

An Analysis of the Nineteenth-century Bildungsroman Engage with Ideas of 'Self-help' or 'Self-culture'

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Abstract

According to Samuel Smiles mentioned in his classic work *Self-Help: With illustrations of character and conduct*, 'Heaven helps those who help themselves.' This quotation seems to clearly explain what self-help is. Smiles also interpreted it further, 'The spirit of self-help is the root of all genuine growth in the individual; and, exhibited in the lives of many, it constitutes the true source of national vigour and strength.' This quotation recalls the title's question I will explore in this essay that means self-help as a driving force for personal growth is the true source of a nation's strength and prosperity. Therefore, when it comes to the connection between the ideas of 'self-help' or 'self-culture' and the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman, I hope to use two literary works as well as Samuel Smiles's classic literary work *Self-Help: With Illustrations of Character and Conduct* to explore this issue. Then, I will divide the structure of this essay into four parts. The literary works that I have chosen are Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*.

Keywords

Bildungsroman; Self-help; Self-culture; *Great Expectations*; *Jude the Obscure*.

1. Introduction

To begin with, I wish to first focus on self-help and self-culture in *The Great Expectations*, making attempts to analyse how it engages with the idea of self-help. After that, I will explore the same issue in *Jude the Obscure* as well, especially focusing on the self-culture in it. In addition, I will make comparisons and contrasts between *Great Expectations* and *Jude the Obscure* in terms of how they delve into the subject of this issue. In the final analysis, the conclusion will be presented at the end.

2. The Particular Interpretation of 19th Century Bildungsroman in the UK

As mentioned by Tobias Boes in the introduction of 'On the Nature of the Bildungsroman', 'Morgenstern's essay thus offers an approach that would connect the classical Bildungsroman to many of the broader intellectual currents of its time: the move toward social realism in literature and the arts, the yearning for the shared experiences of a national community, and not least the search for an adequate way to represent the dynamic forces of history.' [2] The point of view aligns with Samuel Smiles' assertion in *Self-Help* that personal growth is the root of genuine national strength. Tobias Boes also illustrated that 'Far from isolating the *Bildungsroman* as the symptom of a German Sonderweg, Morgenstern's work eloquently affirms it as a central category of modern literature.' [2]

From this perspective, the 19th century Bildungsroman through depicting protagonists' growth process showcasing the ideas of self-help and self-culture. In other words, within that specific societal context, individuals are encouraged to help or educate themselves. In brief, the protagonist Pip in *Great Expectations* was an innocent boy before and then transformed into a mature gentleman whose energy comes from his ambitions and efforts, revealing the spirit of

Bildungsroman in the 19th century. The protagonist Jude in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* also explored the same spirit in it. Jude kept pursuing education and growth although he met several social obstacles and committed suicide, highlighting the spirit of self-help and self-culture as well as criticising the unequal societal structure in the Victorian period.

The Industrial Revolution served as a crucial societal context relating to the social mobility and other economic factors, cultivating the unique spirit of self-help and self-education in the 19th century. According to Jurgen Reuleke in *Population Growth and Urbanization in Germany in the 19th Century*, 'The process of urbanisation, inseparable from the development of industrial society, provided the framework for a decisive change in the life of the individual and of social groups.' [3] With the rapid development of technology and economy, the acceleration of urbanisation leads to significant shifts accompanying with the migration which facilitated the growth of industrial centres. Ultimately, urbanisation transformed societal structures created new opportunities for social mobility and altered the traditional ways of life. Within this specific societal circumstance, a new type of literary work has appeared. Some classics including Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* highlight how this new generation reshapes their destinies through self-help or self-culture. Furthermore, the British Bildungsroman of the 19th century not only mirrors the societal changes brought about by urbanisation but also advocates for the virtues of self-help as essential for personal growth and societal progress. Through these characters' journeys, the novels make inspirations for readers to embrace the ethos of self-improvement, which underscores the belief that individuals have the power to shape their futures in a rapidly evolving world.

