

# Girlhood in British Coming-of-Age Novels



# Girlhood in British Coming-of-Age Novels:

*The Bildungsroman  
Heroine Revisited*

By

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Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



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This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-0304-6

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0304-5

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to doc. PhDr. Stanislav Kolář, Dr., prof. PhDr. Anton Pokrivčák, PhD. and prof. Dr. José Igor Prieto Arranz for their constructive and helpful comments in their reviews of the book manuscript. Also I would like to thank the proofreader Sonja Stojanović and Saša Trenčič for his help with technical preparation of the manuscript. Finally, I owe special thanks to my husband and my son for their love and support.



# INTRODUCTION

Women are educated—who knows how?—as it were by breathing in ideas, by living rather than by acquiring knowledge. The status of manhood, on the other hand, is attained only by the stress of thought and much technical exertion.

G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*

Maturation, understood as the “development of an innate genetic potential under the influence of a particular geographical and cultural setting” (Summerfield and Downward 2010, 2), is a relatively recent concept promoted within the humanist tradition which, from the eighteenth century onwards, has shaped the modern conception of selfhood. Victor Watson (2003) in his concise overview of the theme of maturation in British and American literature places the beginnings of maturation in fiction with John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), when the word progress started to mean “both *movement* and *improvement*” (4, emphasis in the original). Watson sees Daniel Defoe as “the first great writer to find fictional ways of expressing the modern self—predominantly Protestant and middle-class, dramatic and insecure, private and social, but above all with a dynamic sense of its continuity and capacity to change and develop” (9).

The large number of literary representations of maturation that appeared during the Age of Enlightenment and the two centuries of its legacy reveal much about changing perceptions of the individual’s inner world and its interaction with society. Initially, the narratives of personal development possessed a high measure of thematic and structural idiosyncrasies, which often formed the basis of rather narrow definitions of the *Bildungsroman* as a novel about a young middle-class man. However since then, the growing complexities of nineteenth- and twentieth-century society have brought diversification of the genre. The rising need to consider gender, class, ethnicity, race and sexuality in literary representations of maturation and in critical studies about them shows that both writers and critics realize that the traditional humanist idea of an internally developing individual as a unified, masculine, white,

middle-class self no longer corresponds with the awareness of the complexities of personal development in the contemporary world. At the same time, numerous novels about female development by female authors have appeared since the time when Hegel pondered upon the “mysteries” of women’s education, which proves that many women have decided to throw light on the “intriguing” process of becoming a woman.

The present book discusses selected coming-of-age novels in order to study contemporary transformations of the classic *Bildungsroman* in British literature. The research interest in British coming-of-age novels by female authors that provides the basis of this work was motivated by the need to fill in a blank page in the existent academic studies of coming-of-age narratives in English. Important scholarly contributions to the field (e.g. Bubíková 2008, 2015, McWilliams 2009, Millard 2007, Rishoi 2003, Saxton 1998, White 1985) tend to focus on North American examples of the genre. A major exception to this tendency can be found in the works by Milada Franková (2008, 2001), whose studies on Jane Gardam have drawn my attention to this interesting but largely overlooked British author.

In terms of theoretical approaches the book draws on works by the feminist critics whose incorporation of gender into the studies of the *Bildungsroman* resulted in the delineation of the female version of the genre, “the female *Bildungsroman*” (Abel, Hirsch and Langland 1983, Labovitz 1986). The feminist perspective on the genre provided the specification of the female aspects of the classic eighteenth- and nineteenth- century *Bildungsroman* and the characterization of the “feminist *Bildungsroman*” (Felski 1989), developed in the context of second-wave feminism. In this book, I would like to utilize these critics’ definitions of the female *Bildungsroman* to explore further transformations of the genre in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I follow the widely accepted approach to the *Bildungsroman* which usually focuses on “the plot and thematic elements that demonstrate the social and psychological forces contributing to individual *Bildung*” (Ellis 1999, 21) and employ close reading techniques to examine the heroines’ development in the framework of their individual coming-of-age stories. The primary purpose of the individual analyses of the girl protagonists in the process of becoming is to reflect on the transformations of the classic *Bildungsroman* heroine under the influence of new cultural impulses in postwar and postmillennial Britain.

Feminist studies of female *Bildung* in twentieth-century literature (e.g. Abel, Hirsch, Langland 1983, Felski 1989, Labovitz 1986, Pratt 1981) often focus on the adult woman protagonist who experiences “awakening” and liberates herself successfully from traditional gender roles. As Barbara

A. White notes in her book *Growing up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction* (1985), the fact that this older protagonist of the postwar novel of development “moves toward achieving ‘authentic female selfhood’ makes the modern feminist *Bildungsroman* the most popular form of feminist fiction” (195). On the other hand, literary representations of girlhood have attracted less attention from second wave feminists, a fact that can be explained both by the centrality of “womanhood” in postwar feminism and, as White (1985) maintains, by the tendency of the novel of adolescence to focus more on the girl protagonist’s conflict with society than her successful development.

Both major books on the representations of girlhood in twentieth-century (mostly) Northern American literature (White 1985, Saxton 1998) suggest that the adolescent girl tends to be portrayed as a victim of patriarchal society. Barbara A. White’s (1985) study of the girl protagonists in novels by American female authors written between 1920 and 1982 indicates that despite the rising influence of feminist thought on American society, the images of girlhood remained rather bleak during that period. Most frequently, the examined novels of female adolescence “include scenes of male sexual harassment or violence” (175), which corresponds with White’s point that “female adolescence is a social state characterized by weakness” (189). White compares the girl protagonist with the adolescent hero who may *choose* to be a “rebel-victim” (191). The hero makes an existential choice to rebel “against the ‘immitigable rule of reality’, that is, the human condition”, while the girl heroine, who is a real victim, “rebels not because her human body is doomed, by immitigable rule of reality, to imperfection and death, but because her female body, by mitigable rule of society, dooms her to subservience” (191). White concludes her study with the hope that the following decade (1990s) would see the emergence of novels of adolescence that would reflect some positive changes in the status and situation of girls (197).

