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# **Novels of Ripening: The Maturation of the *Bildungsroman***

Michaela Schrage-Früh and Margaret O'Neill

## **Abstract**

This chapter explores how the *Bildungsroman*, originally associated with young protagonists' coming-of-age, has been revised in recent fiction to incorporate the continuing development and growth of characters well beyond their youth and into old age. We provide a brief overview of the development of the genre, including sub-genres such as the midlife progress novel, the *Reifungsroman* and the *Vollendungsroman*, as well as these sub-genres' significance within critical ageing and gender studies. Our readings of *Reifungsromane* from recent Anglophone and European literature, arguably the predominant sub-genre, show how narratives of older characters' development are informed by new perspectives on age and ageing, including the insights that perceptions of age are culturally constructed, and identity formation is a life-long process, as exemplified by the central motif of the journey. Just as growing older is not only a temporal process but also an inner experience involving a backward and forward gaze on one's life course, recent *Reifungsromane* disrupt linear time through narrative experimentation, including interior monologue, life review and reminiscence. In so doing they are well suited to narrate the complex, subjective experience of ageing in specific contexts, and thus to counterbalance the cultural narrative of ageing as decline.

**Keywords:** Bildungsroman, Reifungsroman, Vollendungsroman, midlife progress novel, life review, reminiscence, dream, memory, recovery, journey

## Introduction: Coming of Age

The *Bildungsroman*, as defined by nineteenth-century scholars with reference to Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795) [Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship], initially focused on a youthful male protagonist's development into a well-rounded individual, shaped in his interactions with the characters he encounters on his travels. Female characters in these novels typically serve as symbolic representations of the protagonist's stages of development, culminating in the hero's harmonious marriage with an idealized woman. The genre's definition was later broadened to encompass European novels of formation with more realistic settings and plots, including coming-of-age novels by, for instance, Frances Burney, Jane Austen and George Eliot, about young women whose 'apprenticeship' and character formation is confined to domestic settings and the process of courtship (Hirsch 1979: 308). Their maturation often takes place 'internally rather than "on the road"' (Waxman 1985: 319). Despite critical tendencies to read these novels as a social critique of women's limited opportunities (Hartung 2019: 2), they have also been criticized as showing female characters who 'grow down' (Pratt qtd. Waxman 1985: 319) rather than up. As Heike Hartung claims, 'These developments within feminist literary history provide the background for reconceptualizations of the *Bildungsroman* from the perspective of age studies' (2019: 2). The cultural narrative of ageing is often presented as a linear 'decline narrative' (Gullette 1997); it tends to be marked by one-sided negative stereotypes emphasizing physical and cognitive deterioration, and ultimately marginalizes older people by rendering them socially invisible. In contrast, contemporary versions of the *Bildungsroman* portray the variety, richness and complexity of the subjective experience of ageing, 'extending the notion of individual development to all stages of the life course' (Hartung 2019: 3) and focusing on 'maturity rather than youthfulness as a value' (2019: 4). Cases in point are recent genres such as the midlife progress novel, the *Reifungsroman* and the *Vollendungsroman*, which are sometimes used

interchangeably, as they counterbalance the prevalent concept of decline and decay in later life with more positive narratives of progress, growth and completion. These narratives also sometimes interrogate social factors that might thwart individual development in a demanding, at times alienating world, and raise questions as to the ambiguities of, and possibilities for, final self-realisation and meaning-making in older age.

### ***Bildungsromane* of Later Life: Midlife Progress Novel, *Reifungsroman* and *Vollendungsroman***

The midlife progress novel, identified by Margaret M. Gullette in 1988, refers to novels that centre on midlife in a positive way by offering ‘new plots of recovery and development in those years; and favourable views on midlife looks and midlife outlooks; midlife parenting and childing, midlife subjectivity’ (Gullette 1988: 5). These narratives tend to favour ‘open-endedness, thus expressing an optimistic attitude towards the future as an intrinsic dimension of a character’s maturity’ (Hartung 2019: 3). Gullette explores both male and female midlife progress narratives, including works by Saul Bellow, John Updike, Margaret Drabble and Anne Tyler, as examples of counternarratives to what she identifies as the dominant cultural narrative of ageing as decline (1997). This does not mean that these texts deal with purely positive, upbeat experiences of ageing. For instance, as Gullette notes, ‘Recovery novels, however painful and elegiac, are a form of progress narrative. They show protagonists surviving the harsh events encountered as time passes and demonstrating some continuity of selfhood’ (Gullette 2004: 71).

