UNCOLLICS
Proceeding of Undergraduate Conference on Literature, Linguistic, and Cultural Studies
E-ISSN: 2985-9476
Published by Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Untag Surabaya

Contrasting Journeys of Growth: A Study of *Bildungsroman* in Jenny Han's *We'll Always Have Summer*

AURELLIA SALSABILA
Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia
Email: aurellias@mail.com

Y.B. AGUNG PRASAJA
Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia
Email: agungprasaja@untag-sby.ac.id

Abstract. This study examines the concept of *Bildungsroman* in Jenny Han's *We'll Always Have Summer* (2011). *Bildungsroman* is a literary genre that tells the story of a young person's development from youth into adulthood. This study focuses on two main characters, Belly Conklin and Jeremiah Fisher, analyzed through Female *Bildungsroman* theory and Anti-*Bildungsroman* theory respectively. Using qualitative research with a psychological approach, this study analyzes textual data comprising words, sentences, dialogues, and events in the novel. The findings reveal two contrasting paths of personal development. Belly's story exemplifies successful growth and maturity consistent with Female *Bildungsroman*, while Jeremiah's story illustrates incomplete personal development characteristic of Anti-*Bildungsroman*. Together, these characters demonstrate that true maturity comes from the ability to learn from experience and develop self-understanding. This study concludes that the *Bildungsroman* framework effectively explains contrasting processes of character development, revealing how emotional experiences, identity formation, and personal choices shape characters' journeys toward or away from maturity.
Keywords: Anti-Bildungsroman, Bildungsroman, Female Bildungsroman, Growth, Self-Development

INTRODUCTION

A Bildungsroman is a literary genre that focuses on the self-development of the main character from childhood or adolescence into adulthood (Nugraheni & Hidayat, 2018). The term originates from the German words Bildung, meaning development, and Roman, meaning novel. The genre was pioneered by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship (1796) and popularized by Wilhelm Dilthey. Since then, Bildungsroman has developed into several subtypes, including the Female Bildungsroman, which centers on the growth of a female protagonist (Graham, 2019), and the Anti-Bildungsroman, which presents a protagonist whose development remains incomplete or disrupted (Gumus, 2025).

Jenny Han's We'll Always Have Summer (2011) presents an ideal case for examining these contrasting subtypes. The novel tells the story of Belly Conklin

navigating love, loss, and personal choices between two brothers, Jeremiah and Conrad Fisher. Belly's journey reflects the Female Bildungsroman as she moves from emotional dependence toward self-awareness and independent decision-making. In contrast, Jeremiah's responses to conflict reflect the Anti-Bildungsroman pattern, characterized by emotional avoidance and stagnation.

This study aims to: (1) identify the elements of Bildungsroman reflected in the novel; (2) analyze the pattern of Bildungsroman in both main characters; and (3) analyze the types of Bildungsroman-specifically Female Bildungsroman and Anti-Bildungsroman-as reflected in Belly and Jeremiah's development. No previous study in the English Literature Department of Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya has explored this novel through the Bildungsroman framework, making this study among the first to do so.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and Origin of Bildungsroman

A Bildungsroman is a developmental narrative that illustrates the protagonist's emotional, psychological, moral, and social development through life experiences and personal struggles (Golban, 2018). The protagonist usually begins as a youthful, immature person who gradually gains emotional awareness and a deeper understanding of self and society. The genre has several key characteristics: a young protagonist, a journey of self-discovery, conflict with society, and emotional and psychological growth (Kanwal et al., 2025). It originated in Germany with Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship (1796) and later expanded to English-speaking literature through Thomas Carlyle's translations, influencing generations of British and American authors (Upadhyay, 2020).

Female Bildungsroman

The Female Bildungsroman emerged as literary studies gave greater attention to female characters' experiences. This subtype presents the journey of a female protagonist as she grows from youth to adulthood, focusing on personal growth, identity development, and the tension between personal wishes and social expectations (Graham, 2019; Snircova, 2021). It has three main characteristics: a female protagonist as the center of the narrative, the struggle between personal desires and societal expectations, and self-development through experience and reflection (Ruggemeier, 2023). The Female Bildungsroman challenges male-dominated conventions of the traditional Bildungsroman by foregrounding female interiority and social experience.

Anti-Bildungsroman

The Anti-Bildungsroman presents personal development as characterized by difficulties, contradictions, and uncertainty (Gumus, 2025). Unlike the traditional Bildungsroman, where the protagonist achieves maturity and integration into society, the Anti-Bildungsroman protagonist experiences limited personal growth, a complex relationship with society, and an unresolved conclusion. This genre emerged notably through Flaubert's L'Education sentimentale (1869) and offers an alternative view of the journey toward adulthood (Ruggemeier, 2023). The Anti-Bildungsroman does not deny the importance of personal development but presents it as a journey that may remain unfinished.

