

TOWARDS A POLYTHETIC DEFINITION OF THE BILDUNGSROMAN: THE EXAMPLE OF PAUL AUSTER'S *MOON PALACE*

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This article has a double purpose. First, it presents a multi-factorial and polythetic approach to the definition of the bildungsroman genre. Second, it uses this definition to read Paul Auster's novel *Moon Palace* (1989) as a bildungsroman. The picture of the bildungsroman that emerges from this approach is one of marked continuity from its late eighteenth-century beginnings up to our own times.

Critics often see *Moon Palace* as a post-modern novel with strong resemblances to the picaresque,¹ but I think it has a much stronger bond to the bildungsroman, more specifically the nineteenth-century British bildungsroman. But calling a novel a bildungsroman is by no means straightforward, due to the prolonged critical controversy over how the term should be defined. While recent non-essentialist linguistics and cognitive theory have emphasized that all terms are “fuzzy” and that there can be no definitive definitions of any terms,² bildungsroman criticism has been marked by strong positions claiming that one definition is right while others are definitely wrong. There is now a multitude of different definitions, confronting each other in what one

critic has referred to as “genre wars” (Boes 2006, 230). There are two main factions here. The first is the Germanist tradition which tends to see the bildungsroman as a German genre, strongly tied to the period of Goethe. The genre is seen to express typical German and late eighteenth or early nineteenth-century ideas about education, humanism, and personality formation as the harmonious unfolding of innate characteristics.³ The second position is summed up by Todd Kontje, who says that critics “outside of German studies downplay the national connection and stress the genre's close ties to modernity in general” (1993, 111–112). These critics also tend to emphasize plot and character more strongly than Germanist definitions.

In addition to these disagreements over the national, historical, and ideological foundation of the genre, critics also disagree about which ideologies concrete novels express, and which concrete novels should be seen as belonging to the genre. I suspect that two characteristics of existing definitions have caused much of this controversy. The first is that definitions are often very general and sometimes vague, and the second, that they include necessary qualities. Michael Beddow, for

¹ See for instance Herzogenrath 1999, Shiloh, 2002.

² For instance Popper 1995, 9–21; and Janicki 1990, 1999, 2006.

³ E.g. Martin Swales 1978, 14–15.

instance, sees the defining characteristic of the genre as the “expression and recommendation of a particular understanding of the nature of humanity through the more or less overtly fictitious narrative of the central character’s development” (Beddow 1982, 5–6). This is quite abstract and vague and impossible for a reader to picture. It is thus hard to ‘prove’ whether a specific novel conforms to this definition or not. For definitions to be useful, that is, clearer and more specific than the terms they define, I think they need to be more specific than this.

The second problem with existing definitions, that of necessary qualities, means that the defining criteria are absolute requirements, so that if a book lacks one particular element it is not a bildungsroman. François Jost’s article “Variations of a Species: The Bildungsroman” (1983) seeks to separate the “standard Bildungsroman” (125) or “true apprenticeship novel” (133) from “free adaptations,” “variations” (133), or “pseudo-types” (134). He therefore lists dozens of necessary qualities: The protagonist must not be “pushed on stage in a pram” (135), and “a complete biography of the hero ... exceeds by far the traditional frame of the genre” (132). There must not be too much suffering, and an “essential feature ... is the protagonist’s struggle for selfness rather than his display of selfishness” (135). The ending must be positive. “Death ... tends to weaken, even to invalidate the plot of the true apprenticeship novel” (1983, 133).

