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### Bildungsroman: On Coming of Age as a Genre

The bildungsroman narrative has become iconic in western literature as it is largely reflective of western society itself. This likeness is due to the fact that the genre was born out of a society in which western culture was dominant. The genre of bildungsroman is largely credited to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, which stresses the "dominant principle – that the individual is born not for society's sake but for his own, and that society is essentially an arena in which individuals can collectively realize their own 'capabilities' – applied mostly to upper class or upwardly tending males" (Jeffers 34). The bildungsroman of *Wilhelm Meister* is fundamentally the coming of age story of the upper-class and white male as he finds success in the transition from youth to man. Perhaps one of the most famous works of the genre in modern American literature is J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, which follows the tumultuous adolescence of the wealthy white child, Holden Caulfield, through his attempt to transition to a state of firm self and manhood. Salinger's novel meets all the criteria of Goethe's traditional bildungsroman, centered on the wealthy white male.

However, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the world has changed, lending more power to those of different races and cultural ethnicities, as well as those of the female gender. With this change comes a change in authorship; a plethora of female and multicultural coming of age stories have now been composed. Recent examples of these works are Mary Karr's memoir, *The Liars' Club*, which details her life as young woman in a the midst

of a volatile family; as well as *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which comes from the Dominican-American author, Junot Díaz. While these works are indeed coming of age stories, they might not necessarily be categorized as bildungsromans. The inclusion of works such as Karr and Díaz' writing has been hotly debated by literary scholars in the last half century as to whether or not they have a home within the bildungsroman genre. The definition of what makes up a bildungsroman has become vague and muddled over recent years, causing dispute over whom and what belongs within the genre (Buma 2). There is debate as to whether or not the bildungsroman can lend itself to various cultures and sexes, or if it has become necessary to create a new category in literature. It is essential to examine the way in which the bildungsroman can and cannot be adapted to meet the needs of culturally diverse and female coming of age stories and to observe the ways in which the genre has been both stagnant and evolutionary. In doing so, one can find that the bildungsroman is lacking a contemporary definition of its boundaries and content. I propose a new definition that fights for inclusion.

The bildungsroman can be seen as having split into two categories: the classic or traditional bildungsroman – which describes works such as *Wilhelm Meister*; and a modern bildungsroman, which would describe works such as *The Catcher in the Rye*. I would argue that the bildungsroman has evolved to include contemporary coming of age stories within its definition, and that this would create a third category of the bildungsroman for contemporary works of literature. Contemporary coming of age stories can still be bildungsromans because they detail the process of identity formation in ways that are sometimes more complicated than classic or modern bildungsromans would allude to. Contemporary coming of age stories can be seen as a bildungsroman for a new generation that welcomes diversity and world readers. The modern and the classic bildungsroman both adhere to a set of values that might seem outdated,

which could have the opposite affect intended of the bildungsroman by isolating and pushing readers outside, rather than causing a reflection on self.

Self-reflection is a key aspect of most contemporary coming of age stories; however, it remains largely unrecognized when it comes to the bildungsroman. The bildungsroman is lacking a contemporary definition, making its purpose possibly seem ambiguous to a contemporary audience. Thomas L. Jeffers is a current professor of literature at Marquette University, and the author of the book, *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana*. In this book he discusses the formation of the bildungsroman and why it has been such a popular genre for centuries since its creation by Goethe. He states, “The lesson *Wilhelm Meister* teaches is – well, less how to *take in* life’s meaning than to *give* it meaning” (Jeffers 9). Jeffers goes on to explain that this is one of the fundamental purposes of the bildungsroman. The bildungsroman details the process of coming of age, or finding oneself, in which a person must face some kind of realization and recognize his or her place in the world. Coming of age means both noting the outside forces of life acting on an individual or character, as well as to understand how these forces have meaning for the individual and what the character will do with this newfound knowledge. A bildungsroman is a coming of age story, but it comes with certain restrictions and also describes more of a journey of growth and identity formation than a coming of age story necessarily will. Bildungsromans may have resonated with western readers because the coming of age story structure may be familiar and parallel to their own lives, as every person in western culture must, at one point or another, grow up and find an awareness of self and forces outside of self to carry on life in the realm of adulthood. However, this notion is not inherently western in nature, and is one that might fight recognition in readers all across the globe. In essence, any reader may have been able to find a kind of ‘universal truth’ in the bildungsroman

genre. But then, ‘universal truths’ are always troublesome because everything in literature, and in life, has an origin that is unique to a singular experience, whether that is personal or cultural. The bildungsroman is not exempt from this, and has firm roots in its origin in the western literary canon.

