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The Way of the Wizarding World: *Harry Potter and the Magical Bildungsroman*

Starting in the late eighteenth century and continuing until roughly the advent of modernism, the *Bildungsroman*—sometimes translated the “novel of education” or the “novel of formation”—was a dominant narrative form in European literature. The *Bildungsroman* offers an entertaining story of a young person's coming of age, moving from innocence to experience, with lost illusions and great expectations, and making his or her way in the world. This genre also reveals the anxieties and opportunities of a society undergoing a transformation, as the tale of a young adult's maturation coincides with sweeping social changes as well. In Western literary history, as Franco Moretti has noted in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, the *Bildungsroman* is both the product and the mirror of a revolutionary period in which traditional societies were giving way to the vicissitudes of modern industrial development. This process eventually leads to literary modernism, where the developing personality of the individual becomes all the more fragmented and displaced. We need only think of the difference between *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the novels that roughly bookend Moretti's study, to see the trajectory of the form.

Although the *Harry Potter* series—in its chronicle of a young person's development from childhood to adult maturity, as well as from ignorance and naïveté to knowledge and mastery—might seem a fitting example of a *Bildungsroman*, it is a bit anachronistic to call it such.¹ As Moretti and others have made clear, the *Bildungsroman* registers a certain moment of European history, that of modernity itself, and the form tends to disintegrate once the processes of modernization have saturated social life. The political and industrial revolutions of the late-eighteenth century made possible a new way of thinking, and writing, about personal development, and this confluence of factors makes *Bildungsroman* possible. “Virtually without notice, in the dreams and nightmares of the so-called ‘double-revolution,’ Europe plunges into modernity, but without possessing a *culture* of modernity. If youth, therefore, achieves its symbolic centrality, and the ‘great narrative’ of the *Bildungsroman* comes into being, this is because Europe has to attach a meaning, not so much to youth, as to *modernity*” (2000, p.5).

Nevertheless, *Harry Potter* offers a kind of *Bildungsroman*, one suited to another epoch of anxieties and uncertainties. Straddling the millennia, the *Harry Potter* series emerges as a kind of postmodern *Bildungsroman*, charting a young person's development

through a complex world of magic and reality. The advent of *Harry Potter* coincides (perhaps not coincidentally) with a world transformed by globalization and by mass media's penetration of the remotest regions of the globe, where the assurances of a previous era no longer hold true. Magic adds greater wonder to the stories, but also provides a strategy for making sense of the world. The magical world of wizards, house elves, goblins, trolls, dragons, and Dementors, constitutes a kind of meta-world, a realm just beyond the senses of most Muggles but which is intimately related to our own, often terrifyingly *real* world, as is movingly portrayed in "The Other Minister" chapter of *Half-Blood Prince*. J.K. Rowling's reversal of the notion of destiny—in showing that what some call "fate" is precisely the result of individual choices, whether it was Harry's direction to the sorting hat ("Not Slytherin!") in *Sorcerer's Stone* (p.121), or Voldemort's self-fulfilling prophecy in choosing to kill Harry, as Dumbledore explains in *Order of the Phoenix* (p.842)—offers powerful evidence that "the way of the world" is frequently what we make of it, a valuable lesson for students and teachers alike.

Although each forms a complete story in itself, the seven books of the *Harry Potter* series constitute an entire *Bildungsroman* for an age transformed. Consequently, in this essay I will speak of entire series rather than focusing on one or two novels individually. My aim is to show how Rowling's magical *Bildungsroman*, much like Goethe's or Dickens's "Muggle" ones, helps us to navigate our own path in this perilously complex world of ours, and gives us an Everyman hero, both for whom to root and with whom to explore this world.²

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In a rather literal sense, the entire *Harry Potter* series is "about" Harry's *Bildung*, his development from a boy into a man, as well as from a slightly awkward Muggle into a great wizard. It is also, as Rowling so movingly dramatizes, a process of Harry's finding out who and what he is. We see this in the ways he learns, bit by bit and hint by hint, about his parents, about his role in a prophecy, and about his relationship to the world. *Harry Potter*, not surprisingly, is an extended story of "Harry Potter," of the formation and definition of this person bearing that name. In this sense, the series fit well within our general understanding of the *Bildungsroman* as a genre. The word *Bildungsroman* is sometimes translated as novel (in German, *Roman*) of "education," but the term *Bildung* suggests something both wider and more formative than mere "learning." It is an education rather broadly conceived, establishing a self-image (*Bild* can be mean "representation" or "image"), maturing physically, emotionally, and intellectually, and of course *learning* how the world works: thus, making one's way in the world.