The female body as a site of struggle and a reason for the girl heroine’s victimization also appears in the coming-of-age narratives explored in a collection of essays edited by Ruth O. Saxton (1998). However, some of the novels examined do suggest a change in atmosphere that led to the rise of Girl Power in the 1990s. In these novels the adolescent heroine changes from a passive victim into a girl who fights back. Renee R. Curry (1998) argues that this new type of heroine defies not only patriarchal but also feminist assumptions about girlhood: “This homology between girls and innocence deems young females to be blameless, faultless, virtuous, spotless, pure of heart, irreproachable, inculpable, chaste, guiltless, guileless, harmless, simple, naïve, unsophisticated, artless, unknowledgeable, and free from responsibility” (96). The rejection of the

equation of the girl with innocence that Curry (1998) identifies in such novels as Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1983), Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* (1985) and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) heralds the new perspectives on girlhood that dominate in turn-of-the-millennium popular culture and contemporary academic discourse. The rise of girls' studies in academia has been motivated primarily by the need to map the previously ignored role of the girl in youth culture and recognize the relevance of girls to feminist politics and scholarship (Kearney 2009). On the other hand, the rise of Girl Power images in popular mass media appears to be related to wider cultural changes generated under the joint influence of neoliberalism and postfeminism. As Anita Harris (2004b) notices, "the idea of girl power encapsulates the narrative of the successful new young woman who is self-inventing, ambitious, and confident" (17), a narrative which is actively developed in the postindustrial societies that utilize female labour. The turn-of-the-millennium "can-do girl" (Harris 2004b), as a product of Girl Power discourse, thus appears as a younger and more welcomed version of the *fin de siècle* New Woman who faces a brave new world of seemingly unlimited choices.

The major changes in the position of young women in the western postindustrial world have contributed to important shifts in contemporary understandings of girlhood and womanhood. These shifts are reflected most visibly in postfeminist critiques of the victimary discourse that sees women as passive and powerless victims of patriarchy. Whether developed by popular press postfeminist writers or academic postfeminists, what these critiques share, as Rebecca Stringer (2014) maintains, is the development of a neoliberal version of feminism. Neoliberal feminism aligns young women with agency, power, choice and personal responsibility and encourages them to turn away from the fight against structural oppression, the fight that was central to second wave feminism. Although the figure of the successful can-do girl dominates popular culture generated by the postfeminist media, the fact that neither feminist nor postfeminist phases of Western culture have brought automatic improvements in the situation of all women has not been missed. Literary authors, among others, continue to point out that just like the feminist New Woman, the postfeminist can-do girl is a subject position that is open mostly to white middle-class women.

Consequently, in recent decades, the novel of development has seen the rise of heroines who cannot enjoy the privileged position of being white middle or upper class. The specific situations of young protagonists from ethnic, religious and sexual minorities have been well-covered in numerous studies, such as Bolaki 2011, Ho 2015, Japtok 2005, Kolář

2015, Buráková 2015, and Baučeková 2015. Nonetheless, my study intentionally focuses on the changing representations of the white middle-class heroine in British coming-of-age novels. I explore how the traditional female *Bildungsroman* protagonist, who is by definition white, middle-class and in the process of apprenticeship into heterosexual romance, changes under the influence of feminist and postfeminist discourses. The classic heroine of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century narratives reappears in twentieth-century texts as a modern girl that experiences a significant rise of feminist consciousness only to develop further in more contemporary works into a postfeminist girl who tests the new freedoms offered by the postmillennial world.

The novels that I have chosen for my discussion reveal, in one way or another, important thematic and structural similarities with the classic female versions of the genre (mainly the works of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë). This, of course, on the one hand, points to the generic affiliations between the classic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* and the contemporary coming-of-age novel. On the other hand, these similarities suggest that despite some radical changes in western cultural sensibilities, traditional gender role divisions have preserved an important position in contemporary understandings of female and male development. My selection of novels includes eight texts whose dates of publication range from 1949 to 2014, opening up the possibility of studying changes in the female development genre in three different periods of postwar British literature: the pre-second wave feminism period (1940s and 1950s), the decades dominated by feminist debates (1960s and 1970s) and the postfeminist turn-of-the-millennium period. The choice of the older postwar novels, *I Capture the Castle*, *The Greengage Summer* and *Bilgewater*, was also motivated by an attempt to pay due attention to the works of Dodie Smith, Rumer Godden and Jane Gardam which have been, for a long time, overlooked by literary critics. The novel *The Magic Toyshop*, written by well-known and critically-acclaimed author Angela Carter, obviously does not fulfill these criteria. However, Carter's work provides a good example of a literary representation of what has been recently referred to as "victim feminism", and thus adds to a variety of approaches to feminist issues detectable in Smith's, Rumer's and Gardam's coming-of-age narratives.