Perhaps one of the most problematic issues that arise from attempting to place novels that came into being outside the western literary canon into a western literary genre is the long history in which the genre has come from. Literary genres have deep ties to their histories and formations. The placement of more diverse contemporary novels into the genre of bildungsroman is particularly challenging for this reason. In his dissertation for the University of Pennsylvania, Pascal Buma provides what he finds to be a traditional definition of the classic bildungsroman:

The central focus of such a novel was the *bildung* of a young, bourgeois, German male character from a state of blissful ignorance in childhood to a state of greater awareness in maturity; it involved experiences, some painful, some pleasant, but all contributing to the protagonist’s understanding and appreciating of life, and culminating with the hero, more or less, accepting his place in society (3).

Buma’s definition is somewhat contradictory to the definition presented by Jeffers, which promotes individualism, while Buma’s seems to promote falling into a possible and expected position in society. However, it can be argued that the concept behind individualism has evolved along with the genre itself. The German prided itself in individuality, but also on structure, meaning that Buma’s definition might not be as abstract as it seems. Whereas currently, individualism would describe one creates their own role, rather than “accepting his place in society.” The contrast between these two definitions exemplifies the ambiguity of traditional

definitions of the genre. However, it becomes apparent that we can gain the information that the genre is grounded in the system of values of an eighteenth century western German society. This essentially allows it to reinforce and promote acceptance of the existing power structures at the time. The genre caters to the system of values of the upper-class white male by utterly ignoring those outside of the realm of power, or assuming privilege, at the time of its creation.

Thus, inherent in the bildungsroman is a system of values that may or may not include – or even seem appealing – to different groups, such as women and non-whites. And while the usage of the term bildungsroman has evolved to describe coming of age novels more generally, Aaron Boalick, who wrote his thesis in 2007 for The University of Pittsburgh on problematic portrayals of masculinity in bildungsromans, feels that the canon of the bildungsroman reinforces heteronormative behavior (13). By this, Boalick implies that a distinction is made particularly between man and woman and their position in the power structures of society and in literature. If the power structures that Boalick describes are being reinforced by the bildungsroman genre, then we can see the genre as taking on somewhat of a static position in literature and form. This means that the term would be exclusive to works that fit the profile of the traditional classic or modern bildungsroman, such as the work of Salinger.

J.D. Salinger's classic novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, is in many ways the quintessential modern bildungsroman. It carries with it many of the standards of the classic bildungsroman, yet it also incorporates newer aspects to the genre. Holden Caulfield fits the profile for the bildungsroman hero being that he is an upper-class white male. His social status allows him both the freedom to explore and be mostly on his own without help from others. Holden's coming of age occurs largely introspectively, allowing the readers a chance to witness a change in Holden's thought process as he begins his path towards maturation. The modern bildungsroman also

introduces the idea of defiance of the rules and society as a part of one's journey towards self-discovery. Holden is extremely suspicious of any kind of establishment and the novel is almost exclusively him defying what is expected of him in one way or another or lying compulsively. Holden states, "I'm the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life. It's awful. If I'm on my way to the store to buy a magazine, even, and somebody asks me where I'm going, I'm liable to say I'm going to the opera. It's terrible" (Salinger 22). The compulsive behavior that Holden exhibits is part of the way that his youth is shown, so that when he is more truthful the audience can see his growth as a character. The deviant aspect is not included in the classic bildungsroman; it has been added as another aspect of the modern bildungsroman. The way in which the deviant has been added to the modern bildungsroman is the same way in which I argue that the coming of age stories of women and multicultural authors have home within the contemporary bildungsroman – it is not necessary that they fit all the requirements of the classic or modern bildungsroman story archetype because they are actively shaping a new category of literature.

