

Desire in the Bildungsroman:  
Construction and Pursuit of an Ideal Self Through the Ideal Other

By

Ethan Hennessey Watson



Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
Honors in the Department of English

UNION COLLEGE

June, 2018

“Not all who wander are lost.”

-J.R.R. Tolkien

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## Abstract

WATSON, ETHAN Desire in the Bildungsroman: Construction and Pursuit of an Ideal Self Through the Ideal Other

ADVISOR: Judith Lewin

The *Bildungsroman*, or “novel of education,” has remained popular since Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*. I examine this novel, as well as Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, and Walter Moers’s *Rumo & His Miraculous Adventures*, focusing specifically on the relationships between the three male protagonists and the women that they encounter throughout their lives. Using the theories of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, literary critic René Girard, and feminist philosopher Judith Butler, I draw parallels between and contribute to the scholarly conversation of all three works (or in the case of Moers’s recent fantasy, *Rumo*, begin the critical conversation). All three protagonists mirror the women that they encounter, creating visions of ideal selves that they strive to become. The characters’ progress and relationships, though different, all exemplify Lacan’s Mirror Stage theory, as well as the theories of desire in Girard and Butler; the latter two theories take Lacan’s ideas further and contribute to my comparison of characteristics in these three coming of age novels. I argue that, no matter the length of their journey or the final results of their relationships, successfully completing the Mirror Stage leads the protagonists to become their ideal selves.

## Introduction

The protagonists of the *Bildungsroman*, unsurprisingly, experience the education that their circumstance provides. These characters exhibit clear and meaningful change as they progress through the novels that they inhabit, often learning and changing as a direct result of someone else's guidance or behest. In the three *Bildungsromane* I analyze in my thesis, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, and Walter Moers's *Rumo & His Miraculous Adventures*, I examine the impact of romantic relationships in the protagonists' journeys towards meaningful and lasting character change. All three protagonists are heterosexual males, whose desire for their specific, ideal romantic partner prompts substantial character development. I will apply theories by Jacques Lacan, René Girard, and Judith Butler as the basis of my analysis of the relationships between the protagonists and their romantic counterparts. Additionally, I will use the works of experts on the *Bildungsroman*, namely Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World* as well as folklorist Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, to understand and explore the conventions of the genre.

Lacan's translated lecture, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," is the basis upon which the theories I will employ build. Lacan analyzes the nature of desire, "which force[s] the psyche to make demands" (633), as the driving force of character change. For Lacan, desire derives from a longing to be *like* another individual rather than from a sexual or romantic origin. He posits that as soon as one desires to be like another, one enters into the "Mirror

Stage,” where one’s resulting actions and decisions align more closely with the object of desire. Lacan refers to the two participants of the Mirror Stage as the “self” and the “other,” and explains that once the “self” desires an “other,” the self begins to idealize the other. Protagonists then form ideal selves based on their newly-constructed ideal others, and continue to metamorphose their ideal selves to successfully complete the Mirror Stage. This developmental stage is used, in literature, to describe desiring relationships between protagonists and the ideal others that they encounter and construct. The Mirror Stage serves as my theoretical basis for understanding the relationships between the protagonists and the women-love objects they encounter, and the works of Girard and Butler draw from and add to Lacan’s theory.

René Girard builds on Lacan’s theories — particularly regarding the nature of desire — in his book, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Girard argues that any relationship where desire exists contains *three* parties as opposed to Lacan’s two. He describes the “triangular desire” that can be applied to many literary works, where a third agent, the “mediator of desire,” influences the “desiring subject,” which Lacan calls the “self.” Girard believes that whenever a subject desires something or someone, there is always another individual who, positively or negatively, consciously or unconsciously, affects the protagonist’s relationship with the desired object. Girard touches on many topics, all within the context of triangular desire, and I use his theories regarding masculinity and femininity, sadism and masochism, and rivalries between the self and the mediator of desire in my various chapters. I use Girard’s theories in order to fully understand the relationships not only between the protagonist and the ideal other, but also between the protagonist and other characters in the novels. Finally, I employ Judith Butler’s chapter,

“Desire, to interpret both Lacan and Girard. Butler builds upon and goes further than both critics; I utilize her theories regarding the protagonist’s proclivity to assume the position of the mediator.

In the three *Bildungsroman* texts that I analyze, the relationships between the protagonists and the women they pursue are all different, yet all three successfully progress through Lacan’s Mirror Stage, forming an ideal self based on an ideal other. All three are subject to the influences of a mediator of desire, which changes their perception of their ideal selves, as well as their ideal others, both positively and negatively. The *Bildungsromane* show us that, while a successful completion of the Mirror Stage *is* necessary for lasting, positive character change, romantic success is *not* necessary for lasting self-worth. Each main character seeks to gain something from his journey, yet all find themselves irreversibly and positively changed by their relationships with an ideal other, proving that the Mirror Stage is central to the personal growth that defines the *Bildungsroman* as a genre.

## Chapter 1

### The Formation and Mutability of the Ideal Other through Triangular Desire in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, one of Germany's most prominent authors, is often credited with the invention of the *Bildungsroman*. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796) remains the first and one of the most important works in the genre. At the beginning of the novel, Goethe lays the framework for Wilhelm's love life, writing, "If, as it is often said, first love is the best that any heart can experience early or late, our hero must be considered thrice blest for being able to enjoy these supreme moments in full measure" (4). The young protagonist encounters many women throughout the story, and he falls in love several times. In fact, Wilhelm's colorful love life is what makes the story so interesting, especially when Lacan and Girard help us gain a deeper understanding of Wilhelm's relationships. In *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Wilhelm's travels can be interpreted as his completion of the Mirror Stage, with each woman that he encounters adding elements to the formation of his ideal other. Each new relationship adds a new ideal other in Lacan's Mirror Stage, and eventually Girard's mediator of desire, as Wilhelm constructs an ideal other, an ideal self, and creates his own mediator of desire. Wilhelm Meister's journey can be mapped chronologically, with each new romance leading to the addition of either a new agent in the triangle of desire, or an additional feature to his ideal other. As Wilhelm progresses,



he selects and rejects traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics in order to create a more complete ideal self based on his ideal other.

