

## The Queer Bildungsroman

Instructor: Charlie Tyson

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Office Hours: Wed 3-5pm, Barker Café

**Course Description:** This course offers an introduction to the Bildungsroman (the novel of self-development) by way of the queer coming-of-age story. We will start by examining the nineteenth-century examples of Charles Dickens and Olive Schreiner; we'll then move to late-twentieth century novels written in English or in translation by such authors as E. M. Forster, James Baldwin, Alan Hollinghurst, Imogen Binnie, and Elena Ferrante. What do these works teach us about the relationship between desire and identity? about the varieties of queer experience? Is the novel distinctively equipped as an art form to track a character's burgeoning self-knowledge—if so, how? What strategies do authors use to represent sex and sexuality? What does the queer Bildungsroman tell us about change over time and the shape of a human life?

By the end of the course, students will produce a 20- to 25-page paper on a queer bildungsroman and topic of their choice.

### Course Goals:

- To gain an understanding of the Bildungsroman
- To acquire familiarity with some important works of queer literature
- To learn how to write an upper-level and extended (20-25 page) work of literary criticism
- To learn how to identify and engage with criticism and secondary sources related to a literary work
- To improve clarity, vigor, and organization of writing and argument

### Required Texts (other readings will be excerpted or posted on Canvas):

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*

Imogen Binnie, *Nevada*

Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*

E. M. Forster, *Maurice*

Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*

Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*

Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*

### Assignments:

1. **Two mini-writing assignments (~100 words each)**, emailed to me by 8pm the night before class.

“Definitions” is due in Week 2, and “Summary” is due in Week 4.

**Definitions:** Drawing on Dickens and on the secondary reading from week 1, write a ~100-word definition of “the Bildungsroman” in your own words (no quotes). Then rewrite your definition

in ~50 words. Then rewrite it again, in 10 words or fewer (short sentence or phrase). Send me all three definitions.

**Summary:** Locate and read a scholarly article or book chapter that makes an argument about *David Copperfield* or another Dickens Bildungsroman (e.g. *Great Expectations*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Oliver Twist*). Write a ~150 word summary of the argument. Come to class prepared to describe the argument and explain how you might use the article's findings to build an argument of your own.

## 2. Two "seminar starters."

Twice during the semester, each student will circulate a written reflection (~300 words) by 8pm the night before class; your reflection should consider the week's readings and raise questions for discussion. In class, you will open the conversation by presenting your findings / reflections for 3-5 minutes and invite your classmates to raise additional questions for discussion and share what they most wish to cover during the seminar time.

3. **Short paper (5 pages)** that makes an argument based on a close reading of one of our literary texts from the first five weeks. Due in Week 5.
4. **Junior Essay (20-25 pages)** on a topic of your choice. The final essay is due at the end of reading period and is preceded by several intermediate deadlines:

**Week 6: 1-Hour Research Workshop at Widener Library** (in class)

**Week 7: 2-Page Prospectus** outlining topic and provisional argument AND **Annotated Bibliography** of at least 8-10 sources, with a brief description of each work's argument and how the essay will engage with it

**Week 9: 10-Page Partial Draft of the junior essay**

**Week 11: 20-25 Page Full Draft of the junior essay**

**Reading Week: Final Junior Essay due** to the English Department (date and time TBD)

**Reading Week: 5-Minute Presentation** on your research, to be delivered aloud at the Junior Tutorial Conference (time and location TBD)

## Grading Breakdown:

Attendance & Participation: 15%

Short writing exercises (seminar starters & mini-assignments): 10%

Short paper: 10%

Prospectus & annotated bibliography: 10%

Junior essay draft: 10%

Junior essay: 45%

## INTRODUCTION

### Week 1: What is a Bildungsroman?

Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, introduction  
 Brigid Lowe, "The Bildungsroman," in *The Cambridge History of the English Novel*

## PART ONE: THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY QUEER BILDUNGSROMAN

In the first part of the course, we will read Dickens' *David Copperfield*, which will serve as our classic paradigm for the Bildungsroman as a form. We'll pair the Dickens readings with short stories so that you have a greater array of texts to read and learn from in these opening weeks. We'll also study Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* to examine what happens when the Bildungsroman migrates out of the European context.