Stories of adversity and survival also inform *Reifungsromane*, intertwined with a central journey motif. The *Reifungsroman*, or novel of ripening, as defined by Barbara Frey Waxman in 1985, arguably represents the predominant sub-genre of *Bildungsromane* of later life. It may be found to contain elements of the midlife progress novel and the

*Vollendungsroman*. In Waxman's original definition it centres mainly on narratives about older women, whose ageing process is depicted in terms of change, growth and new opportunities. Like Gullette, Waxman focuses on works by North American and British writers such as Doris Lessing, Elizabeth Taylor, Barbara Pym, May Sarton and Margaret Laurence. Thus the narrative of development that is foregrounded in this sub-genre as it is classically understood is orientated to a global north, white middle-class value system. However, as an underutilised and underresearched narrative form that deals with journeys outside and beyond dominant coming-of-age stories specifically celebrated in the *Bildungsroman*, it opens out the potential for varied and nuanced explorations of self-representation and self-discovery across gender, age, contexts and cultures. Waxman identifies female protagonists who, in later life, are depicted as 'forging new identities or reintegrating fragmented old ones' (1985: 319) and who, by the end of the novels, typically 'have become revitalized, newly self-knowledgeable, self-confident, and independent before they move forward' (Waxman 1990: 17). One such character is Kate Brown in Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973), a woman in her mid-forties whose successful ageing process is condensed within one summer, the first in twenty years that she spends without her family. To achieve successful *reifung*, she 'must introspectively return to her half-formed self prior to the years of marriage and motherhood ... to begin anew the growth that her future promises' (Waxman 1985: 322). After several 'false starts', attempts to 'recapture her lost youth and sexuality' (Waxman 1985: 324), Kate comes to embrace her 'graying, independent self' (Waxman 1985: 330). This development is accompanied by a dream journey sequence that symbolically charts Kate's interior progress and leads her to a second spring, suggesting a cyclical understanding of time that undermines the decline narrative (Schrage-Früh 2016: 173-174). Similar narrative elements can be found in various contemporary *Reifungsromane* such as Clare Boylan's *Beloved Stranger* (1999) (Schrage-Früh 2017), Michèle Roberts's *Reader I Married Him* (2004) (Falcus 2013) and

novels by Penelope Lively (Oró-Piqueras 2015). In recent decades, the genre has expanded to include experiences of *reifung* in male characters, for instance in novels by John Banville (Ingman 2018) and J.M. Coetzee (Gray 2009).

While the *Reifungsroman* tends to focus on characters entering midlife or older age, in 1992 Constance Rooke coined the term *Vollendungsroman*, or novel of completion, to identify a type of novel that began to burgeon in the mid-twentieth century. It typically focuses on ‘an elderly protagonist engaged in an assessment of his or her life’ (Rooke 1992: 253) and on disengagement from social life as a process of ‘completion’ (1992: 247). Centrally, it considers the losses and gains of such disengagement. While acknowledging the realities of decline and loss, authors create a world in which older individuals experience affirmation through new relationships or outlets for personal enrichment, thus defying social stereotypes of later life. Life review, a process theorised by Robert Butler (1963) as a universal inner experience in later life, is regularly used as a narrative device in this genre, within which unresolved conflicts may come to the fore or new meanings may be generated. Rooke reads Laurence’s novel *The Stone Angel* (1964) as an example. In this novel ninety-year-old Hagar recalls her life story and seeks atonement on the path to affirmation before death. For Hagar, her pride has been a strength but also a barrier to connection with others in her life. Self-knowledge and peace lie in understanding that she ‘must always, always have wanted ... simply to rejoice’ (Laurence 1993: 292). A theme of connection, or its avoidance, similarly informs Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending* (2011). The protagonist, Anthony, in his sixties, is prompted to review his life when he unexpectedly receives a small inheritance from the mother of a college girlfriend. As he revises his memories of past experiences, he recognizes and learns to accept feelings of regret, and through retrospective insight experiences affirmation of life (Oró-Piqueras 2014; Pamuk 2020).

