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Colonial Ideology and the Classical *Bildungsroman*

José Santiago Fernández-Vázquez



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**Colonial Ideology
and the Classical *Bildungsroman***

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JOSÉ SANTIAGO FERNÁNDEZ-VÁZQUEZ

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*Al final solo quedarán la fe, la esperanza
y el amor.*

*Comamos y bebamos, puesto que mañana
moriremos.*

SAN PABLO

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Introduction

Coming-of-age novels, also described as ‘novels of formation’, ‘development’ or ‘initiation’, have always been among the most popular literary genres in the postcolonial world, from pre- and post-independence classics, such as R. K. Narayan’s *Swami and Friends*, George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* or Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’s *Weep Not, Child*, to name but a few, to recent literary productions. A great deal of the novels written by the winner of the 2021 Nobel Prize for Literature, Abdulrazak Gurnah, for example, fall within this category, including *Memory of Departure*, *Paradise* and *Gravel Heart*. The extraordinary success of these types of narratives, which find their origin in the German tradition of the *Bildungsroman* and its Anglo-American reworkings in the nineteenth century, has been explained in different ways. Critics generally link the development of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* to the creation of ‘national allegories’ (Jameson 1981: 69), or they refer to the need that these writers have to connect with an international reading public, a goal which would even work as a way of normalizing a narrow universalism (Slaughter 2006: 1419). In their readings of specific texts or regional literatures, several scholars have also suggested

that the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* constitutes an ideological battlefield, a literary form which is deliberately used to engage in an oppositional dialogue with the former colonial masters. The popularity of the *Bildungsroman* in the postcolonial world could then be interpreted as an attempt to appropriate a 'master genre'.

While I do not think that all postcolonial *Bildungsromane* must be read necessarily within this 'writing back' framework, I would like to argue that a certain ideological affinity can indeed be established between the classical forms of the *Bildungsroman* and colonial discourses. Born at the end of the eighteenth century, when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-1796) was published in Germany, the *Bildungsroman* soon became a very popular genre, which was transferred to different countries. Particularly significant was the role that the *Bildungsroman* played in British literature during the nineteenth century, as Great Britain was consolidating its role as the most powerful colonial empire. In philosophical terms, the classical *Bildungsroman* was associated with the values of the Enlightenment and was perceived as a progressive genre, which reproduces liberal bourgeois values, including the defence of progress and liberty. The *Bildungsroman* could be understood, then, to borrow the expression that Joseph Conrad used in one of his short stories, as 'an outpost of progress'. Yet, as it happens in the short story written by Conrad, where the allegedly humanitarian and civilizing actions of the Europeans in Africa actually reveal the brutality of colonialism, the ideology of progress which the *Bildungsroman* should represent also includes an authoritarian conception, which tacitly justifies the colonial enterprise. Postcolonial criticism

questions the neutrality of Western literary categories (i.e., their lack of ideological significance), arguing that there is a relationship between the way in which such categories are established and the control of colonized populations. The fundamental idea underlying postcolonial theory is that European colonialism was not only based on the military occupation of the colonies, or on their economic exploitation, but was underpinned by a process of cultural annihilation. The cultural and ideological control which was deployed in the colonies was part of an attempt to define the identity of the colonized peoples according to the patterns of subjectivity imposed by the colonizers. In this vein, the circulation of Western literature in colonial settings (through certain authors, genres, and modes of writing) played an essential part in colonial rule.

Taking a postcolonial stance, the analysis which I present in the following pages examines the cultural and ideological roots of the classical *Bildungsroman* as a Western-based genre which promotes a colonial ideology. Using Goethe's urtext *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* as examples—together with some case studies from the Neo-Victorian tradition—I suggest that there is a relationship between the major narrative conventions of the classical *Bildungsroman* and the ideological and epistemological background which characterises Western modernity and which gave rise to colonialism. The ideological affinity between the classical *Bildungsroman* and colonial discourse is an expression of what Edward Said has called a 'structure of attitude and reference' (1994: 52), that is, the adjacency of different cultural manifestations which, although formally independent, converge with one another, like different

branches of the same tree (Said 1985: 351-352). As Paul Bové has put it, ‘various “sciences” might be institutionally and even conceptually discontinuous ... and yet given their “adjacencies” make up a coherent system of thought’ (1995: 55). The concept of ‘adjacency’ allows us to study the correlations that exist among different discursive practices, even when there is no linear (i.e., derivative) relationship among them. The researcher’s task consists in establishing the parallels and analogies that join different types of discourse together, showing how these discursive practices converge from an ideological point of view, that is, how they complement each other to define a specific worldview.