### *Mariane, or Birth of Desire*

The novel begins with Wilhelm's first romance, established before he undergoes character change or even begins to construct an ideal other. Wilhelm experiences the first of three "supreme moments" (4), and begins to view himself solely within the context of his relationship with Mariane. Wilhelm's life consists of spending "his nights in the intimate pleasures of love and his days in anticipation of further hours of bliss" (15). At this stage, nothing matters to Wilhelm other than his immediate future with Mariane, and he does not live for himself, but does nothing but "anticipate" his "hours of bliss" with his lover. Mariane is necessary in Wilhelm's development of a more complete self because she represents pure desire, which is the major catalyst of Lacan's Mirror Stage. David H. Richter gets at the crux of Lacan's definition of desire, writing, "It is in the true desire — for an object that is itself conscious and can desire us in return — that the higher forms of self-consciousness arise" (633). This concept of mutual desire is integral to Wilhelm's entrance into the Mirror Stage because there must be some form of reciprocity in order for the "mirroring" effect to work. Mariane *does* desire Wilhelm, however she is unable to commit herself fully to him, since she is already betrothed to another. Mariane returns Wilhelm's desire, yet she ends the relationship before he has the opportunity to construct his ideal self based on her as his ideal other. Every "supreme moment" that Wilhelm feels is based on mutual desire, however, subsequent love objects contribute to the formation of an ideal other *and* to Wilhelm's ideal self.

The pair begins the story entirely enamoured and Wilhelm casts all else aside and is unable to detach his conception of self from his lover, turning desire into a false conception of himself and his relationship. The narrator recounts,

[Mariane] had been important to him before -- now she was indispensable, because he was bound to her by every fiber of his being, and his mind felt, in all its unclouded innocence, that she was half -- more than half -- of himself. He was grateful, and absolutely devoted to her. (16)

Here, we can clearly see the construction of the ideal other in Mariane, as Wilhelm is “absolutely devoted to her,” however, Wilhelm still lacks an ideal self. Because Wilhelm “was bound to her by every fiber of his being,” it seems an insurmountable task to leave Mariane and begin to traverse through the Mirror Stage successfully. To Wilhelm, Mariane *is* the ideal other, however, Wilhelm gives “more than half” of himself to her, and therefore, is entirely prevented from constructing an ideal self based on Mariane, his current ideal other.

Because Wilhelm will interact with so many women over the course of the novel and use them all in his mirror-construction of an ideal self, it is significant that Goethe chooses to begin the story with this description of Wilhelm’s dependence. He emphasizes Wilhelm’s need to experience the world and to grow into a self-sufficient individual through the description of his inability to define himself without Mariane, and the turmoil that ensues following her betrayal. Goethe even draws attention to Wilhelm’s “unclouded innocence” to show how little Wilhelm knows, and to allow the reader to understand that Mariane could never prompt lasting character change. As Thomas Jeffers interprets the beginning of the novel, “We are meant to first perceive the world

as Wilhelm does, then entertain his ideas as imaginative possibilities, and finally formulate critical ideas for ourselves” (9). Jeffers believes that Goethe provides this description of Wilhelm so that we can fully understand his actions and desires, and understand the necessity of separating from Mariane towards a new ideal other. If the reader follows Jeffers’s conclusions regarding Wilhelm’s progress, each of his “imaginative possibilities” constitutes an addition to his creation of an ideal self as he encounters increasingly ideal others. The reader is meant to feel the love and passion that Wilhelm has for Mariane, while also realizing that, for his construction of an ideal self and subsequent character change, his relationship with Mariane will have very little impact.

If Wilhelm’s relationship with Mariane is unhelpful to his development, why does Goethe include it as the starting point for the novel? Mariane embodies the initial experience of mutual desire that launches Wilhelm’s work developing both an ideal self as well as an ideal other. She embodies Wilhelm’s current conception of the ultimate woman, with Wilhelm’s unhealthy levels of devotion leading him to worship her. Mariane is the first love, “the best that any heart can experience early or late,” and Wilhelm holds firmly to the belief that he will never again attain such a perfect union (Goethe 4). However closely Wilhelm clings to Mariane, she provides nothing more than the reciprocal desire necessary for his movement through the Mirror Stage, and their relationship ends before she is able to influence his construction of an ideal self. Even though Wilhelm considers Mariane to be “more than half ... of himself,” she provides no force for character change (16). Although her eventual betrayal is devastating to

Wilhelm, it is necessary in order for him to separate himself from a flawed ideal other and fully enter the Mirror Stage with another love object, one that will help Wilhelm construct his ideal self.

Wilhelm takes Mariane's betrayal to heart, and the sudden shift from joy to intense sorrow not only causes him to embark on a journey with a far deeper meaning, but also to replace any previous construction of an ideal other based on Mariane. The narrator describes Wilhelm as beginning to "reproach himself bitterly when, having lost so much, he could enjoy a moment of calm, painless reflection. He despised his very heart, and longed again for the refreshment of tears and misery" (42). Although Wilhelm is melodramatic, his divergence from Mariane represents the first true sorrow of his life. Where he once felt pure love, he now feels intense remorse, and after he exhausts his sorrow, he bemoans his lack of any emotion at all. Mariane had been "more than half of himself," and Wilhelm loses her neither to illness nor to a fading relationship, but to betrayal. It is because of her infidelity and deceit that Wilhelm ceases to construct an ideal other based on Mariane, and instead associates her actions with what Wilhelm knows he *does not* want. After their relationship ends, Wilhelm swears off romantic relationships for a time, and is "convinced that this would be the only loss, the first and the last, that he would ever experience..." (idem.). Although it seems like a tragedy, Mariane's betrayal of Wilhelm provides him with an opportunity to construct a new ideal other. In fact, Wilhelm's loss of his first ideal other allows for the mutability of his subsequent formation of the ideal. Unlike other participants in the Mirror Stage, Wilhelm is able to shift the focus of his ideal to comprehend the positive features of multiple women. The complex construction of an ideal other, based on multiple women, permits

Wilhelm to work toward a more complete ideal self. During this relative romantic lull Wilhelm meets a love object who advance his goals and desires, and embodies a new vision of the ideal woman: Natalie, the Amazon.

*Natalie, The Amazonian Mediator*

After traveling with a troupe of actors, Wilhelm and his friends are attacked by bandits and saved by a beautiful and mysterious Amazon, who becomes Wilhelm's ideal other and helps him construct his ideal self. Wilhelm valiantly fights off the attackers, but is rendered unconscious due to a severe injury. While being treated by a passing doctor, Wilhelm's eyes "were fixed on the gentle, distinguished, calm and compassionate features of the newcomer: he thought he had never seen anything more beautiful or noble" (134). Here, Wilhelm experiences the second "supreme moment" prophesied by the narrator at the advent of his adventure; however, this vision marks the most important "supreme moment" of the three (4). To Wilhelm, Natalie is most beautiful and noble; immediately he begins to revere her. Interestingly, the narrator describes her as more beautiful and noble than "anything" Wilhelm had ever seen, showing Wilhelm's desire for Natalie through her immediate objectification. When Natalie appears, she reshapes Wilhelm's desires, introducing masculine aspects to Wilhelm's new ideal other. Although the Amazon will disappear from Wilhelm's life for a time, he never fully abandons her as his ideal other, in a sense elevating her to his *super-ideal* other, to which he will compare all future women.