Elements and Patterns of Bildungsroman

The Bildungsroman is structured around three key elements: emotional conflict, identity crisis, and self-discovery. Emotional conflict refers to inner struggles arising from relationships, family pressures, and personal failures (Sawyer et al., 2018). Identity crisis is a period when the protagonist questions who they are and what they believe (Hillestad, 2023). Self-discovery is the culminating process through which the protagonist gains a better understanding of their own identity and values (Golban, 2018). In terms of narrative pattern, the Bildungsroman moves through three stages: the immature teenager, the confrontation with emotional conflict, and emotional development resulting in maturity (Floris, 2025).

METHOD

This study employs qualitative research as its research design. Qualitative research is appropriate because this study analyzes a literary text and focuses on meaning, experience, and context rather than numerical data (Gofe et al., 2022). The primary data source is Jenny Han's We'll Always Have Summer (2011), chosen because it clearly demonstrates both Female Bildungsroman and Anti-Bildungsroman characteristics through its two main characters, Belly Conklin and Jeremiah Fisher.

A psychological approach is applied to examine the mental, emotional, and psychological dimensions of the characters' development. This approach allows the researcher to analyze how thoughts, emotions, motivations, and inner conflicts influence character behavior and growth (Kurniawan & Mustofa, n.d.). Data were collected through close reading of the novel, identifying quotations related to the emotional conflicts, identity crises, and self-discovery of both characters. Selected data were organized into tables by character, pattern, element, and Bildungsroman type, then analyzed interpretively using the Female Bildungsroman and Anti-Bildungsroman theoretical frameworks.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Elements of Bildungsroman

1. Emotional Conflict

Belly's emotional conflict begins with her confident love for Jeremiah, quickly disrupted when she discovers his infidelity. 'I felt so dirty inside hearing him say that. Just disgusted' (Han, 2011: 17) shows the immediate emotional impact. Throughout the novel, she navigates competing feelings for Jeremiah and Conrad, progressively developing greater emotional awareness. Her emotional resolution arrives when she declares, 'I think-I think I'll always love him a little bit. I'll always have him in my heart. But he's not the one I choose' (Han, 2011: 259), before ultimately choosing Conrad. This decision-making process represents successful Bildungsroman emotional development: facing feelings rather than avoiding them.

Jeremiah's emotional conflict follows a contrasting path. His immediate response minimizes Belly's pain: 'It didn't mean anything. I swear to you, it didn't' (Han, 2011: 18). He evades responsibility with the phrase 'it just happened' (Han, 2011: 17), presenting himself as a passive victim. Rather than engaging in honest emotional work, he proposes marriage days after the discovery of infidelity, using romantic gestures to bypass genuine conflict resolution. His most extreme response-'You're not my brother anymore. You're dead to me' (Han, 2011: 236)-indicates emotional regression rather than growth.

2. Identity Crisis

Belly's identity crisis is prominent throughout the novel. She initially defines herself almost entirely through her relationship with Jeremiah. Her acceptance of the marriage proposal-clinging 'like we were the other's safe harbor' (Han, 2011: 52)-reveals she is seeking external definition rather than acting from secure selfhood. The turning point arrives when Conrad returns the infinity necklace, a symbol of her authentic feelings, forcing her to confront the central question of her identity: who she truly is versus who she thinks she should be. Her crisis resolves through her final act of choosing: 'All my life, I never felt like I had a choice when it came to Conrad' (Han, 2011: 259), signaling her transition from passive recipient to active agent of her own life.

Jeremiah, by contrast, exhibits virtually no identity crisis-a defining feature of the Anti-Bildungsroman. He never questions what kind of man he wants to be. His marriage proposal-'It's been our story all along. Yours and mine. Nobody else's' (Han, 2011: 51)-shows certainty without reflection. Even his most honest emotional moment focuses entirely on what he wants from Belly rather than examining who he is. This absence of identity questioning is a structural feature of his Anti-Bildungsroman path.

3. Self-Discovery

Belly's self-discovery develops gradually through each emotional test. Her statement 'Maybe to you sex doesn't mean anything. But it means something to me, and you knew that' (Han, 2011: 18) reveals a person discovering and articulating a personal value in real time. She grows through confrontations with her mother, her own contradictory feelings, and Conrad's continued presence in her heart. By the novel's conclusion, she has achieved authentic selfhood: 'This is our start. This is the moment it becomes real. We are married. We are infinite. Me and Conrad' (Han, 2011: 289), demonstrating a woman who has moved from emotional dependence to mature, self-determined love.

Jeremiah's self-discovery is largely absent. He neither reflects deeply on his choices nor develops greater self-understanding as a result of his failures. His journey ends with loss and disappointment but without the self-insight that genuine self-discovery requires. As the Anti-Bildungsroman framework predicts, his story closes with the protagonist having experienced failure without understanding why he failed.