The use of necessary qualities in a genre definition has several disturbing consequences. One is that genres become discrete, clear-cut categories, absolutely different from one another. All novels should thus belong one category only, and borderline cases should be exceptions. The degree of disagreement over whether particular novels belong to a given genre or not is sufficient evidence that genres, or at least the bildungsroman, is not such a clear-cut category. Secondly, such definitions ignore that fact that genres are constantly

changing and developing. If all novels belonging to a genre are to have all the properties, then change becomes logically impossible. Germanists, for instance, ran into serious problems trying to use Dilthey’s definition of the bildungsroman on works by Mann and Hesse. Dilthey required a positive ending, and if this was seen as an absolute condition, many novels with obvious links to the genre would have to be excluded. This problem could only be solved by changing the definition to fit the works critics wanted to include. Thirdly, such absolute criteria leave little room for originality. Many writers, critics and theorists have seen novels as the result of two influences that might be called, in T. S. Eliot’s words, “tradition and the individual talent.” On the one hand, literature can only be comprehensible if there is a set of shared codes and conventions. On the other hand, each writer expresses something personal and original. Although writers who choose to write in a particular genre they will often enter into a dialogue with former works in the genre by choosing to bend or break certain conventions. If the defining features of a genre are seen as necessary, any creative ‘rule’-breaking will push the work out of the genre.

I have tried to create a definition of the bildungsroman that avoids these two problems; that is, firstly, I try to lower the level of abstraction and make the defining features as specific as possible, and secondly, I try to avoid necessary qualities. My definition is called the Bildungsroman Index, and consists of a list of 91 features divided into seven sections. The classification is polythetic, since members share a large number of features but do not have to have any particular one. This means that the genre is not seen as discrete. Particular novels can be seen as bildungsromane to a greater or lesser extent, not only as definitely in or out.

Since the Index is developed for the English-language bildungsroman tradition, I

have based it on four works that I see as foundational to that genre.⁴ These novels are Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Dickens's *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. I have chosen these primarily because their status as bildungsroman is relatively undisputed. The features are found by comparing the four novels, looking for similarities at all levels, in structure, plot, characters, titles, narration, etc. Secondly, I have taken into account features often mentioned by critics that I think are present in those four novels. Here I have balanced the aims of concreteness and specificity against the importance of the features. For instance, psychological development is quite abstract, but it needs to be in the Index because almost all definitions of the genre see it as important. The features are given points from 1 to 3. Most get 1, but features that are particularly important score 2 or 3. "Important" here usually means that they have been emphasized in former definitions by critics, or are extremely common. Psychological development therefore gets three points, while "Development from false understanding of society to social knowledge" is less persistent and discussed less often by critics and therefore gets only one point.

The scope of this article does not allow for the presentation of the entire Index, but sections, maximum scores, and details of some sections will be shown further on in the article.

Auster's *Moon Palace*

For those unfamiliar with Auster's novel, the first page provides a useful summary of the plot:

It was the summer that men first walked on the moon. I was very young back then, but I did not

believe there would ever be a future. I wanted to live dangerously, to push myself as far as I could go, and then see what happened to me when I got there. As it turned out, I nearly did not make it. Little by little, I saw my money dwindle to zero; I lost my apartment; I wound up living in the streets. If not for a girl named Kitty Wu, I probably would have starved to death. I had met her by chance only a short time before, but eventually I came to see that chance as a form of readiness, a way of saving myself through the minds of others. That was the first part. From then on, strange things happened to me. I took the job with the old man in the wheelchair. I found out who my father was. I walked across the desert from Utah to California. That was a long time ago, of course, but I remember those days well, I remember them as the beginning of my life. (1)

Critics often seem to take it for granted that *Moon Palace* cannot be a bildungsroman because it is postmodern. They then see the loss of belief in the stable self, grand narratives, progress, and traditional values that characterize postmodernism as radically opposed to the humanist and Enlightenment foundation of the bildungsroman. It can thus be claimed that a postmodern novel cannot be a bildungsroman. But with my definition of the genre, a very different picture emerges. Here are the section scores for *Moon Palace* and *David Copperfield*:

SECTIONS	MAX. POINTS	DAVID COPPERFIELD (1849-50)	MOON PALACE (1989)
Formal features	28	28	23
Themes and motifs	16	15	13
Hero	15	14	14
Secondary characters	8	8	6
Society, setting	11	11	11
Main events in hero's life	41	32	38
Events concerning other people	11	10	10
Total	130	118	115

We see that *Moon Palace* gets nearly as many points as *David Copperfield*, one of the novels the Index is based on. In the section

⁴ If this index is to serve as a basis for studying for instance the French or German bildungsroman, it would have to be constructed on the basis of foundational works in the appropriate (sub-)genre.

