

CHALLENGING THE GENRE: MARGARET DRABBLE'S *A SUMMER BIRD-CAGE AS A FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN*

Marija Đurđević
University of Belgrade

Rezime: Овај рад бави се анализом романа Маргарет Драбл *Летњи кавез за птице* у оквиру женског *Bildungsroman*-а. Пре свега дотаћи ћемо се улоге образовања. Путовање, у физичком и духовном смислу, обрађујемо у трећем делу рада. Брак и мајчинство су такође значајни елементи романа и у фокусу су четвртог дела рада. Најзад, упоредивши развојне путеве мушких и женских ликова у традиционалном и савременом женском *Bildungsroman*-у, долазимо до закључка да је овај жанр довољно флексибилан и да дозвољава премештање у савремено доба као и у другачију културну средину.

Кључне речи: Margaret Drabble, *A Summer Bird-Cage*, образовни роман, ženski Bildungsroman

Abstract: This paper analyses Margaret Drabble's *A Summer Bird-Cage* as a female *Bildungsroman*. Firstly, the role of education is addressed. A journey, in the physical and spiritual sense, is discussed in the third part. Marriage and motherhood are likewise relevant and the fourth section is focused on these elements. Finally, having compared the developmental paths of male and female characters in the traditional and contemporary female *Bildungsroman*, we arrive at the conclusion that this genre is flexible enough to allow for a transposition into modern times and into a different cultural environment.

Keywords: Margaret Drabble, *A Summer Bird-Cage*, novel of development, female Bildungsroman.

Introduction

The term *Bildungsroman* came into use and became widely accepted rather recently, only after Wilhelm Dilthey, the philosopher who explored and defined the genre, coined it in his 1913 *Poetry and Experience* (Jeffers 2005: 49). Roughly translated into English as 'a novel of development', the typical *Bildungsroman* follows a young person encountering and overcoming various obstacles on his or her way to becoming a mature, well-integrated, accomplished and valuable member of society.

The genre, unlike the term, has a long history since its origin can be traced back to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* on the basis of which many coming-of-age narratives in British tradition were modelled. The question theorists and critics have been discussing ever since

concerns precisely this transposition of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, i.e. whether the concept created in 18th century Germany can be applied to authors who lived and wrote much later in circumstances which not only differ from the originally envisaged ones, but have very little if anything in common with them, and to heroes who are actually heroines. Would it be possible to challenge the genre and talk about a contemporary female *Bildungsroman*?

The Traditional vs. Contemporary Female *Bildungsroman*

The category of genre in writing and reading is inevitable if a work is to be readable, still “genres are not in fact static” but rather “constructed and ideologically laden” (Fraiman 1993: 1-2). Consider the novel of formation: even though the postmodern age has challenged “the coherent and autonomous self, which is central to the genre’s definition, the *Bildungsroman* has an enduring power,” it “is not an outdated and exhausted form but one that can be detached from its initial context and used productively across different historical periods and cultures” (Bolaki 2011: 9-10). Although the novel of development is the result of specific cultural, historical, social and intellectual tradition of Goethe’s progress-oriented Germany, “the definition of the genre has gradually been expanded to accommodate other historical and cultural variables” (Abel et al. 1983: 5).

The conventional novel of development has as its focus a male protagonist whose growth “assumes the possibility of individual achievement and social integration” (Abel et al. 1983: 5). The hero passes through different stages, each of which “has its own intrinsic value and is at the same time the basis for a higher stage. The dissonances and conflicts of life appear as the necessary growth points through which the individual must pass on his way to maturity and harmony” (Abel et al. 1983: 5-6). Hence, the ultimate goal of the male coming-of-age narrative is assimilation, i.e. successful social integration.

For a long time, the *Bildungsroman* was reserved exclusively for heroes; heroines’ presence was constant but left in the shadow and in service of heroes’ development. The inferior representation of female development was not only part of male *Bildungsromane*:

[m]ost women writers have shared this view of women ... [n]ot until very recently have there been novels that show women successfully developing, learning, growing in the world at large. It is not surprising that such works should appear in the 1970’s as women have more and more left their ‘place’ to enter a ‘man’s world’ (Abel et al. 1983: 229).

So, in the traditional female *Bildungsroman*, e.g. Austen's or the Brontë sisters' classics, the principal objective of heroines' development is marriage. Over time, following certain cultural and political currents of modernity, this objective has undergone change with female coming-of-age narratives approaching male ones in many respects.