3. Self-help in *Great Expectations*

In this paragraph, I will mainly discuss Pip's self-help in *Great Expectations*. In my opinion, Charles Dicken has designed three stages for Pip to finish his self-help journey. In the first stage, Pip is almost satisfied with that 'ungracious condition' [4] although he needs to endure his sister Mrs. Joe. When it comes to the early experiences of Pip, it is clear to know that he is a poor boy with an orphan background. From this perspective, Pip needs to help himself and has no one to rely on, which adheres to the characteristic conditions of the Bildungsroman. While he is fortunate enough to be adopted by his sister Mrs. Joe and her husband Joe Gargery. Pip and Joe have a profoundly moving conversation in the seventh chapter when Joe recalls his background story. Joe said 'But I did mind you, Pip. When I offered to your sister to keep company, and to be asked in church at such times as she was willing and ready to come to the forge, I said to her, "And bring the poor little child. God bless the poor little child. There's room for him at the forge."' [4] This paragraph not only depicts the profound emotions between Joe and Pip but also lays a foundation for the subsequent development of the story. For instance, Pip's self-help journey commences with his visit to Miss Havisham. Just like Pip said at the end of the seventh chapter, 'But the stars twinkled out one by one, without throwing any light on the questions why on earth I was going to play at Miss Havisham's, and what on earth I was expected to play at.' [4] This quotation also can reflect Pip's confusion when he finally escapes that poor upbringing as well as implies how many obstacles he will meet in the future. In contrast, Joe seems to represent the opposite of Pip, which means Joe dismisses his right to be raised and chooses to follow a kind of ordinary life. In contrast, according to Jerome Meckier in *Great Expectations and Self-Help: Dickens Frowns on Smiles*, 'Joe supplies evidence for Smiles' contention that a real gentleman is always "the lord of a great heart", whether it beats under a peasant's coat or beneath "the laced coat of a noble".' [5] He also mentions, 'One must refer to Joe Gargery as a credible example of such genteel great-heartedness in humble attire in *Great Expectations*, not to the endless parade of success stories in Self- Help, where greatness

invariably means getting on, moving up, winning out.’[5] That is to say, earthly success for a person is not only great accomplishments, but also sincere empathy, societal responsibility, and integrity which are some more significant from this critical point of view.

Furthermore, ‘Dickens satirized *Self-Help* as a reflection of and a stimulus to the era’s inordinate expectancy. With Joe’s reservations about raising himself, Dickens parodied the reigning definition of improvement: Joe’s case proved that real goodness, true value to one’s society, has no obligatory relation to bettering one’s worldly standing; It is not synonymous with achieving earthly success.’[5] This perspective demonstrated Charles Dickens’s criticism of the concept of self-help, while emphasising the true value of human compassion and laying the groundwork for Pip’s eventual awakening.

The second stage kicks off when Pip meets Estella in Satis House. Pip is sensitive to Estella’s ridicule just because he calls the knaves Jacks’. [4] All of the feelings of humiliation compel him to alter his fate. For example, Pip’s inner monologue is like ‘I was so humiliated, hurt, spurned, offended, angry, sorry, I cannot hit upon the right name for the smart. God knows what its name was, that tears started to my eyes.’ [4] This thing left an unforgettable influence on Pip and evoked his ambition to be a true gentleman. The spirit of self-help is developing in Pip’s mind as Pip once said to Bidly that ‘he has particular reasons for wanting to be a gentleman.’[4] Samuel Smiles’ concept relating to the true gentleman relies on good characters, morals, and values. He suggested ‘Riches and ranks have no necessary connexion with genuine gentlemanly qualities. The poor man may be a true gentleman.’ [1] This view follows the spirit of self-help at that time while echoing the common image of the protagonist in Bildungsroman. It also showcases the positive side of pursuing to be a true gentleman. Pip is ambitious even though he has achieved his previous goal as an apprentice with Joe for four years. In addition, relating it to the spirit of self-help in the 19th century, as Beth F. Herst argued, ‘Dickens creates in *Great Expectations* an ironic revision of the Victorian self-help fable, exposing the falsities upon which it rests.’ [6] In fact, Charles Dickens has a critical attitude towards the Victorian self-help spirit such as the idea of the gentleman that everyone can achieve success and alter social status through self-improvement. Just like the third stage of Pip when he moves to London, and has a series of things with Magwitch, reflecting the false foundations on which the self-help spirit relies. Furthermore, individuals cannot entirely change their fates through efforts because of the unequal societal structures and entrenched class prejudices.