In the case of the postmillennial texts I primarily searched for the works of young female authors whose coming-of-age narratives reflect postfeminist sensibilities. My intention to discuss the white middle-class girl heroine's practice of "girl power", her embracement of "new traditionalism" or her criticism of second wave feminism was motivated not only by the need to outline the differences between the classic, postwar

and postmillennial *Bildung* heroines, but also to explore the influence of postfeminist media images on literary representations of young women. Important intersections between the media and some literary texts have already been well covered in the studies of chick lit narratives (e.g. Gill 2007, Harzewski 2011, Smith 2008). Chick lit is seen as a contemporary genre that clearly “engages with consumer culture mediums, particularly women’s advice manuals, such as women’s magazines, self-help books, romantic comedies, and/or domestic-advice manuals” (Smith 2008, 5). Chick lit texts tend to be criticized by feminist scholars for the promotion of the same consumerist lifestyles and commoditized versions of femininity—reflected mostly in the protagonist’s obsession with shopping and her body image—that dominate in the contemporary media. The critics of the genre also tend to notice that chick lit combines the tradition of romance, the novel of manners and the novel of development with typical postfeminist images of young women. On the one hand, these novels offer images of the emancipated postfeminist heroine—a career woman, financially independent and sexually assertive. On the other hand, the genre has been accused of promoting a return to traditional gender roles: the heroine’s successful career is often achieved with the help of the right man; chick lit novels tend to present negative images of singlehood, and sometimes participate in the postfeminist revival of the home as an ideal feminine space. In general, the genre has been associated with the antifeminist backlash that, as some feminist critics believe, dominates in postfeminist popular culture.

In my study I see the female coming-of-age novel as another contemporary genre that reflects the media-induced constructions of the postfeminist female identity. Noticing this important similarity between the two genres, my study explores, among other things, whether these coming-of-age narratives reflect the same signs of antifeminist backlash that have been identified in popular chick lit texts. Since I was primarily interested in literary works that have attracted the attention of the general reader and also earned critical acclaim, my final selection comprises Tiffany Murray’s *Happy Accidents* and Caitlin Moran’s *How to Build a Girl*, two novels which were shortlisted for the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize, Helen Walsh’s *Brass*, shortlisted for Betty Trask Award, and Susan Fletcher’s *Eve Green*, a novel which won the Whitbread Award.

The present work includes six chapters. The first chapter presents a theoretical framework for the close reading analysis of the selected coming-of-age narratives. It outlines the main critical approaches to the male and female *Bildungsroman*, paying special attention to the feminist (the feminist *Bildungsroman*) and postfeminist (chick lit) developments of

the genre in twentieth and twenty-first century Anglo-American literature. It also provides a theoretical basis for the delineation of the coming-of-age novel as a literary form that can be seen as strongly related to but also, in some respects, significantly different from the classic *Bildungsroman*. Finally, it places this study of the development of the girl heroine in the British coming-of-age novel in the context of the rising interest in girlhood that has been detected by cultural critics in numerous social and cultural discourses in the turn-of-the-millennial world.

In the second chapter I discuss *I Capture the Castle* and *The Greengage Summer*, two texts that offer points of intersection between the classic genre of the *Bildungsroman*, children's literature and young adult literature. Although these novels were published shortly after the Second World War, they are concerned with topics that have remained central to contemporary narratives of female development: the role of romance and the role of sexuality in the psychological process of maturation towards womanhood. *I Capture the Castle* combines the traditional romantic apprenticeship motif (the search for the right partner) with the more modern concerns relating to other, public, forms of women's realization, such as literary authorship. *The Greengage Summer*, on the other hand, de-idealizes traditional romance through the focus on the heroine's initiation into the dynamics of adult sexual relations.

The third chapter presents two narratives created in the context of second wave feminism, *The Magic Toyshop* and *Bilgewater*. Despite their strong surface-level differences, these novels present the same focus on the heroine's relationship with the father (figure) as a form of negotiating her identity and status in patriarchal society. I also notice that both Angela Carter and Jane Gardam, in their respective narratives, work with the same literary traditions of the female *Bildungsroman*, fairy-tale and Gothic romance to emphasize the feminist concerns that were central to second wave feminism: demand for gender equality in all spheres of life, rejection of the public/private divide along gender lines and vigorous critique of brutal and subtle forms of patriarchal dominance.

The fourth chapter turns to two more recent coming-of-age novels that are examined as literary appropriations of Girl Power media discourse. I read *Brass* and *How to Build a Girl* as respective representations of the two main subject positions that Girl Power discourse creates for young women: the "at-risk girl" and "can-do girl". Each novel, in its own way, explores the radical postfeminist freedoms that the turn-of-the-millennial world offers to the girl heroine. However, what the two novels also share is awareness of the problematic aspects of Girl Power whose destructive effect ultimately leads the heroine in the direction towards some quite traditional choices.

The fifth chapter deals with two novels that participate in what can be seen as a reactionary tendency in postfeminist sensibility. *Eve Greene* focuses on the motif of “new traditionalism” and *Happy Accidents* presents a critique of “victim feminism”. As I show, both novels use Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* as a central intertext to produce interesting contemporary variations of the classic female *Bildungsroman*. Their appropriations of *Jane Eyre* appear as the authors’ attempts to move beyond the accepted feminist interpretations of the novel and offer postfeminist “rewritings” of the famous narrative of female development.

Finally, the sixth chapter offers a summary of the major findings based on my close readings of the selected novels and draws attention to the same patterns in the heroine’s process development that are present in narratives written in different historical and cultural periods. These findings appear to support the point that wider cultural changes that have appeared in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have not had such a changing influence on the literary representations of girlhood as some may have expected. The concluding chapter also addresses the potentially reactionary character of the four postfeminist coming-of-age novels, which seem to employ the same backlash themes that feminist critics identified in the chick lit genre.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE NOVEL OF DEVELOPMENT: GENRE, GENDER, CONTEXT

### **The *Bildungsroman*: Development of the Hero in the Modern World**

The *Bildungsroman* genre originated in the eighteenth century when the idea of an individual's development through the interaction with the social environment appeared in the wider context of the Enlightenment's emphasis on the importance of personal and social progress. The Enlightenment belief in the possibility of progress was deeply rooted in the philosophical assumptions about reason, knowledge and education whose gendered nature has been noticed by female critics. Eighteenth-century philosophy constructed the concept of rationality as the "transcendence of the feminine" (Lloyd 1993, 104), providing a conceptual basis for both the association of advanced reason with maleness and the exclusion of women from the public domain. Just like society's development was assessed by the progress of reason away from feminized nature, the achievements of advanced reason were measured by its capacity to leave behind the feminine, "immature stage of consciousness" (58).

