

Bildungsroman:

The Coming of Age Story

WHAT IS IT?

- A novel that focuses on “the moral, psychological, and intellectual development of a main character”
- This main character is **almost always a child**
- The reader follows this character as he/she gains a **better understanding of the world**

HOW DOES IT WORK?

- A bildungsroman consists of **four stages**, stages that characters must face on their path to maturity
- Because of these stages, the reader usually **follows the character for a number of years.**
- Sometimes, the reader literally follows the protagonist **from childhood to adulthood.**
- Other times, the reader follows the protagonist **from child like thoughts/feelings to more mature understandings** of the world around him/her

STEP ONE

1. The protagonist experiences an event that sets him/ her on a journey

This experience is usually a **tragic loss or sense of unhappiness** causes the character to **leave his/her home or family** (Howe)

STEP TWO

2. The character is almost always **stuck in an “unbending social order”** where society has strict rules that one is supposed to follow (Howe)

STEP THREE

3. A majority of the character's conflicts result from this social order, where the **character struggles between his/her personal needs and “the judgments enforced by this unbending social order.”** (Howe)

STEP FOUR

4. Eventually, the character **learns how to fully enter society**. The novel ends with the character evaluating himself/herself and his/her new place in society (Howe)

This includes a **deeper understanding of the human condition** and, consequently, a **realistic sense of personal humility and compassion for others**.

WHAT IS THE OUTCOME?

- It typically ends on a positive note
- The hero or heroine has made some mistakes and experienced painful disappointments, but he/she is able to move on and put those experiences behind him/her
- End suggests a productive, happy future

Works Cited

Buckley, Jerome Hamilton. Season of Youth:
The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974.

Howe, Susanne. Wilhelm Meister and his English
Kinsmen: Apprentices to Life. New York:
Columbia University Press, 1930.

The Bildungsroman pattern in *Great Expectations*

- ◉ With your partner, fill in examples for each stage of the pattern listed in your notes.
- ◉ Share at end.

The Bildungsroman pattern in *Great Expectations*

Consider the original ending of the novel:

It was four years more, before I saw herself. I had heard of her as leading a most unhappy life, and as being separated from her husband who had used her with great cruelty, and who had become quite renowned as a compound of pride, brutality, and meanness. I had heard of the death of her husband (from an accident consequent on ill-treating a horse), and of her being married again to a Shropshire doctor, who, against his interest, had once very manfully interposed, on an occasion when he was in professional attendance on Mr. Drummle, and had witnessed some outrageous treatment of her. I had heard that the Shropshire doctor was not rich, and that they lived on her own personal fortune. I was in England again — in London, and walking along Piccadilly with little Pip — when a servant came running after me to ask would I step back to a lady in a carriage who wished to speak to me. It was a little pony carriage, which the lady was driving; and the lady and I looked sadly enough on one another.

"I am greatly changed, I know; but I thought you would like to shake hands with Estella, too, Pip. Lift up that pretty child and let me kiss it!" (She supposed the child, I think, to be my child.) I was very glad afterwards to have had the interview; for, in her face and in her voice, and in her touch, she gave me the assurance, that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be.

The Bildungsroman pattern in *Great Expectations*

- ◉ Which ending seems more in line with the pattern of the Bildungsroman?

Original

Revised