The research that is presented in this book is structured into three chapters. The first chapter focuses on the relationship between literary genres and ideology. Some of the major issues and problems of generic discussion will be mentioned, including the Eurocentric approach of those theories that define literary genres as universal natural forms. An alternative methodology for the description of a literary genre will be outlined according to the historicist models, which postulate that all literary forms are historically and culturally determined. Hence, the study of a literary genre must contemplate not just the description of its formal and thematic characteristics, but also the analysis of the ideological principles to which the genre can be associated.

The second chapter discusses the origins and the characteristics of the classical *Bildungsroman* in thematic and narrative terms. To determine the characteristics of the generic repertoire, critical scholarship on the *Bildungsroman* will be surveyed and some practical examples will

be given. Specifically, the investigation will focus on the male narratives written during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Germany and England, taking *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and *Great Expectations* as role models. Some references will be made, however, to female *Bildungsromane* and some female narratives will be used to illustrate the major characteristics of the genre. Gender perspective needs to be taken into account, since the *Bildungsroman* promotes different values for men and women, subjecting the latter to specific discrimination. Also, I will use contemporary Neo-Victorian narratives to show how the major features of the genre have persisted over time and how they have been readapted for a different purpose. In particular, references will be made to Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), 'the foundational postcolonial neo-Victorian text' (Ho 2019: 4), Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) and Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2006) as examples of postcolonial counter-discourse. The importance given to nineteenth-century British fiction, and to the Victorian period in particular, derives from a number of reasons. During the Victorian age, the British novel played a prominent role in the consolidation of the narrative tradition which Goethe had introduced in Germany. In fact, as Franco Moretti observes, the British *Bildungsroman* kept a closer connection with the German model than other European literatures (1987: 63-64). The nineteenth century was also the period when Great Britain reaffirmed the primacy of Western colonialism, which achieved its zenith with the British Empire in the years that followed World War I. Besides, *Bildungsromane* continued to be published in Britain during the modernist period, and much later, but one of the features of these

narratives was that they frequently deviated from the classical form, giving voice to new social groups, who questioned many of the ideological principles of the classical *Bildungsroman*.

The third chapter relates the thematic and narrative characteristics which were previously outlined to the promotion of colonial ideology. The themes of educational development and geographical mobility, together with the role that mentor figures adopt in the classical *Bildungsroman*, will be examined as evidence of the way in which this genre contributes to Eurocentric attitudes and to the civilizing mission which defined the colonial enterprise. A parallelism will also be established between the construction of a unitary self, as a result of the *Bildung* process, and the creation of otherness. The repression of certain forms of subjectivity, including those realities that can be associated with the colonial world, and the adoption of a homogeneous narrative perspective, in which contradictory states of consciousness are obliterated, strengthen the belief in a unitary subject, who is actually the outcome of the interpellation processes that are set in motion by the mentors. To this extent, the *Bildungsroman* exemplifies a method of mental and social control which characterizes modern disciplinary power and which, consequently, played an essential role in colonial domination. Finally, the defence of a progressive ideology, which takes place through the evolution of the *Bildungsheld* according to a linear and teleological structure, will be linked to the historicist systems that favoured the development of European colonialism. As the discussion of the abovementioned Neo-Victorian novels will show, contemporary postcolonial fiction has used the genre of

the *Bildungsroman* to provide an alternative perspective to the classical form of the genre, one in which the links which the *Bildungsroman* maintains with colonial ideology can be dismantled and subverted.

I. Genres as Ideological Tools

The study of genre is one of the most complex issues of literary theory, which has drawn the attention of scholars since classical antiquity. Unravelling the complexities of generic discussion would merit a study of its own, examining the different models and proposals that have been put forward throughout the centuries. There are countless books and essays for those readers who want to approach genre theory in detail.¹ In this investigation, however, my objective is more limited. I aim to outline a model of analysis that enables us to describe the major characteristics of the classical *Bildungsroman* and the relationship that this literary form maintains with colonialist ideology.

A basic contention in this methodological approach is that genres have an ideological dimension, taking ideology as the process by which we adopt a specific standpoint to understand and build reality (a certain worldview or

¹ Classical studies such as those by Hernadi (1971), Fowler (1982) and Rosmarin (1985) can be particularly useful. More recent investigations include Brock, Pflaeging & Schildhauer (2019), Cohen (2021), Frow (2015) and Rowlett (2017).