In *A Summer Bird-Cage* Margaret Drabble has articulated, in a critical manner, the central issues awaiting a modern heroine on her way to maturity: personal ambitions, sorority, marriage and housework, all of which will be addressed in detail in the following pages. We shall endeavour to reveal the specificities of the contemporary female *Bildungsroman* as opposed to the more common and researched male novel of formation, which include "foregrounding community rather than individuality" and "friendships and relationships with female friends, mothers, daughters, and children [which] show women's sense of attachment rather than separation" (Wojcik-Andrews 1995: 14).

Education and Apprenticeship: Creating Opportunities?

From Goethe and Dickens to Balzac and Joyce, the role of education and apprenticeship is to create favourable opportunities for the main character and enhance his future prospects. The protagonist having undergone a process of some sort of formal schooling, certain previously unavailable options become possible to him and not only are his horizons expanded but his mind-set is also considerably altered so that he becomes able to assume the new role awaiting him and, ultimately, to implement some positive changes to society. In the classic female *Bildungsromane* a formal education the protagonist receives, if she is lucky enough not to be excluded from boys' education processes, creates opportunities for her only in the realm of theory; in practice she remains deprived of numerous privileges available to her male counterpart.

In Drabble's novel, set in 1960s England, the situation is considerably different. Or is it? Both Louise and Sarah received a formal education, and an excellent one for that matter seeing they both graduated from Oxford. But Sarah refers to her diploma as "a lovely, shiny, useless new degree" (Drabble 1986: 7) and at one point, while having lunch with some old male friends, she admits that she feels "curiously passé" and wants "to tell everyone that I had a degree too, as good as any of theirs... I felt as though everyone was leading a marvellous, progressive life except me, and that I have been subtly left behind" (Drabble 1986: 110). She makes a discovery Rose claims "Drabble's early novels resound with" – "that she [as a woman] is confined to a sphere created and ordained for her by men" (Rose 1980: 2).

Having recently finished university and being on the verge of entering the adult world, Sarah seems to be at a loss: “I thought about jobs, and seriousness, and about what a girl can do with herself if over-educated and lacking a sense of vocation” (Drabble 1986: 8). Louise’s answer to this question is easy and practical enough: “she didn’t know what else to do so she got married” (Drabble 1986: 148). Sarah, however, cannot come to terms with this solution, especially when she learns that her old friends from Oxford, Gill and Tony, “the last couple in the world about whom I would have sensed any unease or catastrophe,” have separated (Drabble 1986: 38). Her approach to the problem – moving to London and finding a job – proves disappointing since her current position with the BBC is far from satisfying: “It’s so pointless that I can’t even think what I do all day. It’s one of those time-fillers. It bears about the same relation to anything I want to do as painting backcloths must bear to painting canvases” (Drabble 1986: 182-183). Pursuing an academic career is not an option either, even though “she seems to have a natural bent of scholarship” (Rose 1980: 3). Sarah explains why:

I used to fancy myself as one [a don]. But I’ll tell you what’s wrong with that. It’s sex. You can’t be a sexy don. It’s all right for men, being learned and attractive, but for a woman it’s a mistake. It detracts from the essential seriousness of the business. It’s all very well sitting in a large library and excluding sex and upsetting everyone every time your gown slips off your bare shoulders, but you can’t do that for a living. You’d soon find yourself having to play it down instead of up if you wanted to get to the top, and when you’ve only got one life that seems a pity. (Drabble 1986: 183-184)

The passage above demonstrates Sarah’s thwarted ambition: the mores of the time constricted women in terms of their career choices, an excellent education did not open up a plurality of paths to women as it did to men since marriage was still considered a woman’s only viable option. Sarah does not dismiss this alternative altogether but what she wants is to have her cake and eat it, to have it all. “Beyond anything I’d like to write a funny book. I’d like to write a book like Kingsley Amis, I’d like to write a book like *Lucky Jim*,” Sarah admits at one point (Drabble 1986: 185), and if we bear in mind the changes the second half of the sixties and the seventies would bring and the fact that the denouement does not completely resolve Sarah’s development problems, we could argue that perhaps the possibility of her eventually having her cake and eating it is not all that remote.