One such example of the contemporary female bildungsroman is Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*. In her memoir, Karr recounts her experience growing up through the detailed images of her mother and father's explosive relationship and on-going alcoholism. Throughout her quest for self Karr must find a place of reconciliation with her status as a young woman growing up around her father, his many drinking buddies, and her mother's assortment of husbands as well as her romantic and sexual flings. Karr resorts to literature as her guiding light throughout the turmoil, which eventually leads her to a firm concept of self among her family and society as she enters graduate school and higher education. Karr uses her knowledge of the male-centric world in which she lives – largely represented by the actions of her father and his friends – to help come to terms with her own identity. She notes, "Something about the Legion clarified who I

was, made me solid inside, like when you twist the binocular lens to the perfect depth and the figure you're looking at gets definite. Maybe I just liked holding a place in such a male realm. That bar also delineated the realm of sweat and hourly wage, the working world that college was educating me to leave" (Karr 280). Her place in the male world of pool halls and bars brings her both strength and stability, as well as gives her the driving force to find her own path and create a less fragmented identity.

Karr's disjointed existence, as described in *The Liars' Club*, takes place in the midst of a hegemonic society. In a way I find this to be a suitable argument for the memoir's place within the genre. She comes of age by finding her sense of self amongst a world not catered to her sex, and this is partially due to her mother's admittance about what she lost, due to her first husband. Karr reflects, "we should have glowed, for what Mother told absolved us both, in a way. All the black crimes we believed ourselves guilty of were myths, stories we'd cobbled together out of fear. [...] I never knew despair could lie" (Karr 320). Her mother's loss of her first family, and the way her children were indoctrinated against her caused her to crumble. But she was able to gain some sense of redemption by telling Karr these stories, which allowed both to better understand themselves and each other. Both women could not truly carry on with their lives until this information was released. Recognition of self in relation to the world was necessary for Karr to continue her coming of age story. This need to acknowledge oneself mirrors the memoir's struggle for a place within the typically male-dominated genre where a woman must first be able to have a confidence in self and position so that she might fight for her recognition.

In an argument for the place of women in the genre of bildungsroman, Marianne Hirsch Gottfried, a professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, writes that "the bildungsroman maintains a peculiar balance between the social and personal and explores

their interaction” (122). She describes this as part of the function of the genre. This exploration is one that cannot exist without a total view of the society in which we live. The genre is reflective of a hegemonic society, as is Karr’s work. However, females have maintained their presence and have learned to thrive in this society, so we must now question if the same can be true of a female story in a male-centric genre. What I find in Karr’s writing is the dominant male society, from the perspective of a female. Her work has not left the realm of the bildungsroman; it merely has taken up a different perspective. In doing so, she challenges the notion that a female has no place within the genre and proves how a modern definition of the bildungsroman could be expanded to include her work.

The challenge that Karr accepts in writing her work is one that has been taken up by many female authors. Kenneth Millard, Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Edinburgh writes, “[...] the genre has been seized upon by women writers and authors from ethnic minorities for the opportunity it provides to write narratives of subjectivity that are full of ethical challenges in the context of the politics of the self in contemporary America” (Millard 11). Millard accepts the idea that women, as well as people of a race other than white, have a place within the genre and that they must write to maintain an identity in the modern world. Thus Karr’s memoir exemplifies not only her memoir’s pursuit for place within the genre, but also her personal struggle for recognition of individual identity and self.

A characteristic trait of the contemporary bildungsroman is its focus on one individual’s quest for self. Díaz’ *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* breaks this archetypical coming of age story structure by following the lives of four different characters in four different time periods. Each of these stories within the novel is a coming of age story, two of which are women, and none of whom are white. One might argue that these vast divergences from the traditional



structure of the bildungsroman would disqualify Díaz' novel as a bildungsroman; however, it is the similarities in the novel in which I feel it is important to place emphasis. In a discussion on the bildungsroman genre in America, Karin R. Tolchin, Assistant Professor of English at Florida Gulf Coast University states, in a contradiction to Buma's definition, "the *Bildungsroman* valorizes *rejections*, not acceptance" (8). If this is the case, then Díaz' novel fits the genre perfectly. The four central characters: Oscar, Yuniór, Beli, and Lola are each rejected from society for one reason or another, whether it is due to the color of their skin, the expectations from society and peers, or the obsession with Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. But what becomes clear is that it is this rejection that helps each of these characters discover their own sense of self and being.