According to Marianne Hirsch's helpful examination of the genre (see 1979, pp.296–298), the *Bildungsroman* has a number of distinguishing characteristics, all of which seem to fit the *Harry Potter* series quite well. In Hirsch's model, "The novel of formation is a novel that focuses on one central character [...]. It is the story of a representative individual's *growth and development* within the context of a defined social order" (p.296). Harry Potter certainly fits the bill. It is "biographical and social," and its plot is "a version of the quest story." Again, in each volume and across the series as a whole, Harry engages in a quest while the narrative continues to tell his life story and present details of the wizarding society. The *Bildungsroman* is principally concerned with

“the development of selfhood,” ending with the protagonist’s “*assessment of himself and his place in society*” (p. 297). In Harry’s case, this very much means that part of his “quest” is to discover himself and his place in the larger scheme of things, as we see it culminate in his “Chosen One” status in *Half-Blood Prince* and *Deathly Hallows*. With respect to narrative voice, “There is always a distance between the perspective of the narrator and that of the protagonist,” which enables the reader to witness “errors and the pursuit of false leads” along the way (p.297). Interestingly, with a few exceptions,³ the entire seven volumes are told in the third-person but largely still *from the perspective* of one following Harry around; that is, although the perspective is not Harry’s, the narrator “looks over Harry’s shoulder,” as it were, which allows the reader to see Harry’s actions at all times without necessarily being limited to Harry’s point of view. As Hirsch continues, “The novel’s other characters fulfill several mixed functions: *educators* serve as mediators and interpreters between the two conflicting forces of self and society; *companions* serve as reflectors of the protagonist, standing for alternative goals and achievements [...]; *lovers* provide the opportunity for the education of sentiment” (p.298). We may clearly see these aspects in the “secondary” characters of Dumbledore, Ron and Hermione, and Ginny, among others. And, as I will discuss further below, the *Bildungsroman* is “a *didactic* novel, one which educates the reader by portraying the education of the protagonist” (1979, p.298).

The *Ur-text*, it seems, for any discussion of the *Bildungsroman* is Goethe’s tale of Wilhelm Meister’s apprenticeship (*Lehrjahre*, or literally “years of learning”), so it is also fitting that Harry’s story is, more than anything, a narrative of his education at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (and, more generally, in the wizarding world itself). Hogwarts also provides Harry a somewhat utopian space from which to safely—perhaps, giving the mortal dangers he faces so often, this is not the best term for it—explore the wonders of this brave new world of magic. In any case, it is a relatively enclosed setting for Harry to mature and learn, and the leap into the wider world, whether attending such events as the Quidditch World Cup or in his quests for Horcruxes later, are still harrowing, but not entirely unfamiliar.

The *Bildungsroman* combines the general and the specific, often in interesting ways. This helps to make its hero—a specific, even remarkable, individual—into a general or representative Everyman. Hence, Harry Potter, with his misleadingly or *tellingly* pedestrian name, is both the remarkable and unique “Boy Who Lived” or “Chosen One,” and just another good guy muddling through, struggling not only against the forces of Evil (like Ron, Hermione, Neville, and all the others), but also against the usual schoolboy problems (dealing with bullies, worrying about doing well in class or on the Quidditch field, dealing with romantic entanglements, and so on, again like his classmates). Through the process, the individualized hero becomes a representative figure that all readers (who are Muggles, by and large) can easily relate to. Indeed, although one tends to think of the *Bildungsroman*, and the novel in general, as a profoundly individual form, focused as it is on the development of an individual, it is really much more of a tale in which the individual becomes part of a community or social whole. As Marc Redfield has put it, “the *Bildungsroman* narrates the acculturation of a self—the integration of a particular ‘I’ into the general subjectivity of a community, and thus, finally, into the universal subjectivity of humanity” (1996, p.38).

