

## The Bildungsroman Genre: *Great Expectations*, *Aurora Leigh*, and *Waterland*

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The term *Bildungsroman* denotes a novel of all-around self-development. Used generally, it encompasses a few similar genres: the *Entwicklungsroman*, a story of general growth rather than self-culture; the *Erziehungsroman*, which focuses on training and formal education; and the *Kunstlerroman*, about the development of an artist. (*The Space Between*, 13) Although *Great Expectations*, *Aurora Leigh*, and *Waterland* may fit one of these more specific categories, for the purposes of comparison, I shall discuss the Bildungsroman genre as a whole and how it applies to all three. My definition of *Bildungsroman* is a distilled version of the one offered by Marianne Hirsch in "The Novel of Formation as Genre":

1. A *Bildungsroman* is, most generally, the story of a single individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order. The growth process, at its roots a quest story, has been described as both "an apprenticeship to life" and a "search for meaningful existence within society."
2. To spur the hero or heroine on to their journey, some form of loss or discontent must jar them at an early stage away from the home or family setting.
3. The process of maturity is long, arduous, and gradual, consisting of repeated clashes between the protagonist's needs and desires and the views and judgments enforced by an unbending social order.
4. Eventually, the spirit and values of the social order become manifest in the protagonist, who is then accommodated into society. The novel ends with an assessment by the protagonist of himself and his new place in that society.

*Great Expectations* is widely considered to be a direct descendant of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, the prototypical *Bildungsroman*. *Aurora Leigh* takes the genre and complicates it with problems of gender in Victorian society. *Waterland* reconsiders personal growth in a postmodern context, using narrative not for description, but rather as the vehicle for maturation.