

The Elements of Bildungsroman in Liz Curtis Higgs' Historical Novels

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Abstract

Bildungsroman novels, or "the novel of education," portray the journey of a protagonist from their adolescence to adulthood, ignorance to experience, and a troubled childhood to the path of enlightenment. This article explores the novels of Higgs and presents these novels as the quintessence of Bildungsroman through the life journey of the protagonist, Jamie McKie.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, novel of education, childhood, psychological growth, maturity, self-realization.

A Bildungsroman novel is a literary genre that depicts a protagonist's journey from childhood to adulthood on the path of self-realization. "Bildungsroman" is a mixture of two German words, in which "Bildung" and "roman" connote "education" and "novel" respectively. Hence, this genre is also known as the "novel of education" as it instructs the reader on how the protagonist obtains growth and enlightenment physically, psychologically, and morally. The prime attribute of this novel is the progression of a child's character through various difficulties, which encompass a great emotional loss, an exhausting journey, and numerous blows on his way, which establishes him as a mature adult by understanding the world around him over the course of his life journey. In addition, this novel helps the reader relate to the protagonist and discover his own identity.

The chief concern of this paper is to bring out the elements of Bildungsroman as pictured in Liz Curtis Higgs' historical novels. Liz Curtis Higgs is a contemporary American author. Through her writing, she has given life to the ancient characters of the Bible. The historical novels chosen for the present study are *Thorn in My Heart*, *Fair is the Rose*, *Whence Came a Prince* and *Grace in Thine Eyes*.

Higgs employs the customary way of narrating the story "in medias res," i.e., in the middle of things. These historical novels introduce the characters in childhood in a state of innocence. The novel *Thorn in My Heart* begins when one of the characters, Rowena McKie, gives birth to her twin sons, Evan McKie and Jamie McKie, in the Lowlands of Scotland. Though they are twins, they were not born on the same day. "Evan was born on Wednesday

midnight, and Jamie was born when the clock chimed twelve" (TIH 8). Rowena McKie prays that she should love them equally. Yet her younger son, Jamie, wins her heart with his sweet and innocent look. As the children grow up, the twins' father, Alec, and mother, Rowena, prove their favouritism towards their children, and it is too apparent by their remarks. Alec favours Evan and Rowena favours Jamie, and the twins are compared and contrasted, weighed and measured like livestock. This favouritism and unnecessary remarks led the twins to bitter rivalry and a profound emotional loss.

The theme of birthright plays a significant role in unfurling the provocative plot, which results in the protagonist's profound loss. Birthright gives priority and importance to the firstborn son, who will inherit the leadership and judicial rights of the father. Here in the novels, Higgs has brought out through her characters that birthright is not something that can be chosen, but an accident (Kavitha, 3). Alec McKie honours the birthright and dotes on the elder son Evan, continuously praising his keen hunter's eyes, his hunting skills, and his strong bow arms. Whereas, Jamie, less than a minute younger than his twin Evan, has no claim on his father's heart at all. Yet Evan does not care much about his birthright or who inherits Glentool. Ten years ago, he sold his birthright to his brother for a bowl of broth. However, Alec wants to bless Evan before his death – "his father meant to give his heirship – Glentool and all the land's riches – to Evan" (TIH 14).

Nonetheless, Rowena is ashamed of her older son Evan. Rowena's concern is Jamie and his future. She is certain that it is also the will of Almighty God that Jamie

would rule Glentrool someday. Rowena wants Jamie to inherit all his father's blessings, and so she sketches him a deceitful plan. Jamie deems his mother's words because he loves Glentrool, "Glentrool was more than land and livestock; it was his lifeblood" (TIH 27). Through deception, Jamie receives all his father's blessings. When Evan detects his brother's actions, he cries out loud "as the dead bell at a funeral" (TIH 41) to his father and pleads with him to bless him too. Evan also discerns his blunder, growling at Jamie, "Ten years ago you made me pay for a dish of barley broth with my birthright remember? You were practising even then for the day you'd make it stick" (TIH 42).