This theme of rejection is also one that can be seen in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. However, the theme of rejection in this bildungsroman narrative is one in which Caulfield rejects society and the adult figures of authority in his life. For example, upon receiving advice and direction from adults throughout much of the novel, Holden's inner dialogue instantly dismantles whatever advice he has received (Tolchin 35). Holden Caulfield's rejection of society differs from a character such as Oscar, in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, who is actively rejected by society for being dark, nerdy, and overweight. In turn, Oscar reciprocates this rejection by refusing to change his way of being. However, it is important to note that in either case it is partially this rejection that causes the notion of self to emerge for the characters. The reciprocity of rejection in Díaz' work creates a more complicated, multi-layered form of the same type of rejection present in Salinger's writing. Thus, all characters find self through rejection of authority, which is often a central piece in a modern bildungsroman.

Although rejection is a theme that has some commonality between works, there are still huge departures in more contemporary literature from the genre. For example, the bildungsroman is characterized by coming of age into some level of success with self and place in the world. This is where Junot Díaz' *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* makes a complete departure from the genre. As mentioned, the author has layered multiple coming of age stories into the text. Díaz' characters maintain a definite sense of self throughout the novel. Oscar, in contradiction to many coming of age stories, comes of age by staying constant to himself, rather than changing, though constantly urged to change by many of the people in his life: "Trying to talk sense into Oscar about girls was like trying to throw rocks at Unus the Untouchable. Dude was impenetrable. He'd hear me out and then shrug. Nothing else has any efficacy, I might as well be myself. But your yourself sucks! It is, lamentably, all I have" (Díaz 174). As Oscar continues on his journey, he stays true to himself and finds the love he was always told was unattainable without losing weight or becoming less involved in comic books. Rather than be rewarded for grasping a firm sense of self and gaining what he has always desired, Oscar is murdered at the age of twenty-two for loving the girlfriend of a corrupt policeman in Santo Domingo. While Oscar's death cuts his story short, an uncommon trait for a bildungsroman, it is worth noting a few of the ways his story is aligned with the bildungsroman. In accordance with the classic bildungsroman, he might only have the fact that he is both male and young. However, Oscar does represent a contemporary bildungsroman in that he undergoes the feelings of love and loss, has to come to terms with the consequences of his either taking action or inaction, and has a strong sense of self, among other aspects.

While Oscar's bildungsroman is very internal, the other characters of Díaz' novel have bildungsromans of their own that exist in a more communal space. Beli, Lola, and Yunior all

must face realizations about self and their place within the world, but for these characters much of that happens in relation to Oscar's youth as well as the growth and the development of several generations of their family. And while, their own bildungsroman might have occurred in their youth, they are done growing and defining who they are as a person. This means that their coming of age stories are not intrinsically tied to youth. In traditional definitions the bildungsroman describes and emphasizes a transitory period between youth and adulthood in which a person comes into their sense of being. While Buma believes that the genre of bildungsroman has evolved with society's constructions, he believes that there are still some aspects of the bildungsroman that cannot be altered with time; one of these being that a young person must embark on a journey that allows him to find himself and prepare him for adulthood (5). Buma sees youth as a necessity in a bildungsroman, whereas Millard feels that it is not required to come of age, or have a loss of innocence. In a discussion of two modern works – which Millard calls bildungsromans – he states, “These are depictions of significant coming-of-age experiences, but none of the principal characters is adolescent. Formative experiences can occur at any age, but in terms of literary genre the expressions ‘coming of age’ is conventionally used of adolescence” (Millard 4). Millard goes on to argue that it is problematic to assume that to come of age one must be within the realm of adolescence. To reach adulthood in years does not necessarily mean that one has met adulthood in sense of self, direction, and place in the world. While Millard makes a valid argument, writers on literature, such as Pascal Buma, still point to the requirement of youth and utilize works such as Salinger's classic to show why they feel it is necessary.

Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* is the quintessential example of youth in a bildungsroman. His coming of age story happens while he is just sixteen years old. His

experiences in the city, meeting and reacting to people of all walks of life, give him a sense of new found maturity at the end of the novel. If Holden were older he may not have interpreted his experiences the way he did in the novel. In essence, Holden's youth clashed with the adult world he was encountering. However, I would argue that youth is somewhat of an ambiguous topic to broach. Youth and maturity cannot be easily defined as they rely on individual experiences that vary from person to person. Thus, to say that someone must come of age in a period of youth before adulthood is not always realistic, and potentially problematic to the genre. For Holden much of his bildungsroman takes place in an isolated period of his youth; however, this isolation is not a necessary aspect of the genre.