“Main events in hero’s life,” *Moon Palace* scores even higher. This might seem paradoxical, but is only natural since later writers are free to exploit patterns of genre conventions that were less obvious in the pioneering early life of the genre. A complete analysis is beyond the scope of this article, but I will discuss some of the specific ways in which *Moon Palace* resembles and differs from the tradition.

In the “formal” section, *Moon Palace* scores only a little lower than *David Copperfield*. Section details are shown below:

Feature	Formal features	Max points	<i>Moon Palace</i>
1	One main character	1	1
2	Main character an individual, not a type	1	1
3	Hero focalizer for almost all of the narrative (whether 1st or 3rd person)	2	2
4	Retrospective narrative	1	1
5	Narrator understands more than young hero	1	1
6	Ironic attitude to young hero	1	1
7	Main part of plot about period when hero is between 18 and 23 years old	3	3
8	Plot goes from childhood to adulthood (early 20s)	2	2
9	Chronological plot	1	?
10	Episodic structure that nevertheless forms a pattern at the end	1	1
11	Combines inwardness and outwardness, action and reflection	2	2
12	Projected ending is hero finding a place in society, but expectation may not be met	2	2
13	Book title includes the name of the hero	1	0
14	Book title includes the words “years”, “life”, “adventures,” or “history”	1	0
15	Book makes clear it will be a life story	1	1
16	Allusions to <i>Wilhelm Meister</i> , Dickens novel or other bildungsroman	1	1
17	Inserted narrative: other character’s life story (brief)	1	1
18	Inserted narrative: other character’s life story (long)	2	2
19	Epigrammatic utterance by the hero at the end or just before	2	?
20	The narrative mode of the genre is realism	2	?
	Section sum	28	23

In the formal section I have given three features question marks instead of points because it can easily be argued both for and against their presence. Many critics have found too much chance and self-consciousness in *Moon Palace* to call it realistic, and the basic chronology is interrupted by prolepses and analepses. If there is an “epigrammatic utterance” it is not quite traditional and not on the last page. *Moon Palace* is nevertheless very close to the four classics in this section. In the hero section it gets the full score:

Feature	Hero	Max score	<i>Moon Palace</i>
31	An only child	3	3
32	Only one or no (known) living relatives	2	2
33	Of middle-class background	2	2
34	Ordinary (not particularly talented or untalented)	2	2
35	Hero’s basic goodness seen in his willingness to help others	2	2
36	Has androgynous traits	2	2
37	Orphan or	2	2
38	Fatherless or	2	0
39	Parent dies in course of novel	2	0
	Section sum	15	15

Marco follows the British tradition of the orphan: he is an only child, of middle-class background, not particularly talented or untalented, and generally a kind and good person. He is from a small town in the Midwest.

Indeed, *Moon Palace* gets a very high score in all sections, indication that it has almost all the traditional elements, but it also has a little something in addition. The plot, for instance, is basically chronological, but whereas a book like *Jane Eyre* might anticipate a particular future event in a line or two, Auster almost obsessively summarizes most of the action before narrating it “properly” in scene and dialogue. The beginning of the whole book is a good example. This may seem like a departure from the tradition, but in fact it only underlines an important difference between the bildungsroman and the picaresque: whereas in the picaresque the important question for the

reader, the one who drives the plot, is “what happened?”, in *Moon Palace*, we know the basic story from the start, and the important question is “what effect do these events have on the protagonist?” The summaries thus direct the reader’s attention to the development of the main character.