Harry Potter highlights this aspect in a couple of ways. First, by making Harry's development a matter of teamwork, especially in the collaborations with Hermione and Ron but also in his interactions with various characters throughout the series (e.g., Hagrid, Dobby, Lupin, Moody, Sirius, Dumbledore, Griphook, and so on), the series displays how Harry's own *Bildung* is very much a collective effort. And second, by having Harry integrate himself into the wizarding world gradually—notice, for example, that even in *Deathly Hallows*, set six or seven years after he enrolls in Hogwarts, Harry is still marveling at things he had never even heard of before—the reader is allowed to discover a broad and nuanced social totality. The complex world cannot easily be processed by an isolated individual, so to see an individual attempting the impossible has some value in itself. To see that individual working with others, who are themselves (even Dumbledore, we come to realize) also largely in the dark and still slogging along trying to figure things out, like the rest of us, is an important lesson. Indeed, as Rowling makes clear, in ways that renders her own pedagogy (if not her storytelling) far superior to other fantasists like C.S. Lewis or J.R.R. Tolkien, what is most “evil” about her great enemy, Voldemort, is not that he is essentially or primordially evil, but that he refuses to acknowledge that his own individual talents, prodigious though they be, are not enough. Voldemort's unwillingness to integrate himself into society is what, in the end, prevents him from both knowing and ruling that society. It is also what makes him *inhuman*, and makes Harry so very human, with all the lovable flaws that accompany that tragic condition.

Harry's distinctly social and frequently circuitous path to gaining knowledge of himself and his world is quite typical. The trajectory of the *Bildungsroman* is not so much linear, such as a rise from a lowly state to an exalted one or from rags to riches, but circular. In his study of the German *Bildungsroman*, starting with *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and continuing to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Michael Minden points out that, while the “idea of *Bildung*—the development or formation of a young man—is basically linear,” the novels are “in fact circular” (1997, p.1). Harry's *Bildung* does not simply lead from boyhood to manhood (or wizard-hood), but comes full-circle, with Harry reenacting the primal confrontation with Voldemort again and again: dueling Professor Quirrell in *Sorcerer's Stone*, Tom Riddle and the Basilisk in *Chamber of Secrets*, Wormtail in *Prisoner of Azkaban*, and Voldemort in person in *Goblet of Fire*, *Order of the Phoenix*, and *Deathly Hallows*, the final showdown. After all of these, even with the horror of seeing Cedric Diggory or Sirius Black killed, Harry comes to a greater understanding of his place in the world, even if he is not yet “at home” in it. Quoting Novalis, Minden notes that the movement is “immer nach Hause,” always towards home (1997, p.1). This is why so many of these tales end in marriage, in the establishment of a home and family, something that Rowland—even dealing with such young persons as her protagonists—could not help to include in her Epilogue (“Nineteen Years Later”), where Harry and Ginny, as well as Ron and Hermione, are married and sending their own children off to Hogwarts, closing the circle of the entire series, while also underscoring the continuity—and endless continuation—of life (*Deathly Hallows*, pp.753–759).

Magic is the crucial element of the postmodern *Bildungsroman* in *Harry Potter*, perhaps as opposed to the modern one. After all, according to the model of the Age of Enlightenment, modernity was to have swept away the mythic and enchanted parts of the world; the great Romantics, along with their twentieth-century epigones, brought them

back, and postmodernism is thought to foster an easy coexistence of fact and fantasy. The story of Harry's education entails both his learning the ways of the wizarding world and learning to use magic effectively. Like traditional tales in which the hero loses innocence and gains experience, Harry discovers more and more about the magical world, how it operates, and how it relates (or does not relate) to the Muggle world. For the most part, the wizard's world appears to be a near parallel to this other, with its own Ministry of Magic standing in for, or alongside, the British parliament and ministries, and so on. There are even parallel histories, as famous wizards include Paracelsus and Cornelius Agrippa who are also well known in Muggle lore, and the ominous rise of Grindelwald in middle-Europe clearly coincides with the rise of Hitler and the Second World War. Even the more quotidian aspects of our world, such as the boring jobs, transportation hassles, and tedious regulations find their magical counterparts in Harry Potter's.