Holden's isolation is in direct contrast to certain aspects of the contemporary bildungsroman, such as the need to be surrounded by family in order to understand oneself. This communal bildungsroman was not present in the classic and modern bildungsroman stories, and exists currently as an addition to the genre. While the traditional bildungsroman does not happen entirely introspectively, it does in some way exist inside the self, as that is the nature of the quest and of the genre. Both Karr and Díaz present a bildungsroman that could not happen without the constant interaction of others; in fact, it exists because of others. *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is narrated by Yuniors who provides his readers with a reason as to why he is telling the de Leon family's stories. He states, "Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell" (Díaz 7). By this Yuniors implies that he must tell this story in order to redeem himself of his part in it. By telling this story and gaining this redemption he is experiencing his own maturation and coming of age. Without the de Leon family this would not be possible because he might not have been able to see the error of his ways and learn from those so different from himself, such as Oscar. Still, in writing this, Yuniors

also implies that his “zafa” might be for all Dominicans, and not just himself. He was able to learn from the de Leon family and redeem himself. By writing these words down he might be able to pass along his knowledge so that others might, in turn, be able to grow from him as he did from the family.

Rather than looking in on another family as Yunior does; Karr is completely trapped within her own family’s world. Karr’s experiences that help to shape her identity are completely relative to her family. This type of bildungsroman is one that exists within the world, rather than within her own head, and allows her to change with and according to her environments. As with Díaz, in many ways, Karr’s coming of age could not have happened without the existence of her family. This is somewhat of a deconstruction of the typical bildungsroman because it takes the focus of the narrative or memoir away from the individual who is on the quest for selfhood. This also detracts from the notion that the main character must be an outsider from society and any form of definite community. Lola, upon reflecting on Beli’s story states, “if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in. And that’s what I guess these stories are all about” (Díaz 209). Lola has the ability to recognize that she, along with the others, must grow through inclusion in society. Karr’s memoir and Díaz’ novel present stories that must exist inside the community of family. They depart from the realm of the outsider, where many modern bildungsroman heroes, such as Holden, reside.

Holden’s teenage identity as he begins his process of finding himself is that of an outsider. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden must confront his own beliefs about the way society works and the way that people act in order to hopefully one day escape his feelings of alienation in the world. The main conflict that is keeping Holden from allowing himself to find place in the world and society is his own fear of accepting this place. He finds comfort in being an outsider

because it is the only identity that he has ever definitively known. However, as his world is shifting he too must adjust and discard the protective shield of being different that he hides behind. In order to find his place he must first learn to listen to other people, rather than brush them off the way that he does with Mr. Antolini's suggestions to look to literature to find solace in the chaotic and often confusing world:

You'll find that you're not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behavior. You're by no means alone on that score, you'll be excited and stimulated to know. Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles. You'll learn from them—if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It's a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn't education. It's history. It's poetry (Salinger 246).

This suggestion by Mr. Antolini comes late in the novel and is one of the only adult voices that come to Holden in a non-authoritative way, not only validating Caulfield's life and thoughts, but providing him a model of self for the future that makes sense to him (Tolchin 33). It is only when Holden can learn to listen to other thoughts than his own that he can make a breakthrough to finding a firm grasp of his own identity. This is true because he must realize that his existence is not solitary, and that, whether he likes it or not, he will be a part of this world.

This motif of the need to break outside one's own thoughts is not only something that anyone who has gone through adolescence and their teenage years can understand, but something that reoccurs in bildungsroman narratives. Yunior, the narrator in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is not actually a part of the de Leon family, but he becomes a part of their story

and in turn their story becomes part of his story. Yuniór feels compelled to tell the story of the de Leon family and even refers to it as if he is forced to tell the story in order to be able to breathe, he states that it's "the one that's got its fingers around my throat" (Díaz 6). This may be due to the fact that in order to fully come to terms with the person he has become, he first must come to terms with the action that has occurred in his past, as well as the action that has occurred in the pasts of his loved ones and their families. In order to understand himself he must first be able to understand why past events made those in his life develop the way they did, and for Yuniór, this realization comes via the telling of Oscar's story.