## **Life Review and Reminiscence**

*Bildungsromane* of later life are informed by life review and reminiscence as central to the protagonists' journeys into or through old age. Discussing the importance of remembrance in later life, Robert Butler proposes that 'an inner experience or mental process of reviewing one's life' (1963: 65) is a universal occurrence for older individuals and may be observed in writings across history. Yet he observes a pejorative tendency in the psychotherapeutic discourse of his time to consider reminiscence as a symptom of degeneration, and as escapist, passive, or void-filling. The process of life review may be defined as a 'progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts; simultaneously, and normally, these revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated' (Butler 1963: 66). Thus, the life review involves pain as well as pleasure. It is 'shaped by contemporaneous experiences and its nature and outcome are affected by the lifelong unfolding of character' (Butler 1963: 66). Therefore, while it is personal, it is also social and contextual. However, there is a lack of esteem for reminiscence as a valuable cultural storehouse, which, as Marc Kaminsky explores, is indicative of the declining position of older people in society (137). The revaluation of reminiscence is not only culturally enriching but goes hand in hand with supporting an ethos of dignity and respect for older people.

While Butler considers life review to be largely a looking back, closely connected to preparation for end of life, later theorists expand on the process, as well as further differentiate between life review and reminiscence. Kaminsky (1984) draws on psychologist Erik Erikson's life cycle model to suggest that a motivation for reminiscence may derive from the need to integrate and give meaning to previous stages of life to attain wholeness, the alternative to which is despair at the lack of time 'to try out alternate roads to integrity' (Erikson in Kaminsky 1984: 147). For Kathleen Woodward, the emphasis of the life review lies on 'the

examined life, on how we evaluate our life, on the arrival at a certain truth' (1997: 2). Querying Butler's emphasis on location, consistency and coherence, Woodward distinguishes reminiscence as more fragmentary than the life review, as a process concerned with a moment or moments from the past. With reference to psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, she delineates how reminiscence is a social and psychic process, involving 'the creation of a certain kind of mood, one that is generative or restorative' (1997: 2). In this perspective, reminiscence is underwritten by hope.

Cultural gerontology has shown that identity formation is closely connected with continual life reviewing, a process extending 'well into old age' (Ray 2000: 27) and thus life review is so often encapsulated within *Bildungsromane* of later life. The life review may involve reminiscence and dream elements, expressions of nostalgia or regret, and reconsideration as well as reorganization of past experiences (Butler 1963: 68). The process is suggestive of the path to wisdom, reflecting such 'features of the personality as flexibility, resilience, and self-awareness' (Butler 1963: 69). Revealing identity as being 'constantly under construction' (Ray 2000: 29), processes of life review revise dominant representations of older age and support Gullette's 'active concept of aging as self-narrated identity' (1997: 220). In fictional life review, the narrators are involved in the process of 'storying' and 'restorying' (Ray 2000: 28) their lives and identities, as they review and reminisce on their personal, relational and contextualized pasts. They thus demonstrate the creative and regenerative potential of memory and imagination. These processes, given the mutable nature of memory, bring to the fore multiple selves in the course of ongoing transformation, unsettling the familiar and the traditional to open out space for the new (DeFalco 2010). As Amelia DeFalco demonstrates, life narratives are multiple, they look in various directions, and they may contain ambiguity, gaps, instabilities and contradictions (2010: 26). As we will show in our analyses of selected recent *Reifungsromane*, such narratives of ageing not only disrupt



linear conceptions of age as decline but can be suggestive of meaning-making and creativity in later years.

### **Journeys of Ripening in Recent Fiction**

In the following examples of journeys of ripening from contemporary Anglophone and European literature, as the protagonists find opportunities for *reifung*, variations may be observed on themes that suffuse the genre as the protagonists progress on their journeys, such as social and geographical liminality, bereavement and loss, human or animal connection and, centrally, personal growth. In connection, and in contrast to the traditional *Bildungsroman*, these works incorporate narrative devices such as life review and reminiscence. We focus on a selection of *Reifungsromane* featuring characters who seek to redefine or reinvent themselves in response to challenging experiences of loss or crisis.