The public sphere plays a crucial role in this understanding of maturity. As Genevieve Lloyd (1993), quoting Immanuel Kant, explains:

The maturity proper to enlightenment is directly connected with access to a public space in which men of learning enjoy unlimited freedom to use their own reason and 'speak in their own person'. To restrict this freedom in this sphere would be to 'virtually nullify a phase in man's upward progress, thus making it fruitless and even detrimental to subsequent generations.' (67)

However, the traditional confinement of female individuals to the domestic sphere obstructed the personal development of "higher" quality

available to their male counterparts and prevented them from making an autonomous contribution to the public sphere of education and employment. This line of philosophical thinking thus reflected the realities of the traditional divisions of female and male roles in relation to the private and public spaces and at the same time provided conceptual reinforcement of the tradition. Assuming a woman's greater closeness to nature, the Enlightenment philosophy did not stress so much her inferiority as her difference and the complementariness of her mind to that of the male. The male capacity for developing abstract thought was complemented with female "possession of other mental traits—taste, sensibility, practical sense, feeling" (76).

Inspired and shaped by Enlightenment thought, the *Bildungsroman*, from its eighteenth-century German prototype, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1795), to its most famous nineteenth- and early twentieth-century representatives in British literature (*David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, *Sons and Lovers*, *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*), appears as a genre mainly concerned with male development. As some feminist scholars point out, this apparent maleness of the genre informs the early attempts of German critics to delineate its definition. Karl Morgenster during a lecture in 1819 stated that "the genre was to portray the hero's *Bildung* (formation) in all its steps and final goal as well as to foster the *Bildung* of the readers" (quoted in Summerfield and Downward 2010, 1), and in 1870 Wilhelm Dilthey, formulating an influential definition of the genre, also spoke of "a young male hero [who] discovers himself and his social role through the experience of love, friendship, and the hard realities of life" (quoted in Labovitz 1986, 2).

This tendency to associate *Bildung* with a male hero is equally strong in the works of the critics who discuss the novel of development written in English. Susanne Howe (1930) and Jerome Buckley (1974) examine the English *Bildungsroman* in the context of the German tradition and derive its definitions from their discussions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century works by male authors.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging the significant influence of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* on the English versions of the *Bildungsroman*, Howe (1930) reads the genre as the "apprentice novel" in which an adolescent hero

sets out on his way through the world, meets with reverses usually due to his own temperament, falls in with various guides and

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<sup>1</sup> The only significant exception is George Eliot, discussed by Buckley (1974), who reads *The Mill on the Floss* as "a sort of contrapuntal *Bildungsroman*, comparing and contrasting hero and heroine as each moves into young adulthood" (97).

counsellors, makes many false starts in choosing his friends, his wife, and his life work, and finally he adjusts himself to the demands of his time and environment by finding a sphere of action in which he may work effectively. (4)

At the same time Howe (1930) relates the *Bildungsroman* hero to older literary traditions, seeing him as “heir to several literary types”, such as the hero of the moral allegory, the picaresque hero and the hero of medieval romance, and believes that he “may be an ingenious and bewildering compound of all his inherited and acquired characteristics” (5). As the “apprentice novel”, the *Bildungsroman* is seen as clearly distinct from the *Erziehungsroman*—the pedagogic or educational novel, which has “a definite intent, partly practical and partly philosophical” and from the *Etwicklungsroman* which “has a more general scope and does not presuppose the more or less conscious attempt on the part of the hero to integrate his powers, to cultivate himself by his experience” (6).

Although Buckley’s choices of novels that represent the English *Bildungsroman* in many cases overlap with Howe’s selections (e.g. William Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage*, George Meredith’s *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, Samuel Butler’s *The Way of All Flesh*, or H. G. Wells’s *Tono-Bungay*), he associates the genre with the narrower term *Künstlerroman*, as he focuses his attention on the artistic aspirations of adolescent protagonists. Buckley’s definition of the *Bildungsroman* is, however, broader and includes a list of the principal elements that give the specific character to the genre: “[the focus on] childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy” (18). Like Howe, he connects the English *Bildungsroman* with older literary traditions, claiming that the “novel of youth, at least in the Victorian period, is frequently the equivalent of the Renaissance conduct book [as one of its recurrent themes is] the making of a gentleman . . . in the busy world of middle-class progress” (20).

Both Howe and Buckley have been criticized for their approaches that dissociate the genre from the female experience of personal development. As Susan Fraiman (1993) notices, both “Howe’s rendering of *Bildungsroman* as ‘apprentice novel’” (4) and Buckley’s attempts to prove “the autobiographical nature of the English *Bildungsroman*” by selecting the novels whose protagonists are artists (8) enforce the perception of *Bildung* as a specifically male experience. Associating *Bildung* either with “‘apprentice’ [which] refers to a vocational practice” (4) or with the “conception of artistic selfhood” (8), the critics relate the process of the individual’s development to the traditional domains of men.