Also, in Harry's world as in ours, one needs to find ways to make sense of things. Magic is one such way. Magic, like technology (and they are not nearly as far apart as they seem), can make life easier by solving problems, but it also makes things more complicated, as Harry discovers over and over again. Muggles' machines function much like wizards' magic, and we see Arthur Weasley delighting in this fact: “‘*Fascinating!*’ he would say as Harry talked him through using a telephone. ‘*Ingenious*, really, how many ways Muggles have found of getting along without magic’” (*Chamber of Secrets*, p.43). In fact, the Weasleys prove that relying on magic can be quite the handicap in the Muggle world, as when Ron claims, “I know how to use a fellytone now” (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, 431). Rowling's precursor Tolkien had linked magic and machines as two forms of the same thing: power to control, for good or ill, the world around one. Explaining his use of “the Machine (or Magic),” Tolkien writes that it refers to “all use of external plans or devices (apparatus) instead of developments of the inherent inner powers or talents—or even the use of these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating. [...] The Machine is our more obvious modern form though more closely related to Magic than is usually recognized” (2002, p.xvi). Magic, in this case, is another form of technology.

The magic wand is perhaps the best example of this, since it is a tool that enables one to assume greater control over a given situation. Furthermore, according to Ollivander, in *Deathly Hallows*, a wizard's *Bildung* is closely tied to that of his wand. Indeed, for the wizarding world, in which magic is the crucial element—both for understanding the world and for changing it—the magic wand is the principle tool, as well as an important symbol. As Ollivander tells Harry, any wizard worth his salt can “do” magic with any old wand, but the elective affinities between wand and wizard will produce the greatest magic. Harry had learned way back in *Sorcerer's Stone* that “it's really the wand that chooses the wizard, of course” (p.82), and this is underscored again later: “‘The wand chooses the wizard,’ said Ollivander. ‘That much has always been clear to those of us who have studied wandlore’” (*Deathly Hallows*, p.494). Ollivander then explains that the power that is formed by the mutual energies of wizard-and-wand progresses according to the mutual development of the wand and its user. Essentially, a wizard's wand has its own *Bildung*, or, rather, the *Bildung* of the wizard is intimately tied to the *Bildung* of the wand. As Ollivander puts it, “The best results, however, must always come where there is the strongest affinity between wizard and wand. These

connections are complex. An initial attraction and then a mutual quest for experience, the wand learning from the wizard, the wizard from the wand” (p.494).

This sort of *Bildung* resonates well with the postmodern condition, in which the “grand narratives” of modern thought (as Jean-François Lyotard would have it) no longer function as credible guides to understanding and controlling the forces affecting humanity at its most basic levels (see Lyotard 1984, pp.31–37). That is, Enlightenment rationality, the Hegelian concept of the teleological progress of History, or Marx’s consecutive modes of production, seem to hold few answers for the perplexing problems of life in the twenty-first century; even if such meta-narratives are possible, there is some question as to whether they are desirable. Yet one cannot really abandon the process of *Bildung* and the desire for understanding merely because the former certainties no longer hold. *Harry Potter*, in fact, provides a wonderful dramatization of the ways that, when confronted with absolute marvels and belief-shattering novelties, one may still press on and even achieve the sort of practical understanding that allows one to lead a happy life even in times of terrifying uncertainty. Describing what he conceded was a rather modernist strategy for overcoming the spatial and political crises of postmodernity, Fredric Jameson called for “an aesthetic of cognitive mapping,” a figural or allegorical means of getting a sense of the enormous and unrepresentable totality of a world-system—the alarming vicissitudes of the global financial networks, for example—that can affect us severely, and in ways we cannot really know by traditional means (see 1990, pp.51–54 and pp.415–418). Similarly, as a means of getting a handle on our somewhat bewildering circumstances, magic is a sort of mapmaking activity, providing a plan by which we can at least provisionally make our way in the world. Magic, when employed by a well-educated wizard, can help make sense of the confusion.