Centrally, the *Reifungsroman* often narrates an older woman's rediscovery, redefinition and integration of her younger self, whose wishes, desires and ambitions have been on hold during years of marriage and child-raising or who realizes that her ageing self has outgrown former identity constructions. The protagonists are often women in their forties to sixties who become conscious of their outward signs of ageing and, in turn, their social and sexual invisibility.<sup>1</sup> In recent novels, sometimes the protagonists are men, who also observe signs of their ageing, have to adapt to changes caused by retirement or bereavement and are constrained by differently gendered social ideals, for instance power, success and physical and emotional strength. Women are affected by a social 'double standard of ageing' (Sontag 1972), thus scholarly work has concentrated on narratives of female development. However, contemporary mass marketed 'successful ageing' also evokes fears about the relationship between ageing and male health, wealth and virility (Calasanti and King 2005). As such, authors and scholars are increasingly attending to the stereotypes that affect men's as well as women's experiences of ageing. In this

section, we consider women's and men's journeys of ageing in works by European and North-American writers Monika Maron, Fredrik Backman, Siri Hustvedt and Rachel Joyce. These texts, situated in Germany, Sweden, Britain, and the US respectively, all focus on white, mainly middle-class protagonists whose quest for reassessment, new experiences and personal growth is not impeded by economic precarity or social exclusion. Yet, as we will show, the traditionally middle-class genre of the *Bildungsroman* leaves room for explorations of failed or incomplete *reifung*, thereby allowing for critical interrogations of notions of progress and success, and suggesting alternative visions of 'successful' ageing as a communal and post-anthropocentric process. This is the case, for instance, in recent Irish novels by Sara Baume and Joseph O'Connor, which challenge the possibility of traditional notions of individual *reifung* and completion.

#### Female *Reifung* in Works by Monika Maron, Fredrik Bachmann and Siri Hustvedt

Monika Maron's character, Johanna Martin, the protagonist of *Endmoränen* (2002) [End Moraines] and *Ach Glück* (2007) [Oh Happiness], grapples with changes in her life in her mid-fifties. Like Kate Brown in Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark*, she faces an empty nest, anticipating that her only daughter Laura, about to leave for America, will from now on feature in her life mainly as 'Erinnerung und Sehnsucht [memory and longing]' (2007: 103).<sup>ii</sup> Johanna's job as a writer of historical biographies has lost its appeal and purpose, as the subversive messages she used to hide in her work to protest against the GDR regime are no longer needed in post-reunification Germany.<sup>iii</sup> Her marriage has gone stale, even though she has forgiven her husband Achim's affair with a younger woman. Society's 'double standard of ageing' (Sontag 1972) is filtered and voiced through his character; he fails to see how any man might have a 'Faible für alternde Frauen [a weakness for ageing women]' (2007: 95) and

considers Johanna's longing for change ridiculous in a woman her age (2007: 200). In *Endmoränen*, Johanna spends time alone in her rural holiday home to reflect upon her past and present, her ageing process and what to do with the second half of her life, what she calls 'öde lange Restzeit [tedious long remaining time]' (2004: 55). Her initially bleak outlook is, however, alleviated by written and spoken conversations with friends, and by a brief affair with a younger man, Igor, affirming that she is still both sexually desiring and desirable.

The sequel *Ach Glück* spans the duration of Johanna's flight from Berlin to Mexico, with the narration alternating between chapters filtered through Johanna's consciousness and those focalized through Achim, who wanders around Berlin seeking to assuage his growing fear of losing Johanna. This narrative choice throws into relief the discrepancy between Johanna's journey of ripening and Achim's refusal or inability to change. The narrative presents Johanna in a liminal space, neither here nor there – 'zwischen den Zeiten, zwischen den Orten, zwischen den Sprachen [between times, between places, between languages]' (2007: 88) – on her long transatlantic flight, without quite knowing what she hopes to find in Mexico. During her flight Johanna reflects on her life and the recent past, especially her encounters with Igor and the unexpected joy brought to her by Bredow, a dog she has rescued. She marvels at the dog's capacity to find happiness in the moment and, in walking him, rediscovers her love of nature. These events inspire Johanna's decision to accept her older friend Natalia's invitation to join her on a quest to track down the elusive and eccentric artist Leonora Carrington in Mexico. The novel thus emphasises the importance of female friendship and solidarity in older age as well as the need for positive older role models. The narrative ends with Johanna catching a glimpse of Natalia's wide-brimmed purple hat in the airport, a symbol of freedom, opportunity and the subversive potential of women's older age.<sup>iv</sup>