Due to Wilhelm's loss of blood, he constructs his vision of his new ideal other in a semi-dream state, causing the ideal to remain a personal fantasy rather than a dynamic

woman. Wilhelm lies on the ground, looking up at the beautiful Natalie, and finally replaces the void that Mariane had left in him with a new ideal to pursue. Natalie does not seem entirely real to Wilhelm, however, and is not only more beautiful and independent than any woman he has ever seen, but also appears unattainable. The narrator describes Wilhelm's perspective, saying, "the saint disappeared from his fainting sight: he lost all consciousness, and when he came to again... the beautiful lady and her attendants had all vanished into thin air" (135). Wilhelm views the "beautiful lady" as a "saint," and places her on a pedestal in his mind. Although, in this moment, Natalie becomes Wilhelm's vision of the ideal other, she remains relatively static. Wilhelm will add aspects of Therese, his third love, to his vision of the Amazon, yet she always remains at the forefront of his mind as his ideal other.

Given Wilhelm's relationship with Mariane, it is possible for him to become completely obsessed with Natalie. Even in their short interaction, Wilhelm could have considered the Amazon "more than half of himself," much as he had with Mariane, but instead, he holds on to the image of her and what she represents. For the first time, Wilhelm develops an ideal self that he considers worthy of Natalie's returned affections. As Lacan writes, discussing the composition of the "form" of the ideal self, "But the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego... in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone" (644). Wilhelm's ideal self acquires "agency" here in the "fictional direction" that leads towards Natalie, permitting him to begin work on an ideal self. Although he may not be aware of it yet, Wilhelm sets a course toward the realization of his ideal self in order to obtain his ideal other. This is a direction that will be altered slightly by the introduction of both Therese and the real

Natalie, but will continue primarily toward the ideal self that he constructs based on the Amazon. Due to their dream-like meeting, Wilhelm does not try to make himself worthy of one individual woman, but instead, makes himself worthy of the fantastic, otherworldly woman that he remembers. In this way, Wilhelm's mirroring of Natalie goes beyond Lacan's theories, because he remains in the Mirror Stage for a significant period, improving himself based on an ever-changing ideal other.

As soon as Wilhelm meets Natalie the Amazon, he constructs his new ideal in her image. Thomas Jeffers describes this construction of the feminine ideal, writing, "Take her as she is meant – as an image of the *Humanitätsideal* – and we will understand 'image' in a properly Platonic sense, as an approximation to the good and the beautiful, not those ideals themselves" (25). Here, Jeffers refers to Natalie as the "*Humanitätsideal*," the "humanity's ideal," a term that goes beyond my earlier analysis of Natalie as the ideal other, since she becomes the ideal for the *entirety* of humanity, and not just for Wilhelm. Jeffers seems to believe that the Amazon's true identity ends with her fulfillment of purely the "good and the beautiful, not those ideals themselves," and that she is purely human rather than a representation of an ideal human. I would argue, however, that Natalie does represent all of the ideals of a strong individual who is conscious of what constitutes the self. In this first, fleeting moment when Wilhelm constructs his dream-like vision of the Amazon, the language that Goethe employs describes her as not only the ideal of beauty and womanhood, but as an ideal human. Here, again, the idea of Natalie as the super-ideal other is supported. Jeffers's description of Natalie as the "*Humanitätsideal*" raises her to a position beyond her

relationship with Wilhelm, one that can be explained by Rene Girard's theory of triangular desire.

René Girard's book, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, sets out his theory of desire; it begins with Lacan's Mirror Stage, but adds a third element to the mirroring relationship, which can be seen in Natalie the Amazon. Girard uses Lacan's idea of mirrored desire between two individuals, but postulates that a third agent, the *mediator*, is often present. Girard uses the terms "desiring subject" and "object" instead of Lacan's "self" and "other," yet the pairs of terms are generally interchangeable. In the context of Goethe's text, Wilhelm is the desiring subject, and his object was previously Mariane, and becomes Natalie the Amazon. I argue, however, that the dreamlike circumstances of their meeting affects Wilhelm's construction of Natalie as the ideal other, and sublimates his desire for Natalie into the standard against which he will measure future partners, where she acts as the mediator of his desire. Just as Jeffers states that Natalie was elevated to the *Humanitätsideal*, I believe that Natalie, in this moment, becomes a Girardian mediator because she changes the way that Wilhelm views all women. Wilhelm's construction of an ideal other based on the Amazon mediates Wilhelm's desire for women, as he will constantly compare them to his inner vision. Interestingly, the Amazon possesses masculine characteristics as well, characteristics incorporated into Wilhelm's construction of the ideal other in order to change his ideal self to become more masculine.

The language and circumstances surrounding Natalie's appearance and clothing are atypical, suggesting that Wilhelm's construction of the ideal other is based not only on physical appearance, but rather on character traits that he wishes for as part of his



ideal self. Here Jeffers's concept of the *Humanitätsideal* seems to fit, as the Amazon becomes a hermaphroditic ideal for *all* humans to follow, rather than just Wilhelm during his Mirror Stage. Directly after referring to Natalie as the most "beautiful or noble" thing he had ever seen, the narrator says: "Her figure was concealed beneath a man's loose overcoat which she seemed to have borrowed from one of the attendants as a protection against the cool night air" (134). Goethe presents the reader with a stark contrast between her beauty and her masculine dress in order to highlight the masculine characteristics that she introduces to Wilhelm's ideal self and other. Not only has Natalie saved Wilhelm and his friends, but she does so dressed in men's clothing, which blurs the gender line between a beautiful, perfect "lady" and the strong, powerful "amazon" that she becomes in Wilhelm's mind. Later, Natalie "gently put[s] the coat over him" (135), which further complicates her character as a perfect woman with decidedly protective masculine traits. From the pair's first interaction, Natalie contributes strength and masculinity to Wilhelm's formation of a mediator of his desire.

Girard touches on the need for the mediator to possess both masculine and feminine characteristics. Girard refers to the mediator, using gendered literary archetypes, as "a living being whose conception demands a male and a female element. The poet's imagination is the female which remains sterile as long as it is not fertilized by the mediator" (17). Here, the Amazon's transformation from ideal other to mediator represents the (male) "fertilization" of Wilhelm's (female) "imagination," which appears to be synonymous with his constructed ideal other. Girard believes that a successful mediator requires both masculine and feminine characteristics. It is the masculine *and* feminine elements that the Amazon possesses that equip her for her role

as mediator. She influences Wilhelm's desire for a feminine partner, as well as guides him towards a masculine construction of an ideal other from which he can create an ideal self.