If magic is a kind of machine, then it is also an educational tool, a means of making sense of, or giving form to, the world. The *Bildungsroman* is an epistemological genre, where the reader may gain knowledge while also following the learning processes of one or more key characters. In this, it is like the gothic novel—*Harry Potter* certainly draws heavily upon the image repertoire associated with that genre as well—inasmuch as gothic texts frequently depict a movement from mystery and wonder towards knowledge and understanding. Gothic fiction also places the individual within a confounding and often frightening milieu, which he or she has to transform into a meaningful and coherent order somehow. In Marshall Brown’s words, “As their chaotic events unfold, the [gothic] novels return insistently to problems of orientation in time and place, to coherence of experience in a world of magic or mystery, to participation in a community under threat of isolation—in short, to the various continuities of meaning that stabilize a world at risk” (2005, p.xiv). In *Harry Potter*, the “world of magic and mystery” overlaps with a more stable world, presenting magic as a perfectly suitable way of dealing with real-world problems. As he makes his way in the wizarding world, Harry’s journey becomes an allegorical representation of our own efforts towards a “cognitive mapping” of our world-system.

In a significant, even primal, scene for the entire *Bildungsroman* that is the *Harry Potter* series, Hagrid tries to explain to Harry who he is, what he is, and what “our world” is. Furious at discovering that the Dursleys have not told Harry of his own past, Hagrid growls, “Do you mean ter tell me [...] that this boy—this boy!—knows nuthin’ abou’—about ANYTHING?” Harry, at first offended, starts to protest that he actually knows a lot

of “math and stuff,” but Hagrid explains, offhandedly, that he means “About *our* world. *Your* world. *My* world” (*Sorcerer’s Stone*, pp. 49–50). Of course, Hagrid means the wizarding world rather than “our world” more generally (i.e., the readers’ world), but the scene invites us to explore the world with Harry. After all, the *Harry Potter* series does not really tell us who Harry is or what *our* world is like, only that these are questions that we can now seek answers to, quests that we can embark upon. Rowling’s magical *Bildungsroman* invites us to join in Harry’s novel of formation or education. It encourages the reader to use his or her imagination, a powerful force in its own right, to become a wizard or witch as well, “an’ a thumpin’ good’un, I’d say, once yeh’ve been trained up a bit” (*Sorcerer’s Stone*, p.51).

Notes

¹ All references to the seven books in the *Harry Potter* series are to the American editions listed in the Bibliography. I will use *Harry Potter* to refer to the series as a whole; I will refer to individual volumes, with page numbers, by their distinguishing conjoined phrase (e.g., *Prisoner of Azkaban*).

² Because my interest lies in the history and theory of the novel, here looking particularly at the form and function of the *Bildungsroman* in the postmodern condition, I will focus on the *Harry Potter* novels themselves, rather than surveying the overwhelming body of available *Harry Potter* scholarship. Although a notion akin to *Bildung* appears in much of this “secondary” literature, little attention has been paid to *Harry Potter* and the *Bildungsroman* as a narrative form or genre.

³ These include the first chapter of *Sorcerer’s Stone* (“The Boy Who Lived,” pp.1–17, in which Harry appears as a sleeping infant, only at the end), the first chapter of *Goblet of Fire* (“The Riddle House,” pp.1–15), the first two of *Half-Blood Prince* (“The Other Minister” and “Spinner’s End,” pp.1–37), and the first of *Deathly Hallows* (“The Dark Lord Ascending,” pp.1–12). That these all come at the beginning of their respective volumes indicates their status as prologues, setting the mood as well as giving us the rare glimpse of a scene Harry to which is not quite privy. (The introductory “Boy Who Lived,” in fact, like the Epilogue at the end of *Deathly Hallows*, is really outside of the main narrative of *Harry Potter*.)

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