Oscar is a character who is inherently good, and this goodness causes him to be, at times, overly optimistic and even naïve. His coming of age occurs largely through a loss of innocence. Another aspect of the bildungsroman and of the development of identity is the loss of innocence that is a vital part of any coming of age. It is vital because in order for one to make the transition into adulthood they must first face some harsh realities about the world and themselves. For many characters in bildungsroman novels and memoir, this loss of innocence and exposure to reality comes through some kind of a sexual act. For example, Holden's loss of innocence in *The Catcher in the Rye* comes gradually through his experiences in the city, but largely in part from two events. One being his inability to lose his virginity to a prostitute, and the other being waking up to Mr. Antolini stroking his head in his sleep, while Holden was wearing nothing but his "shorts." Neither of these events results in the completion of a sexual act, but they both can be seen as being sexual in nature. It is Holden's encounter with these events and his resistance from their completion that result in his own bildungsroman. However, in many bildungsroman stories the sexual act is completed and it is the completion of the act that allows for the coming of a character into a sense of self to begin. Sexual acts, whether consensual or not, are an

important part of any coming of age story because they often represent a connection to harsh realities of the world, be they disturbing or disappointing.

Karr's memoir provides an example of a disturbing sexual act by graphically detailing her rape as a young girl from a "big boy" in the neighborhood; as well as the molestation of her by her babysitter who forces her to perform oral sex on him. After returning home from her rape she says, "He didn't even have to threaten me to keep quiet. I knew what I would be if I told" (Karr 68). At this time Karr was seven years old, but she had a newfound identity of herself in relation to men which would be recurrent throughout her memoir. At this very young age Karr began on her own torrential pathway to coming of age and self. Karr's experiences as a young girl make up part of her bildungsroman, in an extremely similar way to the bildungsroman of Díaz' Lola. At age eight, Lola is also raped by a neighbor. "When that thing happened to me when I was eight and I finally told her what he had done, she told me to shut my mouth and stop crying, and I did exactly that, I shut my mouth and clenched me legs, and my mind, and within a year I couldn't have told you what that neighbor looked like, or even his name" (Díaz 57). Also similar to Karr, Lola kept quiet about her rape and internalized the information. This experience of being raped and being forced to keep it within yourself is one that might not be uniquely feminine, as men and boys are also raped and sexually abused, but it is an experience that is statistically more likely to happen to women than to men. Karr and Lola's experiences are certainly crucial to their identity formations because they are traumatizing and likely to affect who they are as people and how they view other people. These situations might also have some commonality amongst young women who have withstood sexual abuse and have thus been forced to make it part of their identity. However, I do not believe there to be any universal



feminine experience, meaning that no two women will handle a situation such as sexual abuse in the same manner.

This being said, females do develop their identities in a way different to males because they are brought into a world where all the constructions of society tell them that they are the lesser sex. This recognition of the female form and the restrictions and assumptions it brings are a crucial part of the female bildungsroman and the transition from girl to woman because it is part of the way identity is formed in relation to society. Heejung Cha wrote her dissertation for the Indiana University of Pennsylvania on women and their place in modern bildungsroman stories. She begins by listing some of the roles and dispositions expected of females, particularly females of color: “The daughters of color problematize the tradition-bound womanhood of color, which is perceived as being passive, submissive, sacrificial, religious, and victimized in the ideal figures of daughter, wife, and mother” (Cha 2). These definitions of what it is to be a woman, especially if non-white, can be seen as an act of identity formation that is done by society and cast on to an individual. It is important to note that this type of forced identity, through the pressures of society, is likely to occur on a much smaller scale, as is the case with Beli and Lola.

Beli of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* attempts to cast a Dominican feminine identity onto her daughter, but Lola resists this because she has already begun her own identity formation in relation to Beli and her choices as a woman and a mother: “You don’t know the hold our mothers have on us, even the ones that are never around – *especially* the ones that are never around. What it’s like to be the perfect Dominican daughter, which is just a nice way of saying a perfect Dominican slave” (Díaz 56). Lola considers taking on the role of the perfect female to be making herself a slave. In response to these feelings, she instead makes herself “punk.” This causes a different reaction to her from her family and the outside world. The

world's constructions of femininity are part of Lola's bildungsroman because they shape her identity, whether she wants it to be shaped or not. Thus, as a reader, we can see that she is incapable of escaping some type of identity or image of her that society and outside forces provide her with because her resistance still casts outside opinions. Her strength comes in the form of her own bildungsroman, which takes shape in her ability to continue to define herself both internally and externally, resulting sometimes in a painful struggle.