Goethe himself was quite interested in crossdressing. As Catriona MacLeod puts it, "Goethe confesses that transvestite women have about them a rather erotic allure" (393). MacLeod's study of Goethe's time in Italy makes clear that Natalie's gender ambiguity, as well as Wilhelm's positive reaction, stems from Goethe's own preferences: "It is precisely this moment of uncertainty regarding gender that generates eroticism and desire" (394). Natalie's gender ambiguity does not diminish her sexual appeal or beauty, but rather, in Goethe's opinion, enhances it. What, then, is significant about this transvestism in the context of the story? Even Mariane, Wilhelm's first love, first appears in soldier's clothing, exclaiming to her handmaid that she "wants to be [her]self" (Goethe 2). Wilhelm is attracted to crossdressing because it is analogous to his own formation of self throughout the events of the novel. Wilhelm looks to construct his own personality and character, and identifies with women who refuse to choose between masculine and feminine because they, too, are not entirely sure of their own nature and disposition. Wilhelm relates to these women, and finds them sexually attractive because they are undergoing the same self-discovery that he struggles with throughout the novel.

One distinction arises in Natalie's role as the mediator, since she only exists in this form within Wilhelm's mind. Girard describes the "two fundamental categories" of *external* and *internal* mediators, and explains that, for internal mediators the "distance is sufficiently reduced to allow these two spheres to penetrate each other more or less

profoundly” (9). The “spheres” that Girard refers to encompass the actions, thoughts, and desires of both parties, and, in the case of Wilhelm and Natalie, the construction of the Amazon as the ideal other necessitates that, after she becomes the mediator of Wilhelm’s desire, the two be extremely close. Essentially, Wilhelm’s mediator exists within his own mind, causing their “spheres” to interact “more profoundly” than before. Wilhelm has found his super-ideal other, and, because she appears unattainable, she moves into the role of mediator and forms a basis for comparison for all future love objects.

### *Therese, an Almost-Natalie*

After encountering the Amazon, and elevating her to mediator, a standard for all subsequent women to follow, Wilhelm constructs a new ideal other in the form of Therese, Natalie’s younger sister. Wilhelm is uninterested in a new woman, until his companions describe Therese to him. While convincing Wilhelm to go, Jarno says,

‘You will experience no small recompense by getting to know Therese, a woman with few like her. She would put a hundred men to shame, and I would call her a real Amazon, whereas others who go around like her in ambiguous clothing are nothing but dainty hermaphrodites.’ (Goethe 269)

The specific language here speaks volumes about Therese’s appearance and masculine characteristics, compared to the Amazon’s. Jarno begins by calling her “a woman with few like her,” which would usually imply a completely unique character, but instead, points out that there do exist a “few” women like Therese, one of whom is her sister, Natalie. Additionally, Jarno “would call her a real Amazon, [unlike] others who go

around like her”); he does not tell Wilhelm that she is *the* real Amazon, even though at this stage, Jarno knows the true identity of Natalie. Finally, her “ambiguous clothing” is a positive characteristic; whether Jarno knows of Wilhelm’s preferences is unclear, but he does draw attention to her masculine dress, something that set the original Amazon apart. The reader knows, however, that Natalie, too, is no “dainty hermaphrodite,” and is instead an (admittedly pleasing) masculine dresser. In fact, the masculinity present in Natalie’s character is missing in Therese, and although Wilhelm might not realize that it is an important component of his ideal other, his first impressions of Therese, although positive, lack this key element.

To Wilhelm, there is no way to differentiate between his imagined Amazon and a potential imposter, so he once again is prepared to throw himself entirely into a new love. As soon as he hears about the Amazon (whom he believes is Therese), Wilhelm has a “new, impending expectation of seeing once more the person he so much loved and adored, [who] aroused within him the strangest perturbations. He now interpreted the assignment given him as an express indication of providential guidance” (269). The diction here is very similar to the language used to describe his complete and utter love for Mariane, as he continues to “love and adore” the Amazon, who now exists as the mediator of his desire. Unlike during Wilhelm’s “unclouded” relationship with Mariane, however, he feels “perturbations” over the upcoming meeting, showing that he has changed since Mariane and his first encounter with the Amazon. Whereas the old Wilhelm would have charged headfirst into a romantic assignation with a new potential love, he now exhibits a healthy amount of trepidation regarding a woman who may be the dream-like mediator that now determines his outlook toward other women. Here,

Wilhelm displays a more complete understanding of what constitutes a healthy and successful relationship with the woman who could be an ideal other.

When Wilhelm meets Therese, however, it becomes clear that she is not his dream-Amazon. The narrator describes Therese, saying, “she turned out not to be his Amazon: she was a totally different person. She was well built, though not tall, moved about very briskly, and her bright, blue eyes seemed to take in everything that was happening” (270). Therese is a “totally different person” than the Amazon, yet Wilhelm finds himself oddly attracted to her. At one point, Therese mentions a wart that she used to have on her eyelid, and he finds himself looking “straight into her eye which was clear as crystal. He felt he was looking into the very depths of her soul” (271). What starts out as a potentially unattractive statement turns into a moving depiction of Wilhelm’s attraction to Therese. Her unfeminine wart does not deter Wilhelm from seeing the depth of her true character, showing the change that he has undergone in his progress from beauty as the primary mode of attraction. There is an instant connection between the two, where Wilhelm, for the first time, seems to comprehend another person’s soul.

So why does Wilhelm pursue this woman if she does not match his vision of the ideal other, created and then mediated by his encounter with the Amazon? She is not the androgyne that Mariane and Natalie emblemize in Wilhelm’s mind, yet, despite her femininity, she still appeals to him. This marks the creation, or at least a mutation, of a new ideal other, one who is far more feminine than the previous two. Here, Wilhelm’s ideal includes a more conventional delicacy and poise, but the Amazon’s influence as a mediator continues to affect his construction of the ideal other, requiring masculine

characteristics. This new ideal other does not take shape in Wilhelm's mind until Therese demonstrates masculine independence and strength.

Therese is a feminine figure who is also strong and independent, which are traditionally masculine traits, and Wilhelm finds himself attracted to this combination.

When a neighbor's steward approaches Wilhelm and Therese in the garden,

Therese instructed the steward on everything, explaining every detail, and Wilhelm had good cause to marvel at her knowledge, precision, and ability to suggest ways of dealing with every problem that came up. She never wasted time in getting to the essential point, and each problem was soon settled. (272)

The diction used to describe Therese empowers her. Not only had Wilhelm found "good cause to marvel" at her beautiful eyes, but he marvels at the fact that she is so accomplished in managing her estate. Wilhelm notes her "knowledge, precision," and problem solving skills because she is drastically different from any previous woman he has met in the novel, and certainly different from any previous romantic interest.

Therese is not Wilhelm's Amazon. She is, however, a talented and smart woman to whom Wilhelm cannot help but be attracted. Physically, she is far more feminine than the Amazon or Mariane, but her business acumen and intelligence situate her further within the male sphere than they. In this period it would have been quite unusual for a woman (who was not a widow) to manage her own monetary affairs, which would usually have been handled by a male relative. Therese displays a new form of masculinity in her intelligence and skills, rather than the purely physical masculine traits that the Amazon possessed. Wilhelm adds these new, masculine characteristics to his construction of the ideal, joining physical femininity to intellectual masculinity within his

ideal other. The masculine characteristics that Therese exhibits are far more influential to Wilhelm's construction of an ideal self than the physical characteristics that the Amazon provided, showing significant change from his ideal based on the Amazon to his new ideal as modified by Therese.

