

Supervisor's Review

Barbara Bindasová, "Narrative Strategies and the Themes of Bildungsroman Genre in Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*"

This thesis takes up an interesting topic—the adaptation of Bildungsroman techniques in four 1990s prose works each of which uses the device of the child narrator. The choice of texts provides a rich field for interpretation. The texts by Deane and McCourt invite analysis of the representation childhood memories, authenticity and nostalgic distortion, narratives of struggle/hardship leading to liberation/escape and self formation within the form of the novel/memoir, while the Doyle and McCabe novels also solicit similar nodes of engagement. Though *Angela's Ashes* is obviously pitched at a popular level to a largely Irish-American market, this in itself is a useful counterpoint to the other novels, and to *Reading in the Dark* in particular, as is appropriately noted in the thesis. Bindasová proposes that the four texts can be interpreted via the Bildungsroman apparatus, and structures analysis of the four works in terms of narrative strategies, and the themes of family, community, religion and education. The thesis as a whole realises this objective.

The introduction combines a very brief and general discussion of Irish fiction, followed by a basic description of the structure of the work. One criticism that might be made here is that given the considerable scholarly interest in contemporary Irish fiction, the opening section seems in want of a much more critically informed perspective. What have been the main tendencies in Irish fiction of the twentieth century? Are there observable generational differences among writers? What have been the principal interpretive tendencies in scholarship? What is the significance of the selected writers in relation to these fields? The focus here is restricted to "the relationship with history" (p.5) as a unifying concern in Irish fiction, which is presented without any historical context or reference to the social conditions to which writers might have been responding. It is noted that many of the authors who emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s set their stories in earlier periods "with the attempt to capture the changes in modern society through the usage of innovative narrative techniques" (p.5). Some examples would be required to illustrate this point effectively. Moreover, one might question whether the device of a child narrator is actually innovative? As is subsequently suggested, in an Irish context the combination

of child narrator and Bildungsroman techniques is a tradition dating from James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce's *Portrait* was published in 1916—thus the device in and of itself cannot be defined as new. Rather what these works demonstrate is a *rediscovery* and *reuse* of well established tropes and devices in fiction, though it could be argued that their inflection is marked by different (new) concerns. Finally, but associated with the above points—the works to be analysed need to be clearly situated temporally; original publication dates of the four works are not offered in the introduction and are supplied in the opening paragraphs of only two of the four chapters devoted to the individual works. Such details are of significance if one is to judge the works in the context of contemporary Irish fiction and how meaningful or significant are their adaptations of child narrator devices and Bildungsroman motifs.

The contextual framework for the Bildungsroman genre established in the second chapter covers some key aspects of the history of the genre and usefully concludes with a review of some important examples in Irish literature since Joyce. The chapter closes with a Kirstin Morrison's claim that in contrast to the traditional reincorporation of the individual in the community, the Irish Bildungsroman is distinct in its adoption of separation from community as the badge of maturity and political independence. This argument might be associated with what has long been a motif in Irish literature—exile—and could usefully be linked to a discourse of alienation and modernity. The chapters devoted to the individual authors are characterised by quite systematic and perceptive close reading and succeed in comparing the texts with regard to the categories promised in the introduction.

On the whole the thesis demonstrates some competent research with room for further initiative, and attentive close reading of the four novels. One serious criticism of the work, however, is language competence. In general the register tends towards informality. This in itself would not be so serious if it were not also the case that in the introductory sections in particular are marred by frequent grammar errors and lack of precision with regard to key terms, with the result that the intended meaning is obscure e.g. "Through the variety of approaches and use of narrative tools the traditional genre of Bildungsroman and novel in general is enhanced and developed offering, also, new possibilities of the study" (p.7).

Suggested areas for discussion at the defence:

1. As Franco Moretti claims the Bildungsroman represented a "specific image of modernity" (p.10-11). Importantly it is grounded in bourgeois values. Moretti situates the point of rupture in modernity and by extension with the traditional Bildungsroman genre (with its omniscient narrator) at the end of World War I. This corresponds with what many commentators on modernity would describe as the rise of perspectivism which is associated with a faltering belief in the metanarrative of human progress. Ireland's relation to modernity is arguably a troubled one—some have even controversially argued that Ireland moved from a pre-modern to a post-modern phase without having fully experienced modernity. What becomes of the values traditionally associated with the Bildungsroman as it re-emerges in the work of these four contemporary writers in such a context? Does the Bildungsroman's modern heritage bear upon what is being done by these writers?

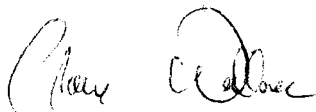
2. In addition to Morrison's claim, are there any other typical characteristics that define Irish adaptations of the Bildungsroman?

3. On page 13 representative plot elements of the Bildungsroman are listed—you purposely use he/she. Comment on the gender dimension to the traditional Bildungsroman. Is this transformed in the Irish texts you have chosen?

4. What do the identified tendencies (narrative point of view and Bildungsroman motifs) in Irish fiction and signify, if anything?

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work "very good" / 2.

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