Definition: **Bildungsroman** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Novel that deals with the psychological and emotional development of its protagonist, tracing his or her life from inexperienced youth to maturity. The first example of the type is generally considered to be C. F. Wieland's *Agathon* (1765–66), but it was Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre/Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96) that established the genre. Although taken up by writers in other languages, it remained chiefly a German form; later examples include Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg/The Magic Mountain* (1924).

Summary Article: **BILDUNGSROMAN**
From *International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities*

The term 'bildungsroman' describes a type of novel that narrates the development of a single, usually male, main character. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795) is widely recognised as the first bildungsroman, which relates a young man's quest to find his place in the changing world of eighteenth-century Germany. Goethe's novel proved hugely influential, and as a result the bildungsroman became one of the most popular genres of nineteenth-century fiction. It continues to inform representations of individual development today, as its seminal representation of the personality as something dynamic and susceptible of growth underpins a wide array of contemporary discourses, ranging from psychology and education through to romantic fiction, feature film, biography and self-help literature.

The bildungsroman emerged as a combination of various European narrative traditions, including the picaresque (the travel and adventure tale), the novel of education and the novel of religious introspection. The result is a novel whose protagonist forms himself through interaction with his environment, and who learns in the course of the story to find his place in the world (Shaffner 1984; Moretti 1987).

Some scholars argue the bildungsroman constitutes a key site for the construction of modern masculine identity (Minden 1997; Mosse 1996). By presupposing a male protagonist, the bildungsroman reinforces the connection between masculinity and the autonomous, self-determining individual articulated in liberal and Enlightenment thought. It also reinforces the ideology of separate spheres: while the masculine protagonist develops in the modern public sphere, subordinate female characters remain static, confined to the reproductive, private sphere.

The increased presence of marginal voices — in particular feminist, postcolonial and queer — in contemporary literature has significantly challenged the masculine, eurocentric idea of development so central to the bildungsroman. As a result, contemporary literature tends rather to privilege an image of the subject as unstable, fragmented and without an ultimate goal or aim. The bildungsroman nevertheless remains hugely influential in Western culture, due to the ongoing appeal of many classic nineteenth-century examples (such as *David Copperfield*) and the ubiquity of concepts of personal development in popular culture (as in the Harry Potter saga, for instance) and everyday life.

**See also:** history, modernity; literature; novel, the

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References and further reading


JADE M. NOBBS

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