For Wilhelm, Therese is necessary in his construction of an ideal other, and his quest to attain her love, because she represents a combination of both masculine and feminine characteristics. She completes a pivotal change in Wilhelm's construction of the ideal other, because she refines his beliefs about what constitutes the perfect feminine personality. Although Wilhelm had a physical preference in his ideal other, Therese introduces an ambiguity in the gendering of his ideal through her actions and skills. She reshapes his ideal by fulfilling his need to mirror the masculinity of an ideal other and shifts his desire towards a purely feminine physical form with a strong, independent personality. Therese does not replace the Amazon, but the ways in which Wilhelm views Therese are supplemented by the mediation of the Amazon.

The need to find both feminine and masculine characteristics within the ideal other is explained by Lacan's concept of "homeomorphic identification" (645). Lacan explains this mixture of masculine and feminine characteristics, writing, "Such facts are inscribed in an order of homeomorphic identification that would itself fall within the larger question of the meaning of beauty as both formative and erogenic" (645). Lacan affirms that there must be some form of "homeomorphic identification" with the ideal other, which is to say that in order for the Mirror Stage to progress and successfully conclude, there must be identifiable characteristics for the self within the ideal other. Lacan touches on the concept "of beauty as both formative and erogenic," showing that

Therese's beauty *is* an important aspect of her participating in Wilhelm's construction of the ideal other, since she introduces a new requisite: sexual attraction. After leaving Mariane, Wilhelm is prompted by the mediator of his desire, the Amazon, to require masculine characteristics of his ideal other. However, Therese's beauty give rise to a new understanding of Wilhelm's desire, one that requires identification while also serving as the focus of future sexual attraction. Although Therese appears to be the final form of Wilhelm's ideal other, he will not pass up the opportunity for the mediator and object of his desire to become one and the same.

#### *Natalie, the Lady in the Mirror*

The Amazon has mediated Wilhelm's desire ever since his encounter with her, and when he meets her again in the flesh, he reverses his prior shift of her from ideal other to mediator back to ideal. Natalie the Amazon has acted up to this point as the mediator of his desire, influencing his construction of the ideal other to align more closely with her qualities. Despite the experiences that alter Wilhelm's construction of the ideal other, the Amazon standard is an unbroken constant of which he strove to be worthy throughout the novel. Wilhelm's conception of the Amazon changes as he does, and his ideal other develops as he meets new women who challenge his idea of perfection. Not once, however, even during a relatively happy engagement to Therese, does Wilhelm forget the Amazon who mediates his desire, and his vision of what she embodied only gains strength as his character goes through the Mirror Stage. The image of the Amazon as the ideal other provides a model for who Wilhelm wishes to



become, and only after he arrives at not only his ideal other, but also his ideal self, can he possess the love and partner who affected his desire so drastically.

When Wilhelm meets Natalie again, her description has changed. As Wilhelm first sees her, the narrator describes his actions: "It was the Amazon! He could not control himself, fell on his knees and cried: 'It is she!' He clasped her hand and kissed it with rapturous delight" (314). Following this moment of recognition, every time Natalie is mentioned in the novel, it is with her actual name. Until this point, both Wilhelm and the narrator had referred to her simply as "the Amazon" because she was a construct: a partially-subconscious mediator of desire. As soon as he touches her, however, the language shifts and she is referred to as "Natalie" in the very next line. "The Amazon" had been a favorite fantasy of Wilhelm's, however, as soon as he sees and touches her, Natalie becomes concrete. Wilhelm ceases to add to his ideal, and begins to get to know Natalie as a real woman. The person that Wilhelm comes to know is different from the imaginary mediator, but rather is a stable, complete ideal other or love object. As Wilhelm recognizes similarities between Natalie and himself, he draws closer to the end of the Mirror Stage, where his conception of self matches his construction of the ideal self as generated by his ideal other. Richter touches on the end of Lacan's Mirror Stage, writing, "'The Mirror Stage'... presents Lacan's meditations on the epochmaking moment when the developing child experiences the Aha! moment, recognizing that whole, complete individual in the mirror as itself" (635). This is Wilhelm's "epochmaking moment" when he realizes that his ideal other, Natalie, represents or constitutes his ideal self. He realizes that, in a way, he and Natalie are the same. Once Wilhelm is able to see the parallels between himself and his ideal other, he

also sees the parallels between himself and his ideal self. Wilhelm completes his mirroring process, and

Goethe ends the story with Wilhelm's journey toward an ideal self fully realized.

Regardless of the skills gained, acquaintances made, and romances navigated, it is the end of Wilhelm's Mirror Stage, and fully-realized construction of self that marks the end of Goethe's *Bildungsroman*. Goethe frames the novel with three "supreme moments" that Wilhelm experiences, however, I argue that Wilhelm was "blest" with romantic attachments four times rather than three. Each time he attempts to construct an ideal other and complete his journey through the Mirror Stage, he is physically or emotionally prevented from doing so. Mariane betrays his love, and the Amazon leaves him wondering whether she really existed at all. When he encounters Therese he begins to differentiate between his need to identify with masculine traits and his desire for specifically feminine attributes. Finally, Wilhelm completes the Mirror Stage when he is able to feel his fourth "supreme moment" even more acutely than the previous three because he loves the ideal other he has courted as well as the ideal self he has become.

## Chapter 2

### Divergence from the Ideal: Pip's Construction and Deconstruction of the Ideal Woman

One of Charles Dickens's most read works, *Great Expectations*, focuses primarily on the protagonist's construction of an ideal other. The British *Bildungsroman* follows the romantic and educational pursuits of Pip in his journey to become a gentleman. What makes the novel so interesting for the purposes of my thesis is Pip's eventual recognition of who his ideal other truly is, and the resulting divergence from any ideal other at the conclusion of his Mirror Stage. Much like Wilhelm Meister's transformation of the ideal of the Amazon into the reality of Natalie, Pip comes to terms with the reality of Estella as a flawed human being, and ultimately relinquishes the fantasy of the ideal other that he had created. For a time, he constructs a new ideal in Biddy, by returning to his agrarian roots. Whereas Biddy is a lively, intelligent woman, Estella remains in Pip's mind an inanimate, cardboard version of his ideal, and his eventual recognition of her flawed humanity prompts him to discard that ideal. Dickens shows in *Great Expectations* that even constructing a flawed ideal partner causes character change, and that eventually discarding that ideal can still lead to lasting happiness if the protagonist has become their ideal self.