Mentors and masters feature prominently in coming-of-age narratives, “the protagonist has a mentor figure in a friend, a tutor, a servant” or a master i.e. teacher (Summerfield,

Downward 2012: 84). Susan Fraiman states, however, that “the typical girl... rarely has a formal education, mothers are usually either dead or deficient as models,” and if she has a mentor, it more often than not proves to be “the man who schools her in order to wed her” (Fraiman 1993: 6). In this modern female *Bildung* story, role models are not lacking but they fail to live up to Sarah’s expectations. The lines that follow show her stance on the issue in question: “...but then who did that leave me as my model? My parents? Cosy Michael and Stephanie? Oh, I didn’t want it, any of it” (Drabble 1986: 187-188). As it turns out, Louise of all characters bears most resemblance to a formative influence in Sarah’s life, both as a figure she wants to be like and as one she yearns to be entirely different from: –“ I have always tried ... not to be like Louise. Or at least from the age of ten onwards” (Drabble 1986: 136). Talking with her cousin Michael, Sarah admits, however, that she would rather be like her sister than his, Daphne; her acquaintance and a friend of her sister’s, Wilfred Smee, tells her that perhaps she is not as unlike her sister as she looks, and John Connell notices the same thing. Commenting on Louise’s loveless marriage and her affair with John, Sarah wonders, “does all that mean that she just succumbed to social pressures? I suppose it does. But on her own terms, that’s the point” (Drabble 1986: 149), and says that she “felt a glow of admiration: she [Louise] was, after all, striking a blow for civilization in her behaviour, not, as it first had seemed, for anarchy. Why that should be admirable I didn’t go into, but I was sure it was: it was braver than to abandon the game completely. To force marriage into a mould of one’s own, while still preserving the name of marriage” (Drabble 1986: 180). Towards the end of the novel she realises what she adopted from Louise: –“this impulse to seize on one moment as the whole, one aspect as the total view, one attitude as a revelation... to live on the level of the heart rather than on the level of slipping petticoat, this is what we spend our life on, and this is what wears us out” (Drabble 1986: 206).

From Goethe to Drabble: Journey and its Significance

The idea of a journey, be it physical or mental, “to a higher moral or emotional ground” (Fraiman 1993: 126) constitutes the fundamental aspect of any novel of formation. “Mobility creates opportunities for reinvention of identity,” claims Bolaki (Bolaki 2011: 240), and adds that it represents “a central ingredient of the traditional novel of development” and, even though it may have “different manifestations, one of the most obvious is travel” (Bolaki 2011: 39). Summerfield and Downward likewise maintain that it is “difficult to separate the accounts of the physical journey from that of a more psychological odyssey as represented by

the *Bildungsroman*” (Summerfield, Downward 2012: 81). Goethe’s prototype attests to this, as do many other coming-of-age novels belonging to different national traditions.

In the traditional *Bildungsroman*, heroes move outwardly, they are physically mobile and perform their feats in the big unknown world, either abroad or in the unknown metropolis, whereas heroines’ development usually occurs in the domestic sphere, they are not confronted so much with the challenges of the outer world, and if they do move about it, it is with the purpose of getting married. “Instead of testing their self-image through adventures in the outside world, they [heroines] are initiated at home through learning the rituals of human relationships, so that they may replicate the lives of their mothers” (Abel et al. 183: 228). If they by any chance decide to defy this unwritten rule, according to Abel et al., they face punishment in the form of lifelong unhappiness (which generally means remaining unmarried), madness or even death. Equally interesting is the sense heroines have that their development is “foisted upon them, that they are largely what other people, what the world, will make of them” (Fraiman 1993: 6). So, in the traditional (female) *Bildungsroman*, a heroine’s quest for identity diverges considerably from a male’s, remaining largely determined by choices others make for her, namely her parents, i.e. her father and later her husband; in other words, her spiritual quest is socially defined.

Unlike her 19th and early 20th century counterparts, Sarah has the freedom to leave her home and lead the life of an independent woman in the city, away from her family; she is smart, educated and in many respects ahead of her time, no one will tell her what to do, neither her family nor friends or society. Moreover, she has the chance to live in the external world and move freely within it as well as to develop in the direction she feels to be right for her, at a certain cost though. We see her, for example, moving to France for a few months, working as a tutor, and then taking her chances in London. Nonetheless, the problem seems to be that her job with the BBC is neither rewarding nor well-paid, it is, just like the Paris experience, a way for Sarah to bide in time available until... what? She finds a better job? Gets married?

