

MASTER'S THESIS

The American self in the shaping: a study of six bildungsromane

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**The American Self in the Shaping:
A Study of Six Bildungsromane**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Philosophy**

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Abstract

This study examines the emergence of the American self in six novels written between 1900 and 1950. I argue that this “emerging self” in the context of the United States constitutes a significant trajectory for the Bildungsroman as it develops against the backdrop of changing American social, economic, and cultural values. In my Introduction, I assert that the American Bildungsroman, developing from and transforming specific characteristics of its European predecessor, is a suitable vehicle for expressing material forces shaping the American self represented in the six selected novels. As an established literary genre, the European Bildungsroman implicitly posits a definition of the self by depicting a model of maturation experienced by the protagonist. This model is conventionally derived from the Enlightenment ideal of the individual as at once autonomous and rational. However, after M. M. Bakhtin and François Jost, the process of achieving self-identity is fundamentally dynamic and comparatively formulated, in large part, through a dialogic relationship with social and historical change in the context of the United States. Therefore, the shaping of a unique American self in its specific historical context needs to be demonstrated.

Close-readings of the six novels, namely, Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia!* (1918); F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926); and Carson McCullers’ *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) integrate genre-based and materialist approaches to demonstrate: first, that a unique variant within the tradition of the Bildungsroman called the “American Bildungsroman” exists; and second, that a dynamic, incomplete and indefinite sense of an American self emerges and also proves such an American self in its shaping is closely linked to the social and historical change in the United States. The present study shows that the American Bildungsroman facilitates effective compromises the genre requires during the first half of the twentieth century, namely, between historical change and Bildung-ideals, material success (or failure) and aesthetic satisfaction, individual autonomy and social constraints, alienation and the search for love, all of which may not be emphasized as manifested in its established European counterparts, thus giving the American Bildungsroman its unique place in the Bildungsroman tradition.

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