#### *Pip, The Perfect Narrator*

*Great Expectations* follows all of the conventions of a *Bildungsroman* and exemplifies immense character development in the pursuit of an ideal other. Pip is a

protagonist who rewards scrutiny because he tells his story from the perspective of his older self. The time and distance between the events of the novel and the position of the narrator provide the reader with an unbiased, often self-critical understanding of Pip's experiences. It is because of this unique narration style that the reader can draw conclusions about both the short-term and long-term impact of Pip's decisions, particularly those arising from passing through the Mirror Stage. Pip presents the reader with good and bad aspects of his life in equal measure, and the events of the novel can be expanded upon through Lacan, Girard, and Butler's theories.

From the very first lines where the narrator explains, "So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip" (Dickens 3), it is clear that this is the enunciation of a self-made gentleman who calls *himself* Pip. Others follow suit, and no one calls him anything else, showing that the internal character changes that Pip makes impact the world around him. In fact, Pip never abandons his self-given name, regardless of outside influences, which attests that the decisions and changes that *he* makes remain the most important and long-lived. Dickens's unique and autonomous narrator comments on the events of his life with the wisdom of age, but leaves out important information to keep the plot mysterious, which makes his romantic adventures so interesting. Pip acknowledges his mistakes as they happen in the plot, and the effects of the Mirror Stage, as well as the overall evolution of his desire, are plain to see.

There are no secrets when it comes to the ways that the women of the novel make Pip feel, and the reader knows why Pip makes the choices he does, which adds intention to his progress through the Mirror Stage, and to his construction of an ideal other. His intense drive to become a gentleman at all costs, and the line that he toes

between his agrarian upbringing and his visions of high society are caused, primarily, by the difficult relationships that he has with the women in the novel. Biddy and Estella both become, in Pip's psyche, ideal others who represent the trajectory of Pip's character change. Although Estella is the ideal other Pip mirrors in order to construct an ideal self, she cannot be fully understood as a character without examining her relationship with Miss Havisham. Toward the end of the novel, Biddy briefly represents a return to his bucolic roots, but it is important to first understand how his perception of Estella, Pip's long-standing ideal other, changes throughout the novel.

### *Estella, a Worthy Ideal or an Agent of Havisham's Desire?*

Pip's conception of Estella as his ideal other is problematic due to the dissonance between what she represents as an ideal other and the true nature of her character brought out by Miss Havisham. The jilted bride constantly goads Estella to be scornful of men. Estella is so mean to Pip when the two first meet that he remembers the interaction quite vividly, yet he constructs his ideal other based on her character and personality. The narrator comments on their first interaction, saying,

Though she called me 'boy' so often, and with a carelessness that was far from complimentary, she was about my own age. She seemed much older than I, of course, being a girl, and beautiful and self-possessed; and she was as scornful of me as if she had been one-and-twenty, and a queen. (55)

Estella is filled with "scorn" and "self-possess[ion]," but is also careless with what she says and to whom. Unlike the considerate Pip, she does not have empathy for other people, particularly someone of a lower class than she. Why, given this honest and

unflattering description, does Pip construct his ideal other based on her? Estella considers herself a “queen,” and as a result, exudes infallibility, something that Pip begins to associate with the upper class. Pip identifies with what Estella represents, not necessarily with her as an individual. Lacan describes this process of identification, writing, “We have only to understand the Mirror Stage as an *identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (644, emphasis mine). Pip is not explicitly identifying with Estella, but rather “assuming an image” of a gentleman, which he develops based on what Estella represents. In this sense, his formation of an ideal other stems entirely from his desire to become *like* that other, without attending to the truth of her character. Pip constructs an ideal other both based on and for the purposes of marrying Estella or someone upper-class who fulfills his desire for upward mobility. Although Miss Havisham has provided for Estella, it is plain to Pip that the old woman is neither a compassionate nor a healthy role model, and Pip attributes many of the negative features in Estella to mimicry of Miss Havisham. Miss Havisham enjoys fomenting conflict between the two youths, cannot overcome her own painful memories of being jilted, and encourages Estella to dislike and distrust men. When Pip visits Miss Havisham, he asks where Estella is, to which the skeletal lady replies, “Abroad, educating for a lady; far out of reach; prettier than ever; admired by all who see her. Do you feel that you have lost her?” (Dickens 112). Although Pip was not led to believe that he could marry Estella, Miss Havisham still belittles him and underscores his loss of his ideal other and the primary force driving his character development toward becoming a gentleman. She calls Estella a “lady” and “far out of reach,” pointing out Pip’s

significantly lower station in life. Although he still believes Miss Havisham to be his mysterious benefactor (who therefore wishes him well), she attempts to convey that Estella is *entirely* out of Pip's league. The narrator describes the way that she speaks to Pip about Estella, saying, "There was such a malignant enjoyment in her utterance of the last words, and she broke into such a disagreeable laugh, that I was at a loss what to say" (ibid.). Miss Havisham finds heartless enjoyment in how she treats Pip, and has no problem with leading a young man astray, even though Pip has only sought to improve himself to be worthy of his ideal other. This scene is significant because it sows doubt in Pip's mind as to the construction of an ideal other, prompting him to begin to stray from Estella as the ideal. Pip still blames Miss Havisham for influencing Estella so negatively. The "malignant enjoyment" that she takes in the games she plays with Pip and Estella is upsetting and significant, since her behavior drives the youths apart. Pip's understanding of Havisham's influence on Estella allows him to continue to improve himself for an ideal other, while recognizing the potential drawbacks of a relationship with a woman who was molded by such a callous individual.

Once Pip becomes aware of the control that Miss Havisham holds over his relationship, she becomes a negative form of Girardian mediator, one that harms Pip's construction and understanding of an ideal other. Miss Havisham has observable control over Pip and Estella's relationship, and Pip grasps the effect that she has on his perception of Estella and the steps necessary to gain the girl's affection. Girard writes about the roles that masochism and sadism play in the minds of both the self and the mediator, writing, "The mediator's hostility always seems somewhat legitimate, since by very definition the victim feels inferior to the person whose desire he copies" (177).

Girard introduces the concept of a mediator's desire as the driving force behind their influence on the "victim" of desire, an influence which Pip observes in Miss Havisham from the very beginning. Miss Havisham wants Estella to feel the pain that she experienced, and channel that pain into spite for men. Pip recognizes the "legitimate" nature of Miss Havisham's actions, and continues to allow her to mediate his desire because he "feels inferior" to her desires. Unlike Wilhelm's imaginary, constructed mediator, the Amazon, Pip's mediator is an actual character who zealously attempts to control his desire for Estella. Miss Havisham's control over Estella is very real, and not only does she mediate Pip's desires, but she also influences the outcome of Pip's relationship with his ideal other.

