homelessness, and more on the role of societal forces in determining the limits of our freedom to belong.

**Home and the Bildungsroman**

Critics have long discussed *The Mill on the Floss* as a novel of formation or *Bildungsroman* (e.g. Buckley 97 and Jost 106), and of all novelistic genres the *Bildungsroman* is perhaps most inextricably intertwined with the question of home. Home is, for instance, quite literally the genre’s starting point:

[T]he hero sets out from home in order to travel and see the world, and records his right and wrong turns. He falls in love, and has his first sexual experiences before finding, and eventually marrying, his ideal companion. He thus gains knowledge of the world, and his experiences modify his *Weltanschauung*. (Gemmeke 32)

Leaving his childhood home, the (male) protagonist will have to learn the ways of the world, and this experience will ultimately turn him into a mature and useful individual richly deserving of domestic bliss. By the end of his quest, the hero will, in other words, have learnt to reconcile his individual desires with the demands of society: “[E]xperiencing both defeats and triumphs, [he] comes to a better understanding of self and to a generally affirmative view of the world” (Hardin xiii). Indeed, as Franco Moretti points out, in the process of true *Bildung* the hero fuses external compulsion and internal impulses “into a new unity until the former is no longer distinguishable from the latter” (*Way of the World* 16). Desire and duty may jar at first, but any such discord will eventually be dissolved.

The only reason why such a dialectical fusion of societal imperatives and individual desire is conceivable is that the genre envisages *Bildung* itself as a kind of homecoming:

[I]n *Bildung* one gives oneself over to something other than oneself, and by this process of giving over, becomes more fully oneself. Giving oneself over to something other is a going out to the other, so that *Bildung* involves the notion of leaving home […] and going out into a new place that is strange and unfamiliar. As one comes to understand this other place, as it becomes familiar, *it comes to be a new home*. […] It seemed strange simply because we did not recognise ourselves in it. (Coyne and Snodgrass 224; emphasis added)

*Bildung* allows the protagonist to recognize himself in what at first seemed an alien world, and the prototypical *Bildungsroman* narrativizes the “dialectical harmony” of such an experience of homecoming (Castle 8; see also Lukács 138; Slaughter 111). As harmony is the key term in the ideal version of *Bildung*, the
hero’s ultimate acceptance of society’s demands must never be motivated by compulsion, fear, or disillusionment, but instead ought to result from his genuine identification with society’s norms (Moretti, *Way of the World* 16).

Many critics recognize, however, that in practice the genre often falls short of this harmonious ideal, as witnessed by the many classic *Bildungsrömäne* that end neither in joyous affirmation nor with calm acceptance, but rather on a note of reluctant, at times painful, compromise. Indeed, for some critics, the genre’s historical development follows a downward trajectory from early optimism to increasing gloom. Franco Moretti, for instance, posits that the truly optimistic phase of the genre, with its “beautiful balance” between the benefits and constraints of modern socialization, lasted only until the mid-nineteenth century, when “the atmosphere darkens” (*Way of the World* vi – vii). The case of *Great Expectations* (1860–1861) arguably constitutes a good example of this increasingly ambivalent atmosphere, as Dickens famously wrote two markedly different endings for his novel: a first one, where the protagonist’s desire for his beloved remains forever unfulfilled (481–482); and a second version, where Pip can finally clasp Estella’s hand, seeing “the shadow of no parting from her” (480; ch. 20). Dickens’s first instinct was, in other words, to end on a pessimistic note, and it took a conscious effort of authorial revision to construct a somewhat more hopeful conclusion. And yet, even this second ending remains curiously ambiguous, as there are two entirely different ways of reading the phrase “the shadow of no parting”: either as affirming that Estella and Pip will live happily ever after (i.e. ‘no future parting is foreshadowed’), or as intimating that their common future will inevitably be cold and dreary (i.e. ‘the fact that there will be no parting casts a shadow over their lives’). This is, to be sure, still far from despair – but it is not “dialectical harmony,” either.3

