

Bildungsroman

Bildungsroman Definition

Bildungsroman is a special kind of novel that focuses on the psychological and [moral](#) growth of its main [character](#), from his or her youth to adulthood.

A bildungsroman is a story of the growing up of a sensitive person, who looks for answers to his questions through different experiences. Generally, such a novel starts with a loss or a [tragedy](#) that disturbs the main character emotionally. He or she leaves on a journey to fill that vacuum.

During the journey, the [protagonist](#) gains maturity, gradually and with difficulty. Usually, the plot depicts a [conflict](#) between the protagonist and the values of society. Finally, he or she accepts those values, and they are accepted by society, ending the dissatisfaction. Such a type of novel is also known as a “coming-of-age” novel.

Examples of Bildungsroman in Literature

There are numerous examples of bildungsroman or coming-of-age novels in English literature. Let us briefly analyze a few:

Example #1: *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (By Henry Fielding)

This is among the famous bildungsroman examples written in a comic mode. Squire Allworthy, a wealthy landowner, discovers a foundling, Tom Jones, on his property. Tom Jones grows up into a lusty but honest young man, in [contrast](#) to his half-brother Blifil, who was a [personification](#) of hypocrisy.

Tom falls in love with Sophia Western, but the relationship is opposed by her father, on the basis that Tom is a “bastard.” After this loss, Tom undergoes many experiences, and finally it is revealed that Tom is the son of Mr. Summer, a friend of Allworthy, and Mrs. Waters, who is Allworthy’s

sister. Therefore, society accepts him when it is established that he is not a bastard.

Example #2: *David Copperfield* (By Charles Dickens)

This can be termed as a bildungsroman, as it traces the life of David Copperfield from his childhood to maturity. His mother re-marries a man named Edward Murdstone, who sends David to work for a wine merchant in London. He then runs away to finally reach his eccentric aunt Betsey Trotwood, who agrees to raise him, and calls him “Trot.” We see a change in David’s “undisciplined heart,” as after Dora’s death, he does some soul-searching, and chooses sensible Agnes – a woman who had always loved him – as his wife.

Example #3: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (By James Joyce)

This is a coming-of-age story of the character Stephen Dedalus. The story starts with Stephen in a boarding school at the age of sixteen. One day he goes back to his room, falls sick due to the unbearable load of his sins, and decides to change himself. He goes to the church for a confession, and the cleric is exceptionally kind. Thus, Stephen discovers another path in his life, as he becomes a cleric. Later in the novel, Stephen’s life takes another turn. He realizes that he cannot waste his life as a cleric. He needs to live in society and be innovative like an artist.

Example #4: *Never Let Me Go* (By Kazuo Ishiguro)

This is a recent example of a bildungsroman novel. The novel is divided into three acts: childhood, adult and donor. It traces the life of Kathy, the protagonist and narrator of the novel. She is a “donor” who is harvested for organs to be donated to gravely ill patients.

We see Kathy as free-spirited, kind, and loving in her childhood. As a young woman she shows less emotion looking back at her past. At the end of the novel, she is a mature woman, and accepts the lives of herself and her friends.

The bildungsroman novel depicts and criticizes those vices of society which cause the protagonist to suffer. The novel conveys a sense of [realism](#), because the protagonist is a common sensitive person who is affected by the loss that they suffer, and this loss, ultimately, changes the course of their life.

In addition, the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist gives us a deep insight into the character, and also helps to understand the conflict in his or her life. As a result, we can identify ourselves with the coming-of-age characters, and feel emotionally attached and interested as we see them pass different stages of their lives, until they finally change for the good.