Girard would classify Pip as a masochist, however, I argue that Pip endures Miss Havisham's cruel treatment because she is a means to an end. Girard describes "the masochist," writing: "The masochist perceives the necessary relation between unhappiness and metaphysical desire, but he nevertheless does not renounce his desire" (177). Pip recognizes that Miss Havisham is a "necessary relation between unhappiness and... desire", yet he cannot be classified as a masochist. He does not interact with Miss Havisham (or, later, Estella) because he desires to, but rather because they are instruments in his desire for social mobility. Conversely, Miss Havisham does not mediate Pip's romantic or sexual desire for his ideal other, but rather his desire for his ideal other's wealth. Miss Havisham desires Pip's suffering, and Pip allows her to mediate his desire as part of an exchange for his eventual social climb. Estella is the basis for an ideal other, but he associates with her and Miss Havisham because he wants *to have what they have*, not *to be what they are*. Pip might be



self-serving in his desire and relationships, but he is not masochistic. The pain that he endures is a means to an end: the wealth and status that his ideal self possesses. Miss Havisham not only separates Estella from Pip and other men, but attempts to push Pip blindly and foolishly toward committing himself to an unattainable Estella, just as she had committed herself to an equally unattainable fiancé. During a visit to Miss Havisham's house, Pip is told repeatedly, "Love her" by Miss Havisham, who utters the words "like a curse" (Dickens 231). She goes on to say, "I'll tell you what real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter -- as I did!" (ibid.). Miss Havisham is clearly using her position as the mediator of Pip's desire to influence his interactions with his ideal other in order to make them align more closely with her experience and beliefs. Were Pip to follow this advice, he would become more and more like Miss Havisham: jaded and completely unable to contend with the pain of a failed romance. This advice resembles Wilhelm's initial impressions of Mariane, when he felt "bound to her by every fiber of his being" (Goethe 16). Just like Miss Havisham after her marriage fell through, Wilhelm was devastated by Mariane's betrayal; in the latter case, however, the trauma prompted Wilhelm's journey and self development. Pip did not have a sudden, earth-shattering experience that alters his conception of his ideal other; instead, he observes Miss Havisham's sadistic tendencies, designed to sow the masochism in him that she craves. Miss Havisham has spent her years arrested in anguish, and Pip begins to recognize the inevitable impact of her lifestyle on Estella. This realization is so powerful that Pip can no longer justify working towards an ideal developed with the sole aim of becoming a gentleman. This

recognition of Miss Havisham's sadistic intentions causes Pip to begin to veer away from Estella as his ideal other, however, he still fails to focus on his most logical model ideal other, Biddy.

### *Biddy, The Ideal who was There All Along*

Biddy is the first girl who interests Pip in his youth, yet his belief that he is destined for greater things than life with her causes him to exclude her in his original construction of an ideal other. Pip first notices Biddy's change into a woman and potential partner one year after she has come to live with the family, remarking, "She was not beautiful -- she was common, and could not be like Estella -- but she was pleasant and wholesome and sweet-tempered" (Dickens 121). Here, Pip uses a physical comparison to Estella to explain why Biddy is not worthy of Pip's pursuit and courtship. Dickens uses her beauty to highlight the difference between the two but describes her not as unattractive, but as "common" and "not like Estella." He uses Estella's superior, uncommon beauty as a metaphor for her station in life, because, disregarding beauty, Biddy is a far better choice for Pip. Biddy was Pip's first teacher, and in many ways, she gave him the tools necessary to impress Miss Havisham, and eventually to excel in his goals to become a gentleman. Biddy may be "common" to Pip in class and beauty, but she is uncommonly smart, and, as Pip mentions, she manages "to learn everything that I learn, and always to keep up with me" (122). Even while managing a household and taking on many adult responsibilities, Biddy has the intelligence and perseverance to continue to learn and improve herself, just as Pip does. Unfortunately for Biddy, however, it is not Estella's superior beauty, but her

superior class that draws Pip to her, and Bidley's "common" status is not enough compared to his original ideal other. Although Estella's education is only mentioned in the context of becoming a proper lady, she never studies or reads, and is decidedly unacademic compared to Bidley. Why then, if Pip can recognize and admire all of these positive qualities in Bidley, does he refuse to consider her as an ideal other?

Pip tries to explain to Bidley that he believes he could not be happy with her or with his current life, and therefore, he must pursue Estella, who represents his ideal other not only physically, but also in terms of class. Pip exclaims to Bidley: "I never shall or can be comfortable – or anything but miserable – there Bidley! – unless I can lead a very different sort of life from the life I lead now" (124). This is blunt and presumably devastating information for Bidley, who seemed to have maintained hope that she and Pip would end up together. Instead, Pip rejects Bidley with finality, as she cannot provide him with the class that he covets from Estella. The absurdity of the situation is apparent to the reader as well as to Bidley, since Pip has no real hope of gaining Estella's affections. What is Dickens, who wrote so many "rags-to-riches" stories, attempting to say about social mobility and the creation of an ideal other if his protagonist constructs an ideal purely for social mobility? Dickens withholds the opportunity for Pip to rise through a union with Estella because he wants Pip's success to be built upon his own achievements rather than a *mésalliance*. Dickens causes Pip's relationships to fail in order to emphasize the necessity of constructing an ideal other, but not necessarily adhering to them during and after the Mirror Stage.

Bidley has always been a voice of reason for Pip, and his return to Bidley also marks a return to a more realistic construction of identity. In fact, Bidley understands that

Pip possesses a flawed conception of self, one that is entirely based on what he desires rather than what he can practically achieve. When Pip tells Biddy that he “wants to be a gentleman on [Estella’s] account,” she replies, “Do you want to be a gentleman, to spite her, or to gain her over?” (125). Here, Biddy presses Pip for a straight answer regarding his intentions, but does not receive one. She goes on to say that Estella is “not worth” winning and that it is not worthwhile to want somebody just because they are beautiful and of a high social status (ibid.). Here, Biddy recognizes the true nature of a successful journey through the Mirror Stage, and understands that Estella cannot help Pip create lasting, positive character change. Pip heeds none of her warnings, and instead drives Biddy away, closing the door on a potential romance, at least for the moment.