I find it pertinent to add that I do not mean to say that females have the only rough or painful experience in identity formation, because alongside the feminine is the masculine. And the expectations of masculinity can be just as harmful as the expectations of the feminine, particularly in non-white cultures. Men of color, in particular, may have trouble escaping the expectations of masculinity. This struggle is clearly shown through Oscar, who is described as having, "none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn't have pulled a girl if his life depended on it. Couldn't play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks" (Díaz 19). In a few sentences we can see Oscar as being totally emasculated from this culture, an outcast. Masculinity may be so present in non-white societies because they have a historical tradition of being made into the worker or slave. Now that they have escaped this role, they may feel that it is necessary for them to overcompensate for the degradation of their past generations of males. In essence, they must show that that they will not be so easily taken advantage of and controlled. This aura of total control can be harmful to themselves as well as to others because it can consume other aspects of their identities.

The need for control is often materialized via masculinity. Díaz' novel is riddled with examples of Dominican "machismo," or hyper-masculinity, which openly praises sexual prowess

and male dominance over women. Yunior, the narrator, spends much of his time describing all of the women he sleeps with and cheats with. Yunior tells Oscar, “O, it’s against the laws of nature for a dominicano to die without fucking at least once” (Díaz 174). Yunior says this because it is the language of the culture he knows and it is what he and Oscar feels are expected of them as Dominican men. However, it is worth mentioning that Yunior’s character is not as “machismo” as he describes himself. He constantly references extremely nerdy things, such as “Dungeons and Dragons” and *The Silmarillion*. These references are slip-ups on the part of his character because it would not be considered machismo to know these things. They reveal that his hyper-masculinity is merely an identity cast on him by his society, and may not be all of the true Yunior, but it is a part of Yunior that we cannot ignore. What we find in these two contrasting images of our narrator is a fragmented character and identity. This fragmentation suggests that he is still trying to figure out who he really is and that he is on the pathway to his own bildungsroman.

While he is on the pathway for coming of age, we never actually know at the end of the story whether all of his issues were resolved, now that he was in love and finally slept with a woman, or if there was more that he wanted to accomplish. It is possible that this pathway to coming of age may never actually be completed. One of the largely unresolved issues within the bildungsroman is whether or not one can truly attain a full resolution and sense of self within the pages of a coming of age novel or memoir. On defining the classic genre, Gottfried states that “the Bildungsroman represents a progression of connected events that lead up to a definite denouement” (Gottfried 122). Having a “definite denouement” means that a book within the genre must have a clear resolution, meaning that all issues are resolved and that the character has successfully attained a sense of self and place within the world. I find myself disagreeing with

this statement for a few reasons. Holden is largely regarded as strong example of a modern bildungsroman hero, but he does not really find the clear resolution that Gottfried mentions as belonging to the classic bildungsroman. At the end of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden is still a teenager and he still has a world of experiences waiting for him. I do not really believe that Salinger expected his audiences to find Holden's world resolved, even if he has undergone some change and is on the path to a more clear identity. If the book were to continue on to the rest of his life we would see that life experiences will continue to shape his identity. Most people are very different then they are at age sixteen, and I believe that Holden would be no exception to this rule. But, as Holden is the archetypical modern bildungsroman hero, does the genre suggest that he has attained resolution in self, despite the fact that he is only sixteen?

There is no textual evidence to support the idea that Holden has completely abandoned all his destructive patterns and that he is an utterly changed man. In a discussion on Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Millard states that "neither Huck nor Holden attains full adult status at the end of their respective stories, and in this respect the genre might be said to give an account of a process that is necessarily incomplete" (Millard 5). Millard suggests that the bildungsroman is merely a glimpse into one important part of a character's life, but not the only important part of a character's life, which is contradictory to Gottfried's "definite denouement." At the conclusion of Salinger's novel what we do know, as readers, is that a change has occurred that will affect the rest of Holden's life. I would argue that life changing events do not only occur once throughout an individual's lifetime, and identity is something that is largely impacted by the choices and events of a person's lifetime, but that it is also something that gradually continues to develop and change until death. If Millard's assumption that the genre is "necessarily incomplete" is accurate, then we can start to see the

opportunity of the expansion of the bildungsroman's meaning and who and what might be included.