A similar journey is narrated in *Britt-Marie Was Here* (2016), by Fredrik Backman, translated from the Swedish by Henning Koch, in which 63-year-old Britt-Marie leaves her

cheating husband to embark on a challenging journey of transformation, undertaken in a liminal space and informed by connection with the social and natural world. Upon leaving her unhappy marriage, Britt-Marie gradually emerges from a cocoon of self-doubt and a lifetime of underappreciation. The balcony boxes that she takes with her on leaving their home, which ‘may look as if they only contain soil, but underneath there are flowers waiting for spring’ (37), symbolize that life is cyclical with new growth and vitality. She finds a job as a caretaker at a recreation centre earmarked for closure in the run-down town of Borg. Just off the motorway, Borg represents a liminal space recalling the space of the transatlantic flight in *Ach Glück*, where Britt-Marie finds an outlet for cultivation and growth. She becomes a mentor, friend, children’s soccer coach, and an object of romantic desire, connections that will be central to her development. In particular, the friendship that emerges between Britt-Marie and a girl, Vega, is a formative one for both, thus demonstrating the significance of generational connections between women for personal growth. Additionally, Britt-Marie fosters a connection with a rat that she feeds daily on the understanding that neither will abandon the other. She confides in the rat her childhood memories, and we learn that the principles of cleanliness and routine by which she lives result from a traumatic early life experience. Cleaning and organising are her armour; however, they are also valuable skills, which, combined with newfound courage, enable Britt-Marie to bring coherence and energy to the community of Borg. Such skills in women are typically undervalued and disregarded as inconsequential to the public-sphere-orientated experience that informs the dominant male *Bildungsroman*. Furthermore, whereas the traditional female *Bildungsroman* typically ends in marriage, as the protagonist conforms to social expectations, this novel, not unlike Maron’s, remains open-ended, leaving Britt-Marie with room for continued growth.

Britt-Marie’s story suggests the importance of intergenerational connection and community, important aspects in many narratives of ripening. These aspects are further

explored in Siri Hustvedt's *The Summer Without Men* (2011), in which the protagonist, fifty-five-year-old poet Mia, faces a crisis when her husband of thirty years pauses their marriage to start an affair with a younger woman. After suffering a psychotic breakdown, Mia moves to a rented apartment in her native town in Minnesota where she initially bemoans her fate: 'Now, menopausal, abandoned, bereft, and forgotten, I had nothing left' (Hustvedt 2011: 66). However, during her 'summer without men' she rebuilds and even enjoys herself as she opens up to and becomes involved in the lives of the women around her, including the pubescent girls in her poetry class, her young neighbour with two small children, and the residents of a retirement complex, including her eighty-seven-year-old widowed mother and her circle of friends. These much older women, 'the Five Swans', serve as role models, who 'shared a mental toughness and autonomy that gave them a veneer of enviable freedom' (Hustvedt 2011: 9). In her engagement with these characters Mia builds a relational identity, as the novel presents what Woodward calls a 'a model of generational continuity' in which 'three generations are linked to each other through a heritage of care for the next generation' (1999: 153).

Reflecting on the journey of life, Mia notes, 'however jumbled that past may be in our heads, we are always moving inexorably toward an end. In our minds, however, while we are still alive and our brains can still make connections, we may leap from childhood to middle age and back again' (210). In so doing she actively works through painful memories, such as her father's death and brother-in-law's suicide, continually analysing, re-positioning and restorying her younger self's experiences from different perspectives, learning from her fellow characters and creating a restorative mood in reminiscences with her mother and the 'Swans'. Unlike Johanna and Britt-Marie, at the end of the novel it is clear that Mia will give her penitent husband a second chance, but she has come a long way from the distraught woman who spent a week in a psychiatric unit upon learning of his affair. Reconciliation becomes possible

precisely due to her maturation process, facilitated by reminiscence, intergenerational friendships and insight into human frailty.

