

23.0 Experiential Learning In Bildungsroman Literature: A Study Of Personal Growth And Transformation In Charles Dickens's Novels

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Abstract

This paper explores the significance of experiential learning in the context of the Bildungsroman genre, with a specific focus on Charles Dickens's novels Great Expectations, David Copperfield, and Oliver Twist. The aim of the study is to analyze how Dickens's protagonists undergo personal growth and transformation through lived experiences rather than formal education or inherited privilege. The method employed is textual analysis, supported by theoretical frameworks from John Dewey and David Kolb on experiential learning, and Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development theory. Results indicate that Dickens's characters—Pip, David, and Oliver—develop resilience, humility, and moral clarity through encounters with poverty, injustice, love, and self-discovery. Each protagonist exemplifies the experiential learning cycle, where hardship and reflection foster maturity and ethical awareness. Comparative analysis further reveals Dickens's consistent reliance on experiential learning as the driver of transformation across his Bildungsroman novels. The major conclusion is that Dickens presents personal growth and identity formation as inseparable from lived experience, emphasizing that true character development arises from adversity, relationships, and reflection. His works thus highlight the enduring significance of experiential learning in shaping moral responsibility and human maturity.

Keywords: Bildungsroman literature, experiential learning, character development, personal growth, self-discovery

Introduction

The “Bildungsroman” is a term often associated with the coming-of-age genre as it reveals the complexities associated with this transition from youth to adulthood. An integral component of any Bildungsroman is the character's development: the psychological, moral, and social dimensions that are influenced by their experiences and successes throughout life. While formal education plays its part in this growing process, it is experiences learned throughout life that shape the character to a greater extent. This is called experiential learning, which focuses on the “acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, and awareness through direct involvement in the world around us.” Charles Dickens is one of the most prominent authors associated with the Bildungsroman of Victorian England. He skillfully incorporates the idea of experiential learning throughout his work. The main characters in his novels, such as ‘David Copperfield,’ ‘Oliver Twist,’ and ‘Great Expectations’ protagonist ‘Pip,’ do not simply transition from youth to adulthood due to formal education or class. Rather, these characters grow and mature due to the experiences they learn from throughout life. Dickens' work reveals that it is life and such experiential learning that shapes the character in a non-linear fashion through his critiques of formal education and class.

Experiential learning, or the lessons learned as a result of the protagonist's personal experiences, is seen to play a pivotal role in shaping the character in the Bildungsroman novels by Charles Dickens, indicating to the reader that real change and development occur not as a result of education or social position, but rather as a result of the experiences the person has and how these ultimately change them as a person. This paper aims to demonstrate how experiential learning plays a role in the Bildungsroman novels of Charles Dickens, and how the execution of the protagonist's experiences is utilized to show the reader the value and importance of real experiences as the true educator in the protagonist's life.

Bildungsroman literature

The word "Bildungsroman" is composed of two words, "bildung," which is German for "formation," and "roman," meaning "novel." The word has historically been capitalized due to its German origins. The coming-of-age novel is an accepted synonym for Bildungsroman. Most Bildungsnromans commence with a hero who feels alienated and alone but conclude with a heroic figure who has found a place among others, although many writers have toyed around with that trope. The genre, however, emerged as Bildungsroman, also recognized as the "novel of formation," in Germany. The specific genre of the Bildungsroman originated in Germany in the early 19th century. The Bildungsroman, or "novel of formation," is a literary genre that centers on the psychological and moral growth of a protagonist from youth to adulthood. Originating in German literature, the term was popularized by scholars such as Jerome Buckley, who described the genre as a narrative in which the central character embarks on a journey—often physical, emotional, and social—that leads to self-discovery and maturity. Franco Moretti further emphasized that the Bildungsroman reflects a conflict between individual aspirations and societal norms, portraying development as a negotiation between personal desire and external expectations. In the context of Charles Dickens's novels, the Bildungsroman structure is evident in the way characters like David Copperfield, Oliver and Pip (Great Expectations) undergo transformative experiences that shape their identities. These protagonists begin as naïve or idealistic youths and, through a series of trials, relationships, and moral dilemmas, gradually acquire self-awareness and a deeper understanding of their place in society. Dickens uses this genre not only to chart personal growth but also to critique social institutions and highlight the formative power of lived experience.