A more recent study by Franco Moretti (2000) relates the inner development of the young protagonist in the European *Bildungsroman*<sup>2</sup> to his mapping of the social space full of uncertainties and contradictions. In his reading, the *Bildungsroman* genre appears as a “‘symbolic form’ of modernity” (5), the era that brought the destabilization of traditional social structures and radical changes in class mobility. He explains the novel’s turn to a young hero in the process of development by means of the changing perception of youth which had started to function as “a specific material sign” of modernity (5). Youth and modernity had become connected through their common attributes of mobility, inner restlessness and the progressive vision that searched for “meaning in the future rather than past” (5). Unlike Howe (1930), Moretti (2000) does not define the *Bildungsroman* on the basis of its strict distinction from other narratives of development. Instead he perceives it as a synthetic literary form that “nullifies the previous opposition” of the *Etwicklungsroman* and the *Erziehungsroman* and thus offers a combination of the focus on the “subjective unfolding of individuality”, and the objective process of educating the individual (16-17). Moretti, like most theoreticians of the *Bildungsroman*, focuses on the exploration of plot differences and the meanings that they generate in the presentation of the process of the hero’s maturation in a particular socio-historical context. He suggests that the European *Bildungsroman* in the nineteenth century developed in two distinctive variations: “the novel of marriage” and “the novel of adultery”. The novel of marriage is strongly associated with the English versions of the genre and characterized by the “teleological rhetoric” in which marriage, whether as a social institution or an abstract principle (marriage with a normative culture), marks the normative ending of the narrative; and it is this ending that gives meaning to the narrative’s events. In the novel of adultery, identified in the works of Continental authors (e.g. Stendhal, Pushkin, Balzac or Flaubert), the meaning of the story is rooted in its “narrativity, its being an open-ended process”. Adultery, literal or/and symbolic, functions in this novel as a sign of the hero’s refusal to complete the process of maturation since its completion implies both loss of youth and conformity to the norm (7-8).

In his discussion of the two versions of the European *Bildungsroman*, Moretti (2000), unlike Howe (1930) and Buckley (1974), makes several references to female authors (Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot) and their *Bildungsroman* heroines (Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Eyre, Dorothea

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<sup>2</sup> Moretti’s discussion includes, for example, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, and Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*.

Brooke). However, ultimately, he perceives the *Bildungsroman* as a genre that is firmly related to one historical period (modernity), one class (middle) and one sex (male): “the very elements that characterize the *Bildungsroman* as a form: wide cultural formation, professional mobility, full social freedom—for a long time, the west European middle-class man held a virtual monopoly on these, which made him a sort of structural *sine qua non* of the genre” (ix).

### **The Female *Bildungsroman*: Growing up a Woman**

The recognition of the important differences between men’s and women’s relations to society underlies the works by the feminist critics who see the introduction of gender into the studies of the *Bildungsroman* as a serious precondition for expanding the definition of the genre. The first systematic approach to the novels of female *Bildung* appears in *The Voyage in: Fictions of Female Development* (Abel, Hirsch and Langland 1983). This collection of essays examines both classic and more modern examples of the female *Bildungsroman*, such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Jean Rhys’s *White Sargasso Sea* and many others. Besides presenting the reader with representative texts about female *Bildung*, the authors also offer a criticism of male-centred approaches to the genre and try to define its female version. Making the point that many of the constitutive elements of the protagonist’s development provided by male critics of the *Bildungsroman*, such as formal education, independent life in the city, two love affairs and an active interaction with society, traditionally did not belong among the social options available to women, they maintain that the “heroine’s developmental course is more conflicted, less direct” (Abel, Hirsch and Langland 1983, 11). At the same time they claim that the female *Bildungsroman* is best described in terms of two recurrent narrative patterns: apprenticeship (not into vocation but life), showing continuous development from childhood to maturity, and awakening, usually realized later in the life of a married woman; and in terms of certain thematic tensions—“between autonomy and relationship, separation and community, loyalty to women and attraction to men” (Abel, Hirsch and Langland 1983, 11-12).

Esther Labovitz in *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century* (1986) represents the radical voice of those who believe that the female *Bildungsroman* in which the protagonist’s development is successfully completed could appear only in

the twentieth century when “*Bildung* became reality for women” (7). In her discussion of the works by Dorothy Richardson, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing and Christa Wolf, she mainly focuses on the recurrent patterns of their *Bildung* narratives, such as self-realization, sex roles, education, inner and outer directedness, career and attitudes towards marriage. The major differences between the male and female *Bildungsroman*, according to Labovitz (1986), include greater connection of female *Bildung* to “[the heroine’s] life experience” than to “*a priori* lessons to be learned” (246) and replacement of the hero’s grapple for social equality with the heroine’s struggle for “equality between sexes” (251).

Ian Wojcik-Andrews’ *Margaret Drabble’s Female Bildungsromane* (1995) presents a male scholar’s contribution to the studies of the female version of the genre. Drawing on the works by Abel, Hirsch and Langland (1983) and Labovitz (1986), he adopts a Marxist-feminist approach and interrogates gender issues in Drabble’s works from historical and materialistic perspectives. He reads Drabble’s novels as examples of the development of the traditional *Bildungsroman* in the twentieth-century context of the socio-political discussions inspired by second wave feminism. The study focuses on the delineation of the significant differences between the female and male versions of the genre, which include “foregrounding community rather than individuality” and “friendships and relationships with female friends, mothers, daughters, and children [which] show women’s sense of attachment rather than separation” (14).

The studies by Susan Fraiman (1993) and Lorna Ellis (1999) represent the critics’ efforts to reevaluate some classic texts of British women’s literature in the context of scholarly discussions about the validity of the distinction between the male and female *Bildungsroman*. Susan Fraiman in *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (1993) stresses, just like Franco Morreti (2000), the *Bildungsroman*’s socio-historical function and relates the narratives about male apprenticeship to the myth of bourgeois opportunity claiming that they “helped to construct the normative, middle class man whose skills and labor are his own” (5). In general she agrees that the twentieth century created more favourable conditions for the female *Bildungsroman*, but she focuses on four older texts, Frances Burney’s *Evelina*, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*. She aims to show that the tendency to define the genre in terms of a single heroic figure is not useful for approaching the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century narratives about female development. Fraiman sees the major difference between the male and female versions of the genre

not only in the female lack of opportunities to search for goals in life other than a successful marriage and motherhood, but, similarly to Labovitz (1986) and Wojcik-Andrews (1995), also in the female protagonist's greater awareness that "personal destiny evolves in dialectical relation to historical events, social structures, and other people" (Fraiman 1993, 10). The male *Bildungsroman*'s focus on the protagonists' "wilful selfmaking" (6) reflects, in her opinion, the belief that the construction of self must include a high degree of individualism. On the other hand, the *Bildungsroman* heroines are more aware of society's influence on their self-formation.