### Male Reifung in Rachel Joyce's *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*

Literary texts engaging with male *reifung* remain scarce. As Billy Gray explains, with reference to Gullette (1997), many fictional representations of older men retain an ideology of personal identity as entwined with masculinity and sexual identity, and this sense of self can be threatened by the ageing process. It is thus essential that authors challenge these presumptions and engage with male ageing as a historical and contextual process so that the critique of traditional masculinity concepts can be elaborated (Gray 2009: 22; 35).<sup>v</sup> As the examples of female *reifung* discussed above indicate, life review, often prompted by experiences of change, loss and crisis, is a necessary process in moving onward in older age. This is also the case in Rachel Joyce's *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* (2012), a recent example of a *Reifungsroman* in which, true to the conventions of the original *Bildungsroman*, a male protagonist embarks on an actual journey on foot. Harold, a recent retiree in his mid-sixties, receives an unexpected letter from his former colleague Queenie, who disappeared twenty years ago after committing a selfless act of friendship for Harold. Deeply upset by the news that Queenie has terminal cancer, Harold can only inadequately express his regret in the short reply he pens to her. However, on his way to post the letter, a girl tells him how her faith saved her aunt from terminal cancer. This chance meeting prompts Harold to embark on his 'unlikely pilgrimage' with the intention to personally deliver his letter to Queenie, driven by his faith that while he keeps walking, his friend will live.

The novel is modelled on John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), an early modern predecessor of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* (Cole 1992: 34; Hartung 2016:

3). Protagonist Harold<sup>vi</sup> is a modern Everyman, whose spontaneous ‘pilgrimage’ changes his own dreary and hopeless life as well as triggers change and hope in others. Harold’s walk north across England, spanning more than 600 miles and taking several months, is symbolic of the journey of life (Cole 1992). It is a journey of spiritual recovery and self-discovery, as Harold’s physical journey is complemented by a journey inwards through which he relives and integrates memories from various life phases: ‘In walking, he unleashed the past that he had spent twenty years seeking to avoid, and now it chattered and played through his head’ (113). In this regard, the text can additionally be read as a recovery novel (Gullette 2004). Harold’s memories entail traumatic scenes from his childhood and adult life, most crucially the gradual estrangement from his only son David, who committed suicide at the age of twenty. As he walks, Harold works through his feelings of guilt, inadequacy and failure. He learns to forgive himself as well as others.

This *reifung* is presented as a process of gradual rejuvenation symbolized by the blossoming of nature; Harold starts out in March and arrives at his destination in June. The many hardships of his journey, as well as his various encounters with friendly strangers, who encourage, assist and confide in him, cause both outward and inward change. We learn that ‘passing his reflection in shop windows, the man staring back at him was so upright and appeared so sure-footed, he had to look twice to check it was really himself’ (Joyce 2012: 178). When his wife, Maureen, meets him at a later point of his journey, she feels that ‘It was the paired-down vitality of him that made her tremble; as if he had at last become the man he should have been all along’ (Joyce 2012: 271-272). He gradually begins to feel closer to Maureen, with whom he has lived a life of silent hostility and endurance ever since their son’s death: ‘he thought of his wife, scrubbing away at stains he could not see. He felt in a strange way that he understood her better’ (Joyce 2012: 166). This understanding occurs partly through learning how to care for others – a stray dog who joins Harold for a while and a young troubled

man who seems like a reincarnation of his dead son – as well as learning to let go when both eventually decide to part ways with him. At the end of his journey, there is hope for a new beginning with Maureen, who has undergone a similar internal process of change, albeit in the confines of their home, her development thus following the more conventional trajectory of the female *Bildungsroman*.<sup>vii</sup>

While Harold's life review is depicted as an isolated and partly painful process, at the end of the novel, as Maureen and Harold reminisce together, dwelling on happy memories from their early courtship, the importance of such shared memories is emphasized. Harold expresses his fear of getting Alzheimer's like his father and losing these memories, invoking the cultural narrative of ageing as cognitive decline: 'As I walked, I have been remembering so much. ... Some of the memories have been hard. But some of them have been beautiful. ... I'm frightened that one day, maybe soon, I will lose them again, and this time it will be forever' (Joyce 2012: 345). Maureen, too, has a vision of old age involving decline and loss (Joyce 2012: 346), yet the book ends on a hopeful note as they face the future together: 'They caught hands again, and walked together towards the water's edge, two small figures against the black waves. Only halfway there, one of them must have remembered again and it passed like a fresh current of joy between them. They stood at the water's edge, not letting go, and rocked with laughter' (Joyce 2012: 347).