An incomplete genre allows room for adaptation and change. The original bildungsroman was formulated on a system of values that was reflective of the time. However, there is much debate today as to the flexibility of the genre. In her dissertation, Cha Heejung proposes that the genre of bildungsroman is not one that can adapt well enough to lend itself to multicultural and female coming of age stories. Cha states:

In order to distinguish different narratives of the Bildungsroman in terms of race and gender, I divide the Bildungsroman into four categories: the conventional Bildungsroman, the gendered Bildungsroman, the decolonizing Bildungsroman, and the transcultural Bildungsroman, whose paradigms, albeit flexible and related, hinge on not only gender and race but also history and culture in the range of individual lives (6).

While this suggestion makes sense in that makes sure that each work of writing has a proper home within its own genre, these new sub-genres are still linked to the overall genre of the bildungsroman, and thus, do not escape its origins. My question now would be to ask if this is a suitable solution to the problem of differences within contemporary coming of age stories and traditional bildungsroman. Even if the genre is broken up into subgenres, there is still the engrained system of values which places wealthy white males at the core. How would this affect the sub-genres?

In order to consider this question it is necessary to first reflect on the work of contemporary authors, and to ponder as to how different the world is now from the time of the genre's inception. It is impossible to avoid the fact that upper-class white males are still largely

at the center of our world and hold most of the positions of power. This world we currently live in still holds large parallels to that of Goethe's eighteenth century Germany, thus, giving some level of credit back to the original restrictions of the genre. So, by creating sub-genres, Cha is merely identifying groups that are often underrepresented, but she is not escaping the constructions of our culture as she might hope. Nevertheless, her constructions of sub-genres may still have a positive effect on the overall genre because they lay down some solid form of place for women and multi-cultural authors within the bildungsroman by challenging and undermining classic bildungsroman values. Most of the inclusions of women and multi-cultural authors to the genre up until this point have been included by looking at the genre in a fairly broad and open light. Cha cements their presence without having to completely decompose the constructions of our world and the literary genre of the bildungsroman. This leaves space for future adaptations of the genre and what can potentially exist inside of it. However, I would argue that creating the category of the contemporary bildungsroman is just as effective as Cha's sub-categories, and unlike her suggestion, it pays homage to the cultural history behind the bildungsroman. Jeffers, on reflecting on the potential for the bildungsromans of the future, states:

I like to imagine our next great *Bildungsroman* recognizing the contributions that all kinds of workers [...] make to the liberal democratic society, that, returning to my first point above, has all along created the conditions in which such workers can even *think* about cultivating a self and pursuing their ideas of happiness. Such a *Bildungsroman* [...] would be frankly patriotic, a celebration of a political and social system that promotes the well-being of the individuated many as against the individuated (and isolated) few (191).

Such a bildungsroman as the one Jeffers fantasizes about is one that is certainly and necessarily all-inclusive and is not biased on the basis of race or gender. In his description of such a freedom for the genre, he rightly notes that it would also mean that there was a newfound freedom for our social and political systems. In essence, the biases that we, as a society, hold would continue to be deconstructed. And while our society constantly progresses, and has progressed greatly since Goethe's time, it is vital to realize that Jeffers view is highly idealistic, but not impossible. There most likely will never be a time when our society is free from bias, but our literary genres may continue to expand so that they are.

The inclusion of works of literature such as Junot Díaz' *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* into the genre of the contemporary bildungsroman act as proof of this and help to deconstruct the notion that the bildungsroman is a genre that is defined by its exclusivity, which has already been disproven with the addition of the modern bildungsroman. It is important to broaden the restraints of the genre, because without doing so the bildungsroman risks becoming obsolete. As literature evolves and becomes more diverse our genres must too evolve to make room for new works. A genre such as the bildungsroman, which is so culturally rooted, is more complicated because it is reflective of a culture. However, by creating another category, such as the contemporary bildungsroman, we do not strip the genre of its culture, but rather, allow it to be more malleable and practical in today's literary studies. Our writing mirrors our realities, and as realities change our ways of perceiving them changes. These works can be seen as bildungsromans, alongside J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, as long as our perception of race and gender continues to evolve.

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