Therefore, maybe what can an ordinary person really achieve is to be a good one with courage and be kind. Thus, corresponding to the first stage of Pip I previously mentioned, the spirit of self-help has both positive and negative effects in the 19th century Bildungsroman, as Beth F. Herst illustrated that ‘Pip’s progress is a pattern from the Bildungsroman form carrying with them a specific historical relevance for an age of upward mobility and hardening class distinctions.’ [6] It shows that although spirit of self-help can encourage one’s ambition and prevalence, it ignores the systematic obstacles existing in the social structures that prevent true societal mobility.

4. Self-culture in *Jude the Obscure*

Moreover, I will explore the spirit of self-culture in Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*. Samuel Smiles once quoted Gibbon’s saying in *Self-Help*, ‘Every person has two educations, one which he receives from others, and one, more important, which he gives to himself.’[1] This quotation illustrates the significance of self-culture in the 19th century which is also the major principle followed by individuals. In fact, the protagonist Jude has been designed by Hardy to observe this societal principle. From the previous chapters, it is clear to know Jude’s determination is to study at Christminster. For instance, ‘But I can work hard. I have staying power in abundance, thank God! Yes, Christminster shall be my Alma Mater; and I’ll be her beloved son, in whom

she shall be well pleased.' [7] From this perspective, Jude can be seen as the representative who follows the spirit of self-culture in the Victorian era. He believes that he will live a better life through effort and perseverance. However, according to Michael Gold wrote, 'The Christian religious leadership at the time struggled to adapt to the onslaught of modernity. Its ranks seemed closed to persons of the merit outside the upper class.' [8] In fact, this point of view provides a specific religious context that showcases the reasons why Jude failed in the end. To put it another way, Jude was trapped in a religious dilemma that leads to his final death. Thomas Hardy adapted it as a tragedy and 'projected a short story of a young man whose life is filled with struggles and ultimate failure.' [9] This variant form of Bildungsroman has altered the tradition that an individual engages himself in a 'progressive society upon completion of his apprenticeship for life.' [9] This point of view represents a transformation of the Bildungsroman, which marks it as a form of social commentary that denies the validity of values in the Victorian era. Furthermore, it corresponds to the subject of my essay that Bildungsroman in the 19th Century critically engages the ideas of self- culture.

On the one hand, the self-culture journey of Jude highlights the sufficient emphasis on personal development. Just like Pip in *Great Expectations*, Jude has an orphan background, and no one can be relied on, unfortunately, he doesn't have a good friend like Joe. What's more, he is determined to pursue a kind of pure Christian life. For instance, 'He was in an enthusiastic mood. He seemed to see his way to living comfortably in Christminster in the course of a year or two and knocking at the doors of one of those strongholds of learning of which he had dreamed so much.' [7] Jude bought books and even learned Latin and Greek by himself. The positive side of self-culture has been manifested, which means an ordinary person can be educated through perseverance and themselves.