#### *Reifung Interrupted: Sara Baume's Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither and Joseph O'Connor's Ghost Light*

As the novels discussed so far demonstrate, journeys of ripening in both male and female characters tend to involve life review, reminiscence, and cyclical movement, although on a progressive path. In the process of change and growth, they bring pain as well as pleasure.



Although the experience is personal, it does not tend to be solitary but draws strength from love, friendship, nature, and community. Yet such narratives of recovery, integration and progress are not always entirely successful or complete. Several recent Irish novels explore the challenges of life review and *reifung* in older characters, for instance, those struggling to survive in adverse living conditions, as in Sara Baume's *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* (2015) and Joseph O'Connor's *Ghost Light* (2010).<sup>viii</sup>

In Baume's novel, fifty-seven-year-old narrator Ray is an ageing and possibly autistic social outcast, who recognises himself in and forms a bond with One Eye, a mangy, mistreated dog he adopts and saves from being euthanised. The novel is told in the second person, as a monologue addressed to One Eye, and as such is indicative of Ray's exclusion from human community as well as his gradual movement toward a postanthropocentric realm, where he begins to experience nature through the eyes and instincts of an animal. Ray, 'an old man' (Baume 2015: 12), who 'has never been anywhere in the world' (Baume 2015: 16), embarks on a road trip through rural Ireland to escape the authorities who he fears want to seize One Eye. In some respects, Ray's journey through the natural world and the four seasons, as suggested by the book's title, is reminiscent of Harold's, yet it lacks positive and meaningful interactions with strangers, who avoid and shun him. As Ray opens up to the dog, his traumatic memories of a motherless, neglected childhood, his dependency in adulthood on his cold, domineering father, his social seclusion, and his father's death, for which he feels responsible, gradually find expression. Yet Ray's burgeoning insights into how society has failed him and his emotional *reifung* as he cares for and bonds with the dog do not lead to psychological or social integration. His journey on the outskirts of human society eventually ends when he runs out of money. Here, the circular journey, leading him back to his father's house, 'the saddest place in our whole small world' (Baume 2015: 275), symbolises a dead end. Setting One Eye free, Ray finds that suicide is his only way forward.

In another example, in Joseph O'Connor's *Ghost Light* (2010), as sixty-seven-year-old impoverished actress Molly Allgood navigates the streets of 1950s war-torn London, accompanied by reminiscence of moments from her past and a deceased lover felt as a ghostly but assuring presence, the confrontation between past and present identities brings about 'a source of uncanniness' (DeFalco 2010: 22) as the strange imposes on the familiar, unsettling secure identity. As with the character of Ray in Baume's novel, Molly is a social outcast. As an Irish emigrant facing social marginalisation, and living in poverty, her experience of ageing is informed by stereotypes and isolation. Reminiscence of moments from her past, including glimpses of her life as an actor, sustain Molly on her journey across the city to take part in a radio play that will be her last performance. The difficulties of facing one's ageing are revealed, for instance, when Molly is confronted with a portrait of an old woman in an art gallery and dwells on her own changing face and voice as well as her 'fretfulness with age ... troubled watchfulness of a child in an unfathomable world' (O'Connor 2010: 59-60). However, Molly's vibrant inner life counterbalances negative self-and-other perceptions of ageing, to reveal the many layers that comprise the ageing subject. For instance, in the same scene, Molly's thoughts turn towards her own art on the stage: "Several years had passed since your greatest performances, but that did not seem to matter to the audience or the actors. And really, it didn't matter to you. ... You knelt to the ovation, touched your breast like a diva" (O'Connor 2010: 65-6). She also recalls how when reporters described her as the playwright's muse, she shifted their attention to her professional training (O'Connor 2010: 66). Such recollections strengthen and sustain Molly. Additionally, as in Baume's novel, second-person narration is utilised, which has the effect of evoking a connection between Molly and the reader. Her journey represents one of creativity and defiance, as her inner world enriches her outer world and additionally allows her to confront social discrimination. However, the realities of the

dynamics of inequalities accumulated over a life course ultimately prevail, and the ending of the novel is bleak.