B. Pattern and Types of Bildungsroman

In terms of narrative pattern, Belly progresses through all three Bildungsroman stages: she begins as an emotionally immature teenager, navigates intense emotional conflict, and arrives at genuine emotional development and maturity. Jeremiah remains largely in the first stage throughout the novel. His responses to conflict-avoidance, charm, escapism, and anger-consistently reflect emotional immaturity rather than growth.

Regarding Bildungsroman type, Belly's story clearly reflects the Female Bildungsroman. The narrative centers on her inner life and female experience; she struggles against social expectations most directly embodied by her mother's opposition to the engagement; and she undergoes genuine self-development culminating in the discovery of her authentic identity. Her final choice of Conrad marks the completion of her Female Bildungsroman journey as she moves from an emotionally dependent teenager to a self-aware young woman who chooses her own life.

Jeremiah's story reflects the Anti-Bildungsroman. He exhibits limited personal growth despite facing significant challenges; his relationship with society is marked by charm and deflection rather than honest engagement; and the novel ends for him with an unresolved outcome. His departure from Belly's life represents an open-ended conclusion typical of Anti-Bildungsroman, where the protagonist fails to integrate experience into growth. Together, these two character trajectories illustrate that identical life events can produce radically different developmental outcomes depending on a character's willingness to engage honestly with their own emotions and choices.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the Bildungsroman reflected in Jenny Han's We'll Always Have Summer (2011) through its elements, patterns, and types as seen in Belly Conklin

and Jeremiah Fisher. The findings confirm that Belly's character can be categorized as a Female Bildungsroman protagonist: she experiences emotional conflict, identity crisis, and self-discovery that collectively drive her toward emotional maturity and independent selfhood. Jeremiah's character reflects the Anti-Bildungsroman, characterized by emotional avoidance, absence of identity questioning, and limited self-discovery, resulting in stagnation rather than growth.

The two characters follow different Bildungsroman patterns: Belly completes the journey from immature teenager through emotional conflict to emotional development, while Jeremiah remains in the immature teenager stage throughout the narrative. This contrast demonstrates that maturity is achieved not simply through experience, but through the ability to learn from experience and develop genuine self-understanding. The Bildungsroman framework proves effective in revealing these contrasting developmental processes and may serve as a productive lens for analyzing character development in contemporary young adult literature.

REFERENCES

Al-Madi, N. (2018). William Golding's Free Fall as a Kunstlerroman. Arab World English Journal. https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/th.200

Fa'iqoh, N. A., & Wahyono, D. (2023). Daryl Wayne Flint's Psychopathic Disorder in Carla Norton's Hunted. In Proceeding of Conference on Literature, Linguistic, and Cultural Studies (Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 852–863). Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya.

Floris, R. (2025). Bildungsroman and Coming-of-Age: Understanding Development Fiction Through Sociology. Romanian Journal of English Studies, 22(1), 90-100.

Gofe, T. E., Rafisa Olana, D., & Debela, K. L. (2022). A Critical Review of Qualitative Research Methods. Science Research, 10(5).

Golban, P. (2017). An Attempt to Establish a Bildungsroman Development History. HUMANITAS - Uluslararasi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi.

Golban, P. (2018). A history of the Bildungsroman: from ancient beginnings to Romanticism. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Graham, S. (2019). A History of Bildungsroman. In A History of the Bildungsroman. Cambridge University Press.

Gumus. (2025). Disrupting the Journey: Gavin Weston's Harmattan as an Anti-Bildungsroman. https://doi.org/10.47777/cankujhss.1566519

Han, J. (2011). We'll Always Have Summer. Simon & Schuster.

Hillestad, R. (2023). Identity Crisis. https://doi.org/10.7249/mg753

Iryna, I. (2021). Genre poetics of R. Wagner's Parsifal in the context of Gesamtkunstwerk idea. Aspects of Historical Musicology, 24(24).

Kanwal, A., Naz, B., & Mehwish, M. (2025). Language and the Struggle for Identity in the Goldfinch. World Journal of English Language, 15(7).

Kurniawan, E. H., & Mustofa, A. (n.d.). Psychological Analysis of Literary and Educational Value in the Novel Psychopath Test.

Nugraheni, D. T., & Hidayat, B. (2018). Annemarie Johansen's Stages of Growing up: Lois Lowry's Number the Stars as a Bildungsroman. Lexicon, 5(2).

Ruggemeier, A. (2023). Female Bildungsroman and narrative development. In Literary Studies Review.

Sawyer, S. M., Azzopardi, P. S., Wickremarathne, D., & Patton, G. C. (2018). The age of adolescence. The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2(3), 223-228.

Snircova, S. (2021). The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century. Slovak Studies in English Literature.

Upadhyay, A. (2020). Bildungsroman: Origin and Development. International Journal of Linguistics and Literature, 9(3).