Lorna Ellis (1999) criticizes the attempts of some feminist scholars to establish more rigid distinctions between the female and male *Bildungsroman*. These attempts are reflected, for example, in the suggestion that these two literary forms can be treated as two different genres developed, respectively, in two different socio-historical contexts of the western world: the context of modernity that associated the progress of society with the personal development of middle-class man and the context of second wave feminism that opened the possibility for the successful development of women. In her study on the British *Bildungsroman* between 1750 and 1850 she disagrees especially with the radical rejections of the possibility of any positive female development in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts. She designs her study as a polemic with the belief that in these novels "'growing up female' has been in fact a 'growing down', 'a choice between auxiliary or secondary personhood, sacrificial victimization, madness and death'" (16). Claiming that there are "striking similarities" (15) between the novels about male and female *Bildung*, Ellis maintains that a certain amount of "growing down", a certain loss of personal autonomy, is an inevitable constitutive element of the maturation process regardless of the protagonist's gender (19).

Ellis (1999) emphasizes the common ground between the male and female *Bildungsroman*, giving the protagonist's agency (active involvement in one's development), self-reflection (ability to grow from one's experiences) and eventual reintegration with society as the most central issues in the narratives of maturation. Still, she admits to the existence of some specific aspects of the female situation when she states that the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century heroine's maturation "involves learning to see herself as others see her, learning how to experience herself as the object of the other people's gaze", which enables her to preserve some autonomy by manipulating others for her own gain (30). The apparent submissiveness that the heroine learns to adopt as a part of her *Bildung* process, Ellis suggests, is to be seen as a "form of empowerment"

since it allows her to “create a manipulative form of control” (33). This conflict between the heroine’s apparent loss of autonomy and the actual gain of feminine, manipulative control (over her husband) is seen as the typical unresolved paradox of the ambiguous endings of the classic novels of female development. It would seem that despite her questioning of the validity of the female *Bildungsroman* concept, Ellis’s argument about the heroines in traditional British *Bildungsromans* adds strength to the feminist point that female development has been determined by women’s greater association with the domestic sphere for centuries, which has left them, as Ellis admits, “legally and socially powerless as individuals” (46).

Whatever the differences in their approaches to the origins of the genre, all major scholars of the female *Bildungsroman* agree that its twentieth-century developments have brought not only new types of heroines whose self-realization could be searched for in ways unthinkable for their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors (equal access to formal education, active involvement in the public world of work and politics, explorations of female sexuality), but also greater thematic and formal variations of the genre. As Ellen McWilliams (2009) states, the contemporary female *Bildungsroman* ranges from “novels of childhood and adolescence to chronicles of transformation in middle age”, usually focusing on “moments of crisis”, turning points in the life of the heroine, “such as the onset of puberty, imminent marriage, or the prospect of children leaving home” (20).

### **The Female *Bildungsroman* in (Post)feminist Contexts**

The review of the major studies on the female *Bildungsroman* has shown that critics have so far concentrated mainly on two major phases of the generic tradition, classic and feminist. Criticism of the classic female *Bildungsroman* (e.g. Abel, Hirsch and Langland 1983, Fraiman 1993, Ellis 1999) focuses mainly on the distinction of the genre from its male variation, noticing both social obstacles in the process of female development and the more or less successful attempts at emancipation that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels of female maturation portray. The inequality that female protagonists experience in terms of social options, such as access to the public space of formal learning and employment, or in terms of the development of independent agency (hindered by marital and maternal roles) is seen as a crucial factor that prevents the heroines from achieving full maturity. Critics maintain that female *Bildung* in these novels tends to be either incomplete or interrupted

by the premature death of the heroine, who cannot cope with the constraints imposed on her by patriarchal society.

A unique place in the context of these discussions belongs to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), which creates important links between the male and female novels of development (Ellis 1999, 38). The novel presents a heroine that not only enters the public space of formal schooling and work, but also achieves a considerable degree of autonomy and control over her life. However, Brontë's compromise between feminist "self-fulfilment and social accommodation," represented by Jane's succumbing to "quiet domestic bliss" (Ellis 1999, 139), has been unsettling for feminist readers, some of whom tend to stress that despite her marriage, Jane preserves her autonomy and even control over crippled Mr. Rochester. Lorna Ellis (1999), for example, develops an argument about the manipulative nature of Jane's behaviour and her fight for preserving her power in the relationship with Mr. Rochester. Similarly, Lisa Sternlieb (2002) opposes the novel's apparent celebration of the ideal companionship of Jane and Rochester when she concludes her analysis of Jane as a manipulative narrator with a radical claim that "there is little that is mutual or shared in [their] marriage" (37). However, the long-term popularity of the novel (reflected also in its many twentieth-century re-writings) shows that the idea of "having it all" that the book appears to promote, i.e. an emancipated existence and the choice of a fulfilling romantic relationship, appeals to many female readers who apparently do not share these feminist concerns.