While the characters in these incomplete *Reifungsromane* renegotiate their identities to an extent, such narratives raise questions about the possibility of coherency and consolidation. As Heather Ingman observes, there is also ‘the difficulty of moving towards greater self-realization in a postmodern world of fractured and unstable identities’ (2018: 109). This difficulty is exacerbated in characters trapped in precarious living conditions, marginalised by society, traumatised or cognitively impaired. Given such complexities, the *Reifungsroman* is necessarily evolving while it yet supports protagonists to develop and expand in later life.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Maturation of the Bildungsroman**

The world is experiencing a ‘longevity revolution’, as the proportion of older people has seen considerable growth and is projected to continue increasing (UN 2019). Accordingly, we may expect to see the continued flourishing and development of these *Bildungsromane* of later life. As we engage with them, it will be important to acknowledge how older individuals’ lives, and the risks and opportunities they may encounter, have changed significantly in recent decades (UN 2019). By drawing on social and cultural gerontology, literary studies can inform new understandings of what ageing may mean in different contexts. Additionally, intersections of gender, race, class and sexuality, or illness and disability, can inform the experience of ageing and may inflect the genre as it develops. For instance, as Hartung points out, the positive construction of ageing as progress and growth is complicated by experiences of dementia in later life, even though dementia narratives ‘also provide counter-narratives to a crisis discourse of age as inevitable decline by questioning the validity of notions of progress as linear development’ (2016: 3). Complicating and subverting linear, chronological and traditional

notions of ageing, contemporary *Bildungsromane* of later life attest to the need to do justice to the complexity, subjectivity and richness of the lived experience of ageing. As society continues to denigrate age as a burden, such works, giving voice to older protagonists who traditionally might have been represented as secondary figures, are all the more important for supporting the cultural and intrinsic value of age. As Kaminsky observes, the cultural value of reminiscence has devalued alongside the position of elders in the community, therefore in its revaluation 'nothing less than our attitude towards old people is at stake' (1984: 137). Bringing to the foreground the personalized, relational and embedded experiences of growing older, which are so often underrepresented in contemporary discourse, these fictional life stories can reframe the cultural decline narrative.

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<sup>i</sup> A rare example of a protagonist in her mid-seventies is Lily Butler in Clare Boylan's novel *Beloved Stranger* (1999). After completing her *reifung* by forging intergenerational friendships and undergoing life review after her husband's illness and death, Lily realizes that 'deep inside she would be sustained by the seed of her own life, reaching up for the light. There wasn't much left of her life, but it was money unspent' (252). For a detailed discussion of this novel as a *Reifungsroman* see Schrage-Früh (2017).

<sup>ii</sup> All translations are ours.

<sup>iii</sup> For a discussion of Maron's work in the context of GDR history see Byrnes (2010).

<sup>iv</sup> The image of the wide-brimmed purple hat contains numerous intertextual references, including to surrealist artist and poet Meret Oppenheim's poem 'Oh große Ränder an meiner Zukunft Hut [Oh my wide-brimmed future's hat]' and to Jenny Joseph's poem 'Warning', both of which envision women's older age in positive and subversive ways.

<sup>v</sup> Gray refers to men as making this challenge, however we suggest authors more broadly due to recent examples of women depicting alternative characterisations of men's ageing, and vice versa.

<sup>vi</sup> The protagonist's first name Harold may also refer to Lord Byron's long narrative poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1818), which features a young, world-weary traveller.

<sup>vii</sup> As Hartung notes with reference to *Pilgrim's Progress*, 'Bunyan's text has been read as central for exploring the cultural origins of the modern life course, which opened up the iconography of ageing (i.e. the ages of life and the journey metaphor) to women, who had been invisible in the medieval stages-of-life doctrine (Cole, *Journey* 26)' (2016, 82).

<sup>viii</sup> *Reifung* is also shown to be incomplete for older characters struggling to integrate traumatic experiences and past identities, as in Irish novels Anne Enright's *The Green Road* (2015) and John Banville's *The Sea* (2005). Ingman (2018) analyses *reifung* and ageing in these novels.

<sup>ix</sup> On further novels exploring the limits of progress and development see Hartung (2011).