On the other hand, as Samuel Smiles argued in the second chapter of *Self-Help*, 'By labour the earth has been subdued, and man redeemed from barbarism; nor has a single step in civilisation been made without it. Labour is not only a necessity and a duty but a blessing: only the idler feels it to be a curse.' [1] The spirit of self-culture seems ideal and nearly becomes the opposition of labour. Thomas Hardy also mentioned this same phenomenon in *Jude the Obscure*, 'He had no trade or calling of any dignity or stability whatever on which he could subsist while carrying out an intellectual labour which might spread over many years.' [7] Jude finds something like food, clothing, and shelter are most required by citizens when he thinks of reality rather than losing in an illusion. [7] That is to say, the demands of labour in real life are necessary for survival. Then, the pure self-culture without necessity is not realistic at all. In addition, his marriage to Arabella and his union with Sue are disasters, especially when his child little Jude murders his two younger siblings. All of the events reflect the cruelty and indifference of that society as well as the conflicts between personal aspirations and the harsh realities. In other words, Jude was lied to by the hypocritical concept of self-culture and lost in the illusion of entering the upper class without distinguishing reality and dream clearly. Hence, Thomas Hardy not only criticised that ideal theory but also satirized societal injustices in the 19th century by engaging with the ideas of self-culture in *Jude the Obscure*.

5. Similarities and differences between *Great Expectations* and *Jude the Obscure*

To begin with, when making some comparisons between them, I found that both authors emphasise the experience that the protagonists pursued self-improvement through endeavors. Such as Pip and Jude are eager to alter their fates through knowledge and effort. Furthermore, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy used their literary works to criticize the class injustices and moral issues in the 19th British society. In the final analysis of similarities, although the two authors differ in depicting self-help and self-culture in *Great Expectations* and *Jude the Obscure*,

both of them illustrate a profound understanding and criticism of individual struggles and societal reality in their works.

However, their writing styles are different that embodied in theme, narrative, and social background. To begin with, *Great Expectations* makes use of humor and satirical narrative writing style that was setting in an inclusive social environment, emphasising the theme of optimism and hope. Ordinary people have possibilities and opportunities to achieve class mobility. Although Pip suffered many troubles and met some disappointments, he got inner peace as well as became mature with a happier ending. In contrast, the theme in *Jude the Obscure* is filled with despair, which follows the realistic writing style. Although Jude is talented enough, he cannot survive in a stubborn social environment with fewer opportunities. The tragic ending of Jude reflects the severe contradictions between himself and the whole society. To sum up, it is evident that Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy deal with the themes of self-help and self-culture from different perspectives. In addition, the differences not only reflect their writing intentions but also reveal their unique understandings and critiques in the 19th century.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, as Kenneth Fielden argued on Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help*, 'The beauty of self-help was that Janus-faced. Not all individuals could succeed. Smiles's own works are overshadowed by a lowering insecurity although profoundly optimistic.' He also mentioned, 'It was on this type of middle-class optimism that the gospel of success was based, even more acceptable, perhaps to the middle class in the largely peaceful and prosperous years between 1857 and 1873.' This interpretation well recalls the previous opinions that I discussed at the eariler parts and explain them further. What's more, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* provide unique narratives engaging with profound themes when they made the explorations of Bildungsroman through the perspective of self-help and self-culture in 19th century British society. The previous analysis of these two works reveals how they criticise the societal structures in the Victorian era, which offer some nuanced views of personal growth and societal constraints. The journey of Pip to becoming a true gentleman demonstrates the spirit of self-help that was advocated by Samuel Smiles. Whilst Dickens criticised the superficial values of the self-help theory through Pip's realizations of success and morality after a series of failures in reality. On the contrary, Thomas Hardy provides a more tragic and critical way of reflecting self- culture. Jude's pursuit of education embodies the spirit of Samuel Smiles' self-culture. However, the suicide of Jude challenges the foundation of that ideal theory as well as highlights the oppressive societal pressure that harms personal development. Overall, it not only criticises the societal values at the time but also offers some enduring interpretations towards personal growth and self-improvement after deeply discussing the ideas of self-help and self-culture. Besides, through reviewing the journeys of Pip and Jude, readers can gain a profound understanding relating to these themes for the sake of getting individual or even societal progress.

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