While the classic female *Bildungsroman* was often defined through comparisons with its male counterpart, the feminist *Bildungsroman*, to use Rita Felski's (1989) term, has achieved the status of an independent genre, boldly developing the narrative about female maturation at a time when, as Ellen McWilliams (2009) notices, novels of male development experienced decline under modernist and postmodernist attacks on the idea of cohesive selfhood (20).<sup>3</sup> Felski (1989) uses the term "feminist *Bildungsroman*" to name one of the two types of female self-discovery novel. Unlike the other type, "the novel of awakening" in which self-discovery is a result of awakening to "an already given mythic identity" (127), the feminist *Bildungsroman* shows some important similarities with the male version of the genre, sharing its "historical and linear structure" and the focus on the relation between the process of self-discovery and the movement "outward into the public realm of social engagement and

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<sup>3</sup> Abel, Hirsch and Langland (1983), for example, quote an opinion of David H. Miles who claims that the male *Bildungsroman* "has reached its 'absolute end' in Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*" (13), published in 1959.

activity” (127). It stresses the importance of engagement with the public sphere of life for the female protagonist’s process of maturation at a time when “the male *Bildungsroman* survives only as parody, or in the form of purely inward development which renounces all social activity” (134). Due to its rejection of marriage as a significant endpoint of the protagonist’s development, the feminist *Bildungsroman* can also be seen as a specific transformation of the nineteenth-century female novel of development which exposes the insufficiency of its traditional plot (128). On the whole, the feminist *Bildungsroman* appears to be a useful umbrella term for various twentieth-century narratives of female *Bildung* that appeared in the context of second wave feminism and which “reveal a critical awareness of women’s subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category” (Felski 1989, 14).

Feminist novels of development reject the dominant romantic motif of the classic female *Bildungsroman* and focus instead on the heroine’s “symbolic act of separation” (Felski 1989, 126) from the traditional social roles of wife, housewife and mother. Separating themselves from the domestic sphere, the heroines negotiate the opportunities available to them in the twentieth-century public space of education, work and politics in a similar way to how the young middle-class heroes of the classic male *Bildungsroman* explore the possibilities offered to them by modern society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> An important point of difference, however, remains, as Ester Kleinbord Labovitz (1986) states, that “the theme of equality between sexes is one sharply stressed in the female *Bildungsroman*, alone” (251). While male heroes leave their homes due to conflicts with their fathers or father figures, in search of independent life in the city, the heroines of feminist narratives leave their homes due to the strong sense of alienation caused by their confinement in the domestic sphere, the drudgery of housework and the constraints of marital and maternal roles (Felski 1989, 130).

Both Labovitz and Felski argue that the modern heroines’ disengagement from the world of heterosexual romance often functions as an important precondition for their personal development. Labovitz (1986) maintains that the “quest for an authentic self” is often “carried out in loneliness, alone, with other women, safe from the eyes of the male world” (248), and Felski (1989) adds that presenting heterosexual marriage as “the very antithesis” of female *Bildung*, the feminist *Bildungsroman*

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<sup>4</sup> Franco Moretti (2000) sees the inner development of classic *Bildungsroman* protagonists as related to their exploring of the social space full of uncertainties and contradictions, which, however, opened for young middle class men the possibilities of “wide cultural formation, professional mobility [and] full social freedom” (ix).

invariably includes a female friend or lover that “plays a symbolically important role in the protagonist’s development” (138). The ideal of sisterhood that these novels present is sustained by the assumption that female community can create “personal bonds which may serve to challenge the instrumental rationality of social relations in a male-defined public sphere” (Felski 1989, 140). The belief in the common, particular nature of female experience and the necessary antagonism between the values of female and male communities are defining elements of this feminist genre, which is, according to Felski (1989), based on an essentially optimistic vision of history as “progressive emancipation” (140).

While the feminist *Bildungsroman* participates in the cultural atmosphere dominated by the second wave feminists’ fight for women’s equality in private and public spheres of life, more recent female *Bildung* narratives reflect an important shift from feminist to postfeminist sensibilities. Postfeminism, as critics have noticed, is “a term fraught with contradictions” (Genz and Brabon 2009, 1), reflected most clearly in the difference between the views that relate postfeminism to new theoretical developments in feminist thought and those who relate it to antifeminist tendencies detectable across popular culture. On the one hand, postfeminism is treated as “a useful conceptual frame of reference encompassing the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism” (Brooks 1997, 1), and, on the other, it is seen as a sign of a backlash against the gains of second wave feminism. To critics like Ann Brooks who emphasize intersections between feminist ideology and anti-foundationalist movements, postfeminism is a new, more mature, stage in the history of feminism, which includes “rejection of the assumption that feminism is based on a unified subjectivity, a universal sisterhood” (Genz and Brabon 2009, 17). Other critics like Susan Faludi (1991) or Angela McRobbie (2004a, 2004b), on the other hand, speak of postfeminism in relation to the mass media’s role in the gradual decline of the organized feminist movement. Susan Faludi in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991) sees postfeminism as a term coined by the 1980s American press in the context of its focus on the “paradox” in the life of the emancipated women who “have achieved so much yet feel so dissatisfied” (91). In her view the term signifies a conservative backlash against feminist achievements, promoted by the American media and the movie industry through the images of women who were “unhappy because they were too free; their liberation had denied them marriage and motherhood” (126). McRobbie (2004b), although not perceiving postfeminism as a straightforward backlash, discusses popular

female characters like Bridget Jones, Ally McBeal and the characters from the *Sex and the City* series as signs of the new postfeminist cultural norm which invokes feminism only to suggest that it is no longer needed. Postfeminist cultural practices, in her opinion, emphasize the freedom of personal choices (a right guaranteed by the achievements of second wave feminism), which may also include the willing return to traditional female roles, such as the housewife or the sexual object. Postfeminist culture appears to promote these more traditional choices of women by exploiting the female anxieties related to the biological clock pressures and the “stigma of remaining single” (11).