If self-awareness and social integration are the main goals of successful development, then Sarah’s coming of age could not be deemed failed but neither can it be deemed finished. Her being conscious of both her own self and social circumstances, as the story progresses changes occur both in her character and interpersonal relationships: –bonding with Louise reflects her inner growth as does her more mature and enlightened stance on marriage and life in general. She struggles not only with this marriage - career dilemma, but with the broader concept of being an adult woman in a predominantly patriarchal society and everything this

implies. Sarah's journey is thus mostly of a psychological nature, she does not move in space as much as she does in her mind, and the final pages of the novel show that she has indeed come a long way since Louise's wedding. We are informed that she will soon start a new, better job, that the ties with her sister are now stronger, and that getting married is a decision she has yet to make, not the path already carved she can only follow.

The Problem of Marriage from the Female Angle

“The trope of marriage is considered to be the end *par excellence* of the traditional (and in particular female) *Bildungsroman*” (Bolaki 2011: 146). Bolaki also maintains that through the institution of marriage the female character “willingly limits her freedom to be bound to another person, and this also marks her reconciliation with the social order” (Bolaki 2011: 146). Thus, achieving much needed social integration, one of the most important outcomes of coming of age, as well as status and protection, the heroine renounces the chance to lead the life of an independent human being. “Her finding of friends, her picking of work are both subsumed by the single, all-determining ‘choice’ of a husband,” says Susan Fraiman, emphasizing the word *choice* so as to point out the lack of it: “compromise and even coercion are more strongly thematized than choice” (Fraiman 1993: 5-6). So, the question is whether this refers only to prototypical female novels of formation, or the concept expands to cover more contemporary works of female development fiction.

Discussing 19th century novels of development, Marianne Hirsch comments on “a world that expects a woman to define herself by love, marriage, and motherhood” (Abel et al. 1983: 68). The 19th century female *Bildungsroman* presented heroines with two possibilities, they could either get married, marriage representing the final point of their search for the self, or they could die tragically failing to conform to the social mores. This inevitably leads us to raise a question: what other possibilities does 19th century England offer to women, indeed does it offer any other at all, are “[t]he days... when a woman justifie[d] her existence by marrying” indeed over (Drabble 1986: 74)? And what do marriage and motherhood stand for in the lives of the women in *A Summer Bird-Cage*?

To begin with the title Margaret Drabble “borrowed” from John Webster's *The White Devil*, the entire quotation goes as follows: “’Tis just like a summer bird-cage in a garden: the birds that are without, despair to get in, and the birds that are within despair and are in a consumption for fear they shall never get out” (Webster 2004). The quote is from Act I, Scene ii and is uttered by the character of Flamineo displaying his “views of sexual relationships and

marriage” (Male 1986: 6). So, Drabble uses this image to represent marriage as a kind of prison: –women “within” dread staying trapped and never getting out, whereas those “without” live in the constant fear of not “getting in” and thus missing out on life, not realising that marriage could easily turn into a cage, seemingly secure and comfortable, but actually denying them freedom.

The novel begins with Sarah’s return from Paris in order to attend her sister’s wedding. What the protagonist fails to comprehend is why Louise, a radiant beauty, is marrying Stephen, a boring and rather disagreeable social satirist. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes evident that she has married him for his money and that she is having an affair with John Connell, the man she truly loves, who happens to be Stephen’s friend and the best man at their wedding. The course of events and the pattern Sarah notices among her friends from Oxford and Cambridge – “... high-powered, pretty girls, the daughters of earls and artists ... [t]hey all met very highly-sexed men and fell in love and got reconciled to life and got married” (Drabble 1986: 142-143) – forces her to ponder the position of women in a male-dominated social order:

... thinking how unfair it was, to be born with so little defence, like a soft snail without a shell. Men are all right, they are defined and enclosed, but we in order to live must be open and raw to all comers. What happens otherwise is worse than what happens normally, the embroidery and the children and the sagging mind. I felt doomed to defeat. I felt all women were doomed... simply because [they] were born to defend and depend instead of to attack. (Drabble 1986: 28-29)