There is good reason, then, for a more cautious assessment of the *Bildungsroman* as a genre, and accordingly Marianne Hirsch speaks of the protagonist’s eventual accommodation to, rather than his affirmation of, the society in which he lives (“Novel of Formation” 298). Less optimistically still, Jeffrey L. Sammons’s definition of the genre incorporates the possibility of the protagonist’s utter failure ever to find a sense of being at home in the world:

It does not much matter whether the process of *Bildung* succeeds or fails, whether the protagonist achieves an accommodation with life and society or not. [...] There must be a sense of evolutionary change within the self, a teleology of individuality, even if

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3 In fact, Dickens himself seems to have recognized this ambivalence, for from the 1862 Library Edition onward, the final sentence appeared in a slightly different, less ambivalent form: “I saw no shadow of another parting from her” (Rosenberg 500–501).
the novel, as many do, comes to doubt or deny the possibility of achieving a gratifying 
result. (41)

Sammons, in other words, is willing to consider as a Bildungsroman even a novel 
in which individual gratification ultimately remains irreconcilable with life in 
society – a novel, in short, that takes very much the same pessimistic stance as 
Sigmund Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents. Accordingly, for Sammons, 
the key requirement for a Bildungsroman is not a happy outcome, but merely 
that Bildung – which he defines as “the early bourgeois, humanistic concept of 
the shaping of the individual self from its innate potentialities through accul-
turation and social experience to the threshold of maturity” – play a central part 
in the hero’s quest (41). In this less sanguine view, the protagonist’s leaving 
home still constitutes the genre’s starting point, yet a regained sense of be-
longing may ultimately prove sadly elusive (Gemmeke 38).

Such an austere account of the genre fits well with Eliot’s The Mill on the 
Floss, for the novel’s heroine, Maggie, undoubtedly fails to harmoniously fuse 
on her own desires with the demands and imperatives of her family and society at 
large. Even when Maggie is still a child, her relatives express misgivings and 
disapproval: Mr. Tulliver fears that his daughter is “[t]oo ’cute [i.e. acute, clever]” 
for a woman, and his wife bemoans both Maggie’s unruly behavior and her 
brown skin, which “makes her look like a mulatter” (12; bk. 1, ch. 2). Aunt Pullet 
similarly frowns at her niece’s dark complexion, suspecting that looking “like a 
gypsy” will stand in Maggie’s way later in her life (58; bk. 1, ch. 7). Deborah 
Epstein Nord rightly notes that Maggie’s relatives thus conflate her “anomalous 
femininity” with a sense of racial otherness (103), and to some extent this ex-
plains why, after a particularly severe scolding, little Maggie decides to run away 
and join a group of gypsies – an act that she sees as “the only way of escaping

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4 Two brief excerpts may serve to exemplify Freud’s position: “If civilization imposes 
such great sacrifices not only on man’s sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can un-
derstand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization” (Civilization and 
Its Discontents 73; “Wenn die Kultur nicht allein der Sexualität, sondern auch der Ag-
gressionsneigung des Menschen so grosse Opfer auferlegt, so verstehen wir es besser, 
dass es dem Menschen schwer wird, sich in ihr beglückt zu finden”; Das Unbehagen in 
der Kultur 226). “Since civilization obeys an internal erotic impulsion which causes 
human beings to unite in a closely-knit group, it can only achieve this aim through an 
ever-increasing reinforcement of the sense of guilt” (Civilization and Its Discontents 
96; “Da die Kultur einem inneren erotischen Antrieb gehorch, der sie die Menschen zu 
einer innig verbundenen Masse vereinigen heisst, kann sie dies Ziel nur auf dem Wege 
einer immer wachsenden Verstärkung des Schuldgefühls erreichen”; Das Unbehagen in 
der Kultur 243).