With this, Jamie heaps guilt on himself, "I'm guilty as sin. And a dead man as well" (TIH 45). On the one hand, he tries to seek his father's forgiveness, but Alec's words are sharper than the sword: "You have brought shame to Glentrool this day, James McKie. You should be more than sorry for taking advantage of a shooglie old man.... It's your brother who needs to hear your apology, Jamie" (TIH 43). On the other hand, he has to run for his life, because Evan whispers to Jamie, "Watch your back, man. I'll plant my dirk in it the minute Father's in his grave" (TIH 44). Accordingly, Jamie becomes a life-time victim. Jamie is collapsed emotionally, physically, and psychologically as he loses his father's love and trust, his brother's care and affection, and eventually runs away from his own Glentrool to save his life from his brother's hands.

Higgs unties the plot of the journey in order to gain control of these disordered circumstances. Rowena suggests Jamie stay away from Glentrool until Evan's anger sinks. It seems odd for Jamie to even think of living anywhere other than Glentrool. Nevertheless, Jamie embarks on a journey to the east to his maternal uncle Lachlan, to escape the wrath of his brother. He walks slowly in the dark of an autumn midnight as his legs hurt. He crosses the icy, treacherous river Minnoch in the dead of night. Jamie's horse, Walloch, knows the fording spot well and boldly plunges into the water and carries him to the other shore. The first inn where Jamie stays is the House o' the Hill Inn. It is a low-beamed rough room, favoured by smugglers heading east from Portpatrick. He faces ample struggles and hardships in this exhausting journey towards the east of Galloway. Here, the reader can evaluate himself against Jamie's laborious expedition, which is the by-product of one's selfishness, greed, and deception.

Higgs spreads out the theme of conflict in the storyline to develop a unique tension. Conflict challenges a character's convictions and brings out their strengths and weaknesses, as it does in real life (Kavitha, 187). After the arduous journey, Jamie reaches his uncle's house and seeks shelter under his roof. He has a plan to seek a bride for him as well, from his own people, as instructed by his mother. In all this process, he gains life experience, which helps him better understand the world. Jamie's uncle, Lachlan McBride, has two daughters—namely Leana McBride and Rose McBride. Leana is not attractive because she has pale skin and sensitive eyes, while Rose is attractive and bonny, and she attracts Jamie's attention. He asks his uncle for Rose's hand in marriage, and when everything is set ready for their marriage, Rose gets stuck in her aunt's home due to the bad weather and cannot make it to her wedding. At her father's request, Leana serves as her proxy bride, which Jamie does not expect at all. The plot twist occurs when Leana sleeps with Jamie on the night of their wedding, while the drunken Jamie waits for Rose to appear at any time of night. When he discovers that he has been betrayed by a proxy bride, his conscience takes him down his memory lane, where he had betrayed his father as a proxy.

The protagonist demonstrates immense psychological growth, change, and maturity by the end of the novel. Jamie's path towards maturity is not an easy one. He makes numerous mistakes in various phases of his life and is usually at odds with his uncle. Despite setbacks, Jamie craves to set everything right in its place with Leana, Rose, Ian, Evan, Alec, and Rowena. As the story extends, Jamie gradually accepts his shortcomings. On his way to Glentrool with his family, he faces difficulties both physically and psychologically. He surrenders himself to Evan, and Jamie and Evan reconcile with each other. Evan embraces Jamie, "My lost brother is found. I'll not lose you again, Jamie" (WCP 409). Jamie is entirely distressed by the death of Rose and Rowena. Alec forgives, reconciles, and restores Jamie the headship as the Laird of Glentrool.

As the story matures, the protagonist displays imperative changeover, psychological growth, and maturity, and, predominantly, the story ends on a positive note. In line with this, Jamie gets mature and lives a contented life with Leana and their four children: Ian, Will, Sandy, and Davina McKie. He even becomes conscious of how life could be difficult for the second born. In *Grace in Thine Eyes*, Jamie relates his sons' negative personalities

with that of him; "Jamie knew the twins were fashioned out of the same black cloth God had used to make him. Thievery and deception were woven through his past; the same threads ran through the fabric of his brutish sons" (GTE 369), towards whom he is exceptionally stringent.

Hence, this article presents the elements of Bildungsroman found in Higgs historical novels as it explicates the protagonist Jamie's life starting with his troubled childhood, growth, profound loss, exhausting journey, clustered conflicts, change in his perception of the world around him, self-realization, and maturity.

References

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