Auster’s use of inserted stories may also seem untraditional, particularly because one story is so long. But Book VI of *Wilhelm Meister*, entitled “Confessions of a Beautiful Soul”, is also about another character and in a different genre, and it is one of the most-discussed parts of the book. In *Moon Palace* the inserted story is a Western told by the old man Effing. A clue to the meaning of this story is found at the very beginning of it, when Effing is talking about traveling in the desert:

Byrne told me that you can’t fix your exact position on the earth without reference to some point in the sky. ... A here exists only in relation to a there, not the other way around. There’s this only because there’s that; if we don’t look up, we’ll never know what’s down. Think of it boy. *We find ourselves only by looking to what we’re not.* (154, emphasis added)

It may not be quite obvious from the quotation, but in the context of Marco’s development, the motif of earth and sky – or earth, moon, and sun – comes to refer to the relation between people. “We find ourselves only by looking to what we’re not,” and what we are not, is other people. We do not learn to know ourselves first, and then others because we know ourselves; it all starts with the other. We cannot discover ourselves in solitude. The fundamental and unavoidable bond between self and other is one of the key ideas of the bildungsroman, and one of the ways this theme is brought out through inserted stories. The stories told to or read by the young heroes of bildungsroman show them what they are not, and they can use this difference in discovering themselves. The stories present different ways

of living your life and different views on life that become part of the field of experience of the young hero. Effing’s story may seem like an exciting adventure story, or an artist’s journey of discovery, but to the hero Marco, it serves as a warning. Effing’s is first and foremost a story of isolation and loneliness, and Marco needs to realize the consequences of taking a similar path in his life. In Goethe, as well, the inserted story of the Beautiful Soul puts Wilhelm’s life in perspective and helps him think about certain aspects of his own life. Auster is thus using the story-in-the-story in a way that is typical for the genre, even though it may look superficially different.

The major themes of *Moon Palace* are undoubtedly those we know from the bildungsroman, especially the psychological and moral development of the hero from youth to adulthood. This theme is linked to the question of what governs the direction of a life, and here chance comes in as a disturbing element. After publication of *The New York Trilogy* (originally published separately in 1985 and 1986), and influenced by *The Invention of Solitude* (first published 1982), two ideas about Paul Auster’s writing gained general acceptance: first, he was a postmodernist, and second, his major theme was chance.⁵ When chance then seems to ruin the realism of *Moon Palace* it is easy to conclude that the novel is a postmodern work about chance. However, chance plays an important role in the traditional nineteenth-century bildungsroman as well, and not only as a plot element. Chance figures along with ideas about fate and free will as constituents of a theme concerning the direction of a life. “Can there be some pattern in chance events?” Wilhelm Meister ponders. “Is what we call ‘fate’ really only chance?” (VII.9, p. 302). This problem is one many bildungsroman heroes face, and the lesson they

⁵ See for instance Iversen 1992.

have to learn if their story is to have a favorable outcome is to exercise their free will to carry on and make the best of things, even when other outside forces interfere and make them feel it is hopeless.

In conclusion, a comparison of the scores for *Moon Palace* with those of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* will help to bring out some of the differences between the Index and other definitions of the bildungsroman. In America, there is a tradition for seeing *Catcher* as a bildungsroman, while *Moon Palace* would tend to be excluded because it is postmodern. The Index scores reverse this picture:

SECTIONS	MAX. POINTS	MOON PALACE (1989)	THE CATCHER IN THE RYE (1951)
Formal features	28	23	8
Themes and motifs	16	13	5
Hero	15	14	2
Secondary characters	8	6	3
Society, setting	11	11	7
Main events in hero's life	41	38	8
Events concerning other people	11	10	0
Total	130	115	33

While *Moon Palace* is clearly within this genre definition, *The Catcher in the Rye* gets a low score in all sections and seems to have little resemblance to the traditional English-language bildungsroman as defined by the Index. When some critics interpret *Catcher* as a bildungsroman, I think that is largely due to the striking allusion to *David Copperfield* on the first page. *Moon Palace* also alludes to *David Copperfield*, and usually this is a very strong signal that the author wants the book to be read in conjunction with the bildungsroman. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, however, *David Copperfield* is presented NOT as a model to be emulated but to be rejected. Holden Caulfield says explicitly that he does not want to go into "all that David Copperfield kind of

crap" (5). The allusion thus invites readers to contrast the two works, to find differences. And they are not difficult to find.