Experiential learning

Experiential learning as a process of learning through experience has been more specifically defined as "learning through reflection on doing". Hands-on learning can certainly facilitate an experiential approach, but it doesn't necessarily address the minds of learners. Experiential learning differentiates itself from rote or didactic learning in which students are more passive learners. Experiential learning, defined as "learning through reflection on doing," sets itself apart from passive rote or didactic methods by actively engaging learners' minds. While hands-on activities facilitate this approach, true growth demands reflection on experiences. David A. Kolb's respected theory, building on John Dewey's view of education as real-life environmental interactions, outlines a dynamic four-stage cycle: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation. This continuous process drives performance improvement, learning,

and personal development everywhere, anytime—making life itself the ultimate classroom for growth and change.

Experiential learning theory, created by David A. Kolb, can be considered one perspective on an individual's psychological learning process and growth through experiences. According to the theory, learning is a continuous process consisting of four historical elements: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. David A. Kolb's theory of experiential learning delineates a four-stage cycle—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation—whereby individuals transform lived encounters into knowledge. This framework aptly elucidates the maturation of protagonists in Charles Dickens's Bildungsroman novels, including *Pip*, *Oliver Twist*, and *David Copperfield*. Absent formal pedagogy, their psychological growth emerges from personal trials, social interactions, and self-derived insights, affirming experiential learning's pivotal role in identity development and narrative progression.

Lawrence Kohlberg proposed his theory of moral development stages, which helps to analyze the moral development of Dickens' characters in his Bildungsroman novels. Kohlberg's moral development theory outlines six stages: pre-conventional (self-interest via rewards/punishments), conventional (social order and justice), and post-conventional (universal ethics). This framework illuminates Dickens' Bildungsroman protagonists' evolution from immature, fear-driven morals to principled maturity. In *Great Expectations*, Pip transcends ambition and class shame, embracing loyalty and humility through lived trials. Dickens' novels reveal experiential learning as key to both identity formation and ethical growth, where self-discovery fosters societal harmony—aligning personal betterment with Kohlberg's stages of advancing moral reasoning. Furthermore, Dickens' characters like David Copperfield, *Oliver Twist*, and Pip mature through David A. Kolb's experiential learning theory—a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In Bildungsroman novels such as *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Great Expectations*, protagonists grow psychologically and morally from youth to adulthood via personal trials, social interactions, and moral conflicts, not formal education. This process, central to the genre's tension between individual aspirations and societal expectations, transforms their immature perspectives into empathy, humility, and justice, aligning perfectly with Kolb's model of learning through lived experiences.

Textual analysis of experiential learning in charles dickens's novels

In **David Copperfield**, Dickens introduces the readers to a protagonist whose overall transition from childhood innocence to adulthood occurs entirely because of acquired experiences rather than intellectual or educational growth. Various experiences faced by the character during childhood, such as the treatment received by Mr. Murdstone, working at the factory, and living in poverty, influence the character's life and cause him to undergo deep contemplation and transformation. Connections with characters like Mr. Micawber and Agnes play an important part in transforming the character and contributing to his growth. If we apply Kolb's experiential learning cycle model to the character of David Copperfield, it

becomes clear how this character transforms overall as an adult based on “experiential” experiences faced during childhood and later in life. According to Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, the character undergoes moral growth too. Initially, the character is centered on fulfilling his own needs and desires, but with growing age and throughout his experiences, he becomes more inclined towards moral reasoning and feelings too.

Similarly, in **Great Expectations**, Dickens also shows the story of Pip's transformation as a story of ambition, disillusionment, and, ultimately, humility. Though Pip's experiences involving his shame over his humble background, his misdirected desire to improve his social status, and his ambivalent association with Magwitch are the experiences that bring change, they also act as the catalyst for his growth because of the lessons in loyalty, love, and justice he ultimately comes to learn. While Kohlberg's theory clarifies the story of Pip's moral development, Kolb's theory also explains the way in which Pip develops as a result of his experiences and reflective practice. Overall, the story of Pip, as presented by Dickens in "Great Expectations," reflects the author's view on the futility of the British class system and the true meaning of personal growth and development as coming from one's lessons and experiences.