### Week 2: Self-Knowledge

Dickens, *David Copperfield*, parts I-VI  
 Katherine Mansfield, "Bliss"  
 Sally Shuttleworth, "Lies and Imagination," in *The Mind of the Child*  
 Rita Felski, "Recognition," in *Uses of Literature*

[in class: Dickens, autobiographical fragment]

\*Due 8pm the night before class: "Definitions" mini-assignment\*

### Week 3: Vocation

Dickens, *David Copperfield*, parts VII-XII  
 Carmen Maria Machado, "Inventory" and "The Resident," from *Her Body and Other Parties*

Choose one:

Bert G. Hornback, "David's Vocation as Novelist: Frustration and Resolution in *David Copperfield*"

OR

Julia Kuehn, "*David Copperfield* and the Tradition of the Bildungsroman"

### Week 4: Love and Resolution

Dickens, *David Copperfield*, parts XIII-XX  
 Elizabeth Tallent, "Briar Switch," from *Mendocino Fire*  
 Martha Nussbaum, "Steerforth's Arm," in *Love's Knowledge*  
 Maia McLeavey, "Soul-Mates: David Copperfield's Angelic Bigamy"

\*Due 8pm the night before class: "Summary" mini-assignment\*

### **Week 5: Cross-Dressing in the Colonies**

Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*

Choose one:

Jed Esty, “The Colonial Bildungsroman: *The Story of an African Farm* and the Ghost of Goethe”  
OR

Mark Sanders, “Towards a Genealogy of Intellectual Life: Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of An African Farm*”

\*Due in class: 5-page essay\*

### **Week 6: NO READING – WIDENER LIBRARY VISIT / RESEARCH WORKSHOP**

This is a great week to read ahead if you think you want to write on a text from the second half of the course.

\*My goal is for you to come up with some concrete ideas before the prospectus is due. To that end, please email the tutorial a 2-3 sentence topic “pitch” and a starter list of 5 sources relevant to your topic by 8pm the night before class.\*

### **PART TWO: THE MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY QUEER BILDUNGSROMAN**

The second part of the course will survey a range of twentieth-century and contemporary queer Bildungsromans. We will examine these works’ treatment of race, gender, and class, in addition to a number of aesthetic issues such as voice, point of view, description, realism, and the tracking of change over time.

### **Week 7: Becoming a Woman**

Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*

Peter Brooks, “The Melodramatic Imagination,” in *The Melodramatic Imagination*

Read two entries of your choice from Post45’s “Slow Burn” on *My Brilliant Friend*:

<http://post45.research.yale.edu/2015/06/the-slow-burn-an-introduction/>

### **Week 8: Plural Identities**

James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*

James Baldwin, “The Outing,” from *Going To Meet the Man*

Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color”

Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence*, chs. 1 & 2

### **Week 9: Edwardian Daydreams**

E. M. Forster, *Maurice*

Heather Love, *Feeling Backward*, introduction

Cynthia Ozick, “Forster as Moralist,” in *Art and Ardor*

\*Partial draft due\*

**Week 10: The Gay Male Bildungsroman**

Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library*

John Updike, "A Same-Sex Idyll"

Leo Bersani, "Is The Rectum a Grave?"

**Week 11: "Bildung" without the "Roman": poetry, painting, film**

*How do other artforms, such as paintings and poems, track and examine self-formation?*

Danez Smith, "The 17-Year-Old & the Gay Bar," "acknowledgments," 4 poems from *Ampersand Review* (<http://ampersandreview.com/?s=danez>)

Chen Chen, "Self-Portrait as So Much Potential," "When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities," "Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls"

Christopher Alessandrini, "'Boys Do It Better': The Selected Paintings of Louis Fratino," *New York Review of Books*, <https://www.nybooks.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/daily/2019/05/18/boys-do-it-better-the-paintings-of-louis-fratino/>; select one painting by Fratino and be prepared to discuss in class

Alfonso Cuarón, *Y Tu Mama Tambien*

\*20-25 page draft due\*

**Week 12: A Young Woman's Awakening**

Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*

**Week 13: The Transgender Bildungsroman**

Imogen Binnie, *Nevada*

Andrea Long Chu, "On Liking Women"

\*In class presentations\*

**COURSE POLICIES**

**Academic Honesty:** Plagiarism is the use of another person's ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failure on the assignment to dismissal from the course to even more serious actions. You are responsible for understanding Harvard FAS's Honor Code: "Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other

instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.”

**Collaboration:** I encourage you to talk with other students about the course and our readings and to read one another’s work. In individual assignments (including presentations and papers), academic collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

**Attendance:** Attendance in tutorial is key to your success and that of the class. I will give each student one “free” absence in case of sickness, travel, etc.: no explanation necessary. Missing more than one class will hurt your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in course failure. If you have extenuating circumstances, please speak with me as soon as possible so we can decide on a plan of action together. Being late also disrupts the work we’re doing together; 2 lates = 1 absence.

**Deadlines & Late Grades:** Unless otherwise specified, assignments are due by 11:59 pm on the date listed in the schedule. Late assignments will be docked 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g. A- to B+) for each day late. I am willing to grant extensions for exceptional circumstances: if you think you will need an extension on an assignment, please talk with me as soon as possible. I cannot grant extensions for the final paper: students who fail to submit a final paper, or submit a final paper late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial.

**Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:** “Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head’s inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.”