into matured or developed state. The theme of identity and the self is dominantly presented in Ralph Ellison’s Bildungsroman, *The Invisible Man*. As part of self-discovery the protagonist gets a new perspective on his relationship with other people. So in this kind of Bildungsroman, the main character psychologically evolves toward maturity and self-awareness. Journey is another important theme in Bildungsroman; the hero leaves home which usually situated in rural setting to travel into the wider world of urban setting. So the protagonist encounters a larger society that tests his various potentialities and eventually the physical journey motivates change through which he gets growth. Mainly the theme of education is another essential component of Erziehungsroman. In this kind of novels, life is an education and the process of growing is a series of experiences that teach many lessons which may be academic in nature or may be in other

areas such as learning social conventions, business affairs or gaining integrity in various relationships.

Bildungsroman variations:

There are many movement variations in Bildungsroman such as Entwicklungroman (novel of development), Erziehungsroman (novel of Education), Künstlerroman (novel of artistic development), and Zeitroman (development of era along with personal development). There may be a kind of social protest, picaresque element along with some English, American or German aspects in particular. The American style of the Bildungsroman is a combination of the German Bildungsroman and the Spanish picaresque such as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Defoe's *Moll Flanders* is an English Bildungsroman in picaresque in nature. While the German Bildungsroman emphasizes internal conflicts within the main character, the English Bildungsroman uses the outside world to threaten the hero's quest for identity. Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus* are some of the best examples of Künstlerroman. But in Zeitroman, a variation of the Bildungsroman blends the development of the era in which the hero lives with his personal development. For example, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* dramatizes the effects of being a Civil War soldier on the protagonist.

Conclusion:

In fact, the term Bildungsroman is applied to many novels of all times. Though it is not a dominant genre; it has a universal appeal because it deals with the universal experience of growing up or coming of the age. In all of the novels which have been mentioned connected with a kind of quest to become a responsible adult to find one's place in the world. It is a bit difficult that readers have sustained interest in this topic. Following various difficulties of the protagonist in a Bildungsroman, readers trace the strenuous journey toward maturity and learn from the growth process observed in these novels. As every student of literature learns, a well written story has certain basic elements such as plot, character, point of view, setting, tone, and style. In many kinds of literary works any one of these elements can be emphasized over the others. In the case of the Bildungsroman, character is primarily emphasised more than anything and the structure of the story tends to follow the standard pattern: introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement.

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