Catcher does have a hero focalizer, but there is no distance between the reader/narrator and the hero. This causes a complete identification between reader and hero that is not traditional for the genre. *Catcher* does not treat Holden's life from childhood to adulthood, nor does it even mention the age 18-23 which is the focus of the four classics on which the Index is based. Holden's story takes place when he is sixteen and thus too young to be an adult by the end of the book. The time-span of the plot is also very short, from a Saturday to the following Wednesday. He does go through a process of development, but it is very different from the maturation process of the four classics that formed the basis of the Index. His change (reflected in the title) consists in realizing that growing up is unavoidable, and that children cannot be saved from falling into adulthood. He resigns himself to the way things are, but his (and the book's) negative view of American society and adult life does not change.

But the main difference between *Catcher* and the above-mentioned bildungsroman is that it lacks most of the features that have to do with the role of other characters. Except for his little sister, all the other characters are presented as phonies. Bildungsroman traditionally describes two processes: first, liberation, when the protagonist leaves home and has to get by completely on his or her own; second, there is an opposite process of reattachment as the hero discovers that there are other people who can fill the function of family and provide care, help, and mutual affection. Bildungsroman protagonists gradually find a place in society because of their attachment to other people and what they learn from them. *The Catcher in the Rye* has neither of these processes. Through narration, plot, and characters, *Catcher* posits Holden as a lone

sane voice in a corrupted and slightly mad world.

Moon Palace might be seen to resemble *Catcher* in that the hero ends up just as alone as he was in the early parts, and without any clear commitments to job, family, or society. But there is a very important difference. Before the series of disasters that befall him at the end, Marco in *Moon Palace* has gone through an almost complete transformation. From being in despair and wanting to die after his uncle's death, he has found meaning, love, responsibility, and purpose through other people. It is this transformation he refers to on the first page when he talks about "saving myself through the minds of others." Later he says that making love to his girlfriend Kitty for the first time was

one of the most memorable things that ever happened to me, and in the end I believe I was fundamentally altered by it. I am not just talking about sex or the permutations of desire, but some dramatic crumbling of inner walls, an earthquake in the heart of my solitude. (94)

Marco learns what psychologists call intimacy, and this lesson gives his life meaning. So in spite of his losses, at the end of the book Marco has acquired an internal baggage that makes him fit for life, ready to start again.

The Bildungsroman Index offers a definition of the genre that is different from earlier ones in many respects. Most striking perhaps, is the strong continuity from British nineteenth-century examples up to our own times, seen in the almost identical scores of *David Copperfield* and *Moon Palace*. The genre thus becomes less dependent on one particular historical period than (particularly Germanist) critics have made it. But this does not imply that genres are independent of history. It is

unlikely that a novel written before the four classics it is based on could get a very high score. The index shows a genre that does have a beginning, but that stretches forward in time beyond the various endpoints different critics have proposed. The bildungsroman is historical, but its history is longer than many critics have claimed; it has a life-span that goes from *Wilhelm Meister* up to today, and it might well come to an end some time in the future. The index presents the bildungsroman as a large set of different features, relating to form, themes, characterization, and plot. This implies that novels can use the features to create a link with a tradition, and then conform with or break particular conventions according to what each novelist wishes to express. This definition allows for individual creativity and change over time.

The Index does not define genre primarily on the basis of a specific content such as an ideology, world view, "the spirit of the age", or an educational program. Nevertheless, contrasting *Moon Palace* and *The Catcher in the Rye* in terms of the Index, we see that the relationship between society and the protagonist is treated in almost opposite ways. In opposition to society and unable to become attached to other people, teen-aged Holden descends into mental illness. The novel glorifies childhood and presents society and adulthood as corrupting and degenerative. *Moon Palace* has an older hero, on the threshold between youth and adulthood, who grows from youthful isolation to mature intimacy, realizing the importance of love, responsibility, and family. And, looking back on his experiences later, as he writes the book, Marco says: "I remember those days well, I remember them as the beginning of my life" (1).

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