Having witnessed the dissolution of her sister’s marriage, her friend Gill’s separation (she married for love and her marriage still failed), her friends Michael and Stephanie’s marital bliss (they were “the sort of people one might very much like to be, if one didn’t suspect that through thus gaining nearly everything one might lose that tiny, exhilarating possibility of one day miraculously gaining the whole lot” (Drabble 1986: 85)) and her mother’s discontent with her own life (“All I am is a servant, that’s all I am, just a household drudge” (Drabble 1986: 64)), Sarah, an intellectual of a modern generation, becomes well aware of women’s situation and how marriage could easily turn into a prison, which is why she begins to contemplate her own engagement to Francis she previously took for granted. She says: “He is somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic on his way home to me, and I am waiting to see whether or not I have kept faith. I am waiting to take up my life again” (Drabble 1986: 207). Sarah has

acknowledged that economic independence and mutual love and respect are crucial for a successful marriage: without either marital life is doomed to failure. She does not renounce the idea of marriage though her feelings about it remain ambivalent: –“I began to wonder if I myself would ever dare to get married. There were so many dangers” (Drabble 1986: 187). She now evaluates it more objectively, considering both its positive and negative aspects and still hoping once she enters into it, she would be more prudent than the women around her so that it does not turn into a cage and that the roles of wife and mother are not the only ones defining her as a person.

Conclusion

Declared an exhausted form by many a critic, the *Bildungsroman* keeps proving them wrong and remains present, popular and very much alive in the 21st century, as it used to be in Goethe’s time, thanks primarily to its flexible framework and broad range. This allows us nowadays to differentiate between numerous subgenres within the original one, the contemporary female novel of formation being only one among these.

In this paper we have endeavoured to show the specificities of female development in the era characterized by the second wave of feminism, to show how “[w]omen’s developmental tasks and goals, which must be realized in a culture pervaded by male norms, generate distinctive narrative tensions – between autonomy and relationship, separation and community, loyalty to women and attraction to men” (Abel et al. 1983: 12). Fraiman is thus right when she claims that “the way to womanhood [is] not a single path to a clear destination but ... the endless negotiation of a crossroads,” whereas “the single, surging story line remains nevertheless more plausible for men” (Fraiman 1993: x).

We also feel inclined to adopt her stance on the novel of development “not as the story of a character, but as the story of a cultural moment” (Fraiman 1993: 144). If we approach the issue of the female *Bildung* from this position, it is evident how the change in cultural geography influences the development of both male and female protagonists. From Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, then James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, to contemporary authors such as Zadie Smith and Hanif Kureishi, heroine and hero’s developmental paths have indeed reached the point of almost overlapping, and we say almost because their *Bildung* stories will always have some intrinsically different facets, and here we side with Summerfield and Downward when they say that “clear-cut gender distinctions regarding development are neither possible nor desirable” (Summerfield, Downward 2012: 6), but apart from this

characters can develop only as much as the cultural paradigm and the conventions of the genre would allow them. Unfortunately, the 1960's were not as permissive and open-minded as modern times, but neither were they as rigid and narrow-minded as the Victorian era. Fortunately, the framework of the *Bildungsroman* has proved wide and flexible enough to accommodate all these challenges and to enable us nowadays to freely discuss the contemporary female *Bildungsroman*.

Bibliography

- Abel et al. 1983*: Abel, E., M. Hirsch, and E. Langland, eds. *The Voyage in: Fictions of Female Development*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983.
- Bolaki 2011*: Bolaki, S. *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011.
- Drabble 1986*: Drabble, M. *A Summer Bird-Cage*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1986.
- Fraiman 1993*: Fraiman, S. *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Jeffers 2005*: Jeffers, T. L. *Apprenticeships: the Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Male 1986*: Male, D. A. *The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster. Hampshire and London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1986.
- Rose 1980*: Rose, E. *The Novels of Margaret Drabble: Equivocal Figures*. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980.
- Summerfield, Downward 2012*: Summerfield, G. and L. Downward. *New Perspectives on the European Bildungsroman*. London and New York: Continuum, 2012.
- Webster 2004*: Webster, J. *The White Devil*. The Project Gutenberg. July 16, 2004. [EBook #12915]. Web. [accessed on 13.1.2018.]. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12915/pg12915.txt>>.
- Webster, J. The White Devil. The Project Gutenberg. July 16, 2004. [EBook #12915]. Web. [date of entering 13.01. 2018.].* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12915/pg12915.txt>>.
- Wojcik-Andrews 1995*: Wojcik-Andrews, I. *Margaret Drabble's Female Bildungsromane. Theory, Genre, and Gender*. New York: Peter Lang, 1995.