In **Oliver Twist**, Dickens addresses character development through the experience of an orphan whose innocence is tested by the harsh realities of society. Oliver's experiences in the workhouse, his exploitation by Fagin's criminal gang, and his exposure to both cruelty and compassion shape his understanding of the world. Nancy's sacrifice and Mr. Brownlow's kindness are defining moments that reinforce Oliver's moral clarity and resilience. Through Kolb's experiential learning lens, Oliver's experiences of suffering and kindness become concrete experiences that foster reflection and identity formation. Kohlberg's moral development theory further supports Oliver's ethical maturation in moving from innocent naivety to a principled awareness of justice and empathy. Oliver's experience suggests Dickens's larger social vision for the novel-continuing to illustrate how experiential learning allows for moral and personal development to occur even in the face of adversity.

Together, these novels show how Dickens consistently uses experiential learning as the basis for character development in the Bildungsroman tradition. David, Pip, and Oliver each embody the idea that growth comes not from formal instruction or inherited privilege but from the challenges, reflections, and moral lessons gained from real-life experiences. When comparing *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, and *Oliver Twist*, it's clear that Dickens relies on experiential learning for character growth, even though each protagonist's journey reveals different aspects of this process. David's development highlights resilience in facing personal hardship, Pip's focuses on disillusionment with social ambition, and Oliver's emphasizes the preservation of innocence amid corruption. Despite these differences, all three characters grow through cycles of experience, reflection, and moral awakening, rather than through formal education or inherited privilege.

David Copperfield's journey epitomizes the function of perseverance and reflection on the way to surmounting any adversity. The painful experience of his abusive childhood and struggles with poverty become lessons in the making of his empathy and responsibility. Pip's

trajectory, on the other hand, serves to underscore the peril of misplaced ambition. His shame over his origins and headlong pursuit of wealth lead to painful realizations, which eventually make him learn lessons in humility and the meaning of justice. Oliver's path is different because he begins with innocence and goes through torture and compassion, all of which together make his moral firmness unwavering. In contrast to David and Pip, Oliver's growth consists not in ambition or resilience but in the preservation of goodness despite exposure to corruption. These works in total represent Dickens's overall philosophical belief: that character development comes through living experience. Through struggles, aspirations, or innocence in the face of adversity, Dickens's characters exemplify the principles of experiential learning. Applying Kolb's model of experience and reflection with Kohlberg's stages of moral development would shed further light upon the character growth of each.

Conclusion

Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, and *Oliver Twist* show that the heart of character development rests not in formal education or birthright privilege but in lived experience. Each protagonist—David through resilience, Pip through disillusionment, and Oliver through the preservation of innocence—epitomizes the experiential learning curve: suffering and contemplation that result in maturity and moral clarity. Experiential learning is not an act of learning knowledge in these novels; rather, it's an act of growth and transformation. David learns to turn suffering into resilience, Pip transforms his false ambition into humility and empathetic will, and Oliver maintains the goodness within him despite corruption. Their journeys reflect a growth that is a fluid process of meeting up with challenges, reflecting upon them, and emerging into one's skin with a deeper sense of identity and moral responsibility.

Through the application of the ideas of both Dewey and Kolb, in relation to the ideas of experiential learning, Dickens' protagonists highlight the application of moral development theory, also based on the stages set out by Lawrence Kohlberg. Through the application of the "Bildungsroman" concept, it is possible to see that Dickens' protagonists highlight the linkage that exists in relation to the learning experienced within the broader scope of youth and maturity. Ultimately, it can be seen that Dickens was presenting both literary and ethical views on human development, because although tied to the creation of an element of social realism, Dickens's characters ensure that, through an overreaching message of experiential learning, we are reminded that true maturity can only be achieved through exposing oneself to the realities of the world, to justice, and to learning through experience itself.

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