The fact that postfeminism “is variously identified or associated with an antifeminist backlash, pro-feminist third wave, Girl Power dismissive of feminist politics, trendy me-first power feminism and academic postmodern feminism” (Genz and Brabon 2009, 10) suggests that the term refers to a specific fusion of academic and popular discourses that defines the turn-of-the-millennium atmosphere in Anglo-American cultural space. For the purpose of this study, the most useful approach to the term is the one offered by Rosalind Gill (2007) who claims that

postfeminism is best understood not as an epistemological perspective, nor as a historical shift, and not (simply) as a backlash, in which its meanings are prespecified. Rather postfeminism should be conceived of as a *sensibility*, and postfeminist media culture should be our *critical object*. This approach . . . seeks to examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media. (254-255, emphases in original)

Gill’s study of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century media identifies recurrent tropes, themes and constructions in their representations of gender, such as

the notion that femininity is a bodily property, the shift from objectification to subjectification, the emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline, a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment, a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference, a marked sexualization of culture and an emphasis upon consumerism and commoditization of difference. (255)

Like Angela McRobbie (2004b), Rosalind Gill (2007) notices how postfeminist culture offers a complex fusion of progressive, feminist perspectives with the revival of traditional, conservative visions of gender roles, a fusion that cannot be easily dismantled as a sign of a straightforward, intentional backlash. The media’s revival of the images that present women as sexual objects, their constructions of the female beauty ideal that requires constant self-surveillance and discipline and

their reification of traditional gender relations are fashioned in the new signifying system that crucially depends on the concepts of freedom, choice and empowerment of the (female) individual. Postfeminist images of old-fashioned sexism are seemingly disempowered by an ironic perspective, routinely adopted, as Gill (2007) shows, by lad magazines or in advertising. On the other hand, female power is related in the postfeminist media to (liberal) feminist ideas about equal rights and opportunities. These ideas are however treated as common sense and thus depoliticized, while feminism as a political stance is constructed as an “inauthentic” ideology that is “not articulating women’s true desires” (Gill 2007, 269).

The contradictory fusion of the conservative and the progressive that characterizes postfeminist popular culture is materialized in two dominant representations of femininity that pervade the turn-of-the-millennium mass media: a “happy housewife” image—which offers a straightforward return to a patriarchal tradition, strongly criticized by feminist critics—and the more complex images of “Girl Power” which have provoked ambivalent responses from feminist critics. The happy housewife, the central figure of “new traditionalism” challenges feminist associations of domestic space with confinement, and rejects the perception of housework as drudgery while openly idealizing domesticity as “a retreat from the workplace” (Genz and Brabon 2009, 58).<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Girl Power media images (most famously popularized by the British pop group the *Spice Girls*) are typical of rejecting “victim feminism” through combining exaggerated femininity and sexuality of the female body with traditional masculine subject positions. Girl Power discourse has also been realized through the emergence of new female film and TV characters of the Ally McBeal type, which adopt “‘new feminist’ strategies, as recourse to individualism, power through sex and working within the system to dismantle ‘the master’s house’” (Genz and Brabon 2009, 72). These new postfeminist representations of women in popular culture have inspired contradictory reactions from feminist theoreticians: the backlash argument is contradicted by those (e.g. Naomi Wolf or Rene Denfeld) who read them as signs of the “power feminism” which appeals to the new generation of young women.

Naomi Wolf (1993) and Rene Denfeld (1995) notice the decline in the popularity of feminist ideology among young women but they do not see it as a result of the influence of the postfeminist images of women spreading

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<sup>5</sup> Examples provided by the critics range from media celebrities, like Nigella Lawson (a glamorous cook) to movies like *Baby Boom* (1987), in which a successful career woman gives up her job to experience the joys of motherhood (Genz and Brabon 2009, 57-61).

the antifeminist backlash across the mass media. They relate the trend, on the one hand, to the actual successes of second wave feminism, the “genderquake” that started in the 1990s and brought the rising political and cultural power of women (Wolf 1993). Thus to many young women the feminist movement appears to have fulfilled its aim and they may feel that “feminism is [their] birthright” (Denfeld 1995, 2). On the other hand, these critics relate the rising unpopularity of feminism to the changes in the feminist movement that have become associated with the radical margin—the voices that present feminism as “puritanical, man-hating, and obsessed with defining women as ‘victims’” (Wolf 1993, xvii)—and with the “obscure academic theory on subjects as the ‘patriarchy’ and ‘phallogentric’ language”, the theory that seems to be unrelated to practical problems of everyday life (Denfeld 1995, 19).

Wolf (1993) suggests a way out from the crisis of feminist ideology in its move away from the “victim feminism” that, in her opinion, dominates contemporary academic discourse to the “power feminism” associated with the origins of the movement. Her detailed characterization of victim feminism includes such features as the identification of women with powerlessness, the idealization of women’s childbearing capacity as a “proof” that women are better than men, the belief that women are naturally non-competitive, cooperative and peace-loving, the projection of aggression, competitiveness and violence on to “men” or “patriarchy”, and the perception of women as pure and perfect (148-9). In contrast to this, power feminism, among other things, “acknowledges that aggression, competitiveness, the wish for autonomy and separation, even danger of selfish and violent behaviour, are as much a part of the female identity as is nurturant behaviour; understands that women, like men, must harness these impulses; sees women as moral adults” (150). Rene Denfeld (1995) agrees with Wolf that it is the radical feminist voice that dominates the organized, ideological forms of feminism, claiming that its discourse of “victim mythology, a set of beliefs that promote women as the helpless victims of masculine oppression,” (12) alienates the organized feminist movement from the women’s cultural movement. This cultural movement, Denfeld maintains, gives evidence of women’s ability to take independent, active positions in their search for equality with men.

Although both Wolf and Denfeld have been criticized for “adopt[ing] a dangerously simplistic attitude towards feminism” (Gamble 1998, 39), their texts remain useful in drawing attention to the rift between the academic postfeminism defined by its intersections with complex postmodernist, poststructuralist and postcolonial theories and the postfeminism reflected in the texts of popular culture. Questions about the character of second wave feminism and its participation in the “victimary