#### *Fall From Grace, The Beginning of Pip’s Divergence From Estella*

Although, as a young boy, Pip may have known of Miss Havisham’s negative influence on Estella and himself, he still clings to Estella as his ideal other because of what she represents. After months of courting and pursuing her, convinced of his own good fortune at having been promised to her by Miss Havisham, older Pip the narrator comments on his emotions at that time, saying, “I never had one hour’s happiness in [Estella’s] society, and yet my mind all round the four-and-twenty hours was harping on the happiness of having her with me unto death” (Dickens 292). It is plain to both the reader and an older, wiser Pip that the time and energy spent in pursuit of Estella was wasted. To describe being with one’s love as a “misery” shows not only Pip’s failings as

a judge of both character and romantic worth, but also Estella's upbringing and position as the heartbreaking object of his desire. Pip never considers himself to be part of Estella's world – always using language like “her society” – and his origins preclude him from ever truly fitting into her life comfortably. Pip does not love Estella, but rather, desires an ideal other with the social status and power she signifies. He appears not to appreciate fully or understand the implications of “loving” someone who is so vastly different from himself, because he does not yet realize that he is committed to an idealized version of Estella rather than an actual one. He believes that, at a certain point, if he can just win her affection, marriage will carry with it the happiness of having obtained his ideal other, and joined her social sphere. Estella has always been scornful of Pip, but she punctuates her poor behavior by giving Pip hope during brief respites from her scorn. She occasionally allows him to kiss her or to accompany her on errands, and, although the reader and the narrator perceive that she has no true feelings for him, she continues to string him along.

The realization of Estella's true nature allows Pip to understand not only what she is like, but why she became the way she did, causing his construction of an ideal other to crumble and eventually change form. A turning point in Pip's construction of romantic desire, self-worth and internal development comes when the pair visits Miss Havisham as young adults. Again, Pip sees Miss Havisham's sadism when she asks, “How does she use you, Pip; how does she use you?’ she asked me again, with her witch-like eagerness, even in Estella's hearing” (293). The “witch-like” Havisham does not care about Estella overhearing her seek “malignant enjoyment” in Pip's torture. The

question of how Estella “uses” Pip is never fully answered, although Pip and the reader both understand that it is Estella’s compliance with Miss Havisham’s mistreatment of suitors that translates into “using” him ill. Pip realizes that his ideal other is largely just a marker of social status but that he indeed wants something more from a romantic partner.

Estella obeys Miss Havisham’s wishes, causing Pip to revise founding his ideal other solely on her. Estella tells Miss Havisham of the many suitors she has disappointed, while Miss Havisham relishes the stories of her cold behavior and attitude towards men. The narrator describes his reaction to her stories, saying,

I saw in this, wretched though it made me, and bitter the sense of dependence, even of degradation that it awakened... that Estella was set to wreak Miss Havisham’s revenge on men, and that she was not to be given to me until she had gratified it for a term. (293)

Pip acknowledges (even while it is happening) what Miss Havisham’s actions, as the mediator of his desire, have done to him. He recognizes the “dependence” and “degradation” that Estella’s candor causes, yet, for a time, he continues to cling to his desire to rise in class, and therefore continues to desire Estella. Pip recounts: “I saw in this that Estella was set to wreak Miss Havisham’s revenge on men, and that she was not to be given to me until she had gratified it for a term” (293). Although Dickens remains vague while having Pip recount his feelings, the “this” that he sees is Estella’s mistreatment of men, and the “it” that must be gratified is Havisham’s vengeance. Even though he can recognize the unhealthy and callous way that he has been treated, he is so committed to his vision of a life in a higher social sphere, that he believes that Miss

Havisham's anger, enacted through Estella's treatment of men, is in no way directed towards him, but will rather be satiated after "a term", when the pair can embark on a happy life together. For Pip, the fact that he has survived this long in Estella and Miss Havisham's good graces seems proof that Havisham will cause them eventually to marry. Estella's behaviors may be excused by Pip because he believes that he is exempt, and that there is a happy life ahead. Havisham's question of how Estella "uses" him does spark some confusion, causing him to question the worthiness of his ideal other, and eventually look elsewhere for a new ideal to mirror.

Estella is portrayed as a frustrating, mysterious, and even malicious character whom Pip continues to pursue as a status symbol. For two thirds of the novel, Pip desires Estella and mistreats Biddy. Pip's complex and vexing set of emotions in this scene portray the raw difficulty of realizing that one's ideal self, constructed in the Mirror Stage, does not align with the corresponding ideal other. Although Estella could have facilitated Pip's social climb, he realizes that he never truly wished to spend his life with her. Where Wilhelm's ideal other changed as he applied the Amazon's mediation of desire and replaced potential partners with newer, more optimal ideal others, Pip moves in the opposite direction: from a beautiful, infallible girl in a higher social class, to recognizing her as an imperfect and often cruel young woman. The aspects of Estella's character that have always challenged Pip are also what makes Dickens's story so intensely emotional and meaningful, yet also frustrating for both the protagonist and the reader. Her flaws as well as her beauty have remained the same since her introduction,

and it takes Pip many years to realize that he desired Estella for her wealth alone, and that he must seek a new ideal other which will engender a more complete ideal self.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell describes the “transformations of the hero”, which *Bildungsromane* follow fairly well. He describes “the Hero as Lover” of the ideal other, saying, “She is the image of his destiny which he is to release from the prison of enveloping circumstance. But where he is ignorant of his destiny, or deluded by false considerations, no effort on his part will overcome the obstacles” (342). Following the Hero’s Journey archetype, Pip’s ideal other or “goal” becomes “the image of his destiny,” and in Pip’s case, “the prison of enveloping circumstance” is Havisham’s influence and control of Estella’s actions. Pip is “deluded” when he believes there is a foreseeable end to Estella’s abuse, even if that end is Havisham’s death, however, where maintains his delusion, “no effort on his part will overcome the obstacles,” –that is, Pip cannot change things. Once he discovers that Havisham was not his benefactor, the “obstacles” become all but insurmountable. Suddenly, Estella wavers as his destiny, and Pip is prompted, again, to discard this other as his ideal, a decision strongly influenced by the discovery of Estella’s origins.

### *Estella’s True Origins - A New Desire Emerges*

Pip encounter with Jaggers’s maid, Molly, causes him to fully abandon Estella as the ideal other, as an understanding of Estella’s background finally demolishes the perfection that Pip once believed Estella possessed. Jaggers mentions that Molly has “gipsy blood” (377), and later Pip learns that Abel Magwitch, Pip’s secret benefactor, is



Estella's father. Within the span of a few days, Pip comes to understand that Estella's blood is no better than his own. In fact, she is the illegitimate child of a murderess and a transported criminal — an origin that is decidedly *lower* than his. Suddenly, Estella, his idol for the majority of his life, loses the luster of her mysterious circumstances. She is humanized, and brought even lower than Pip when he began his journey towards gentility. Old Pip claims he continues to care for Estella even after the discovery of her birth, saying, "I had loved Estella dearly and long, and that, although I had lost her and must live a bereaved life, whatever concerned her was still nearer and dearer to me than anything in the world" (396). Pip learns of Estella's origins after she is betrothed to another man, and he can finally construct a new ideal other, independent of Estella. He will always love Estella, but is resigned to a "bereaved life," showing that he has already undergone enough character change to accept his fate.

Even though he knows he will never have her, Pip wants to make sure that he knows the full extent of Estella's story in order to be in a position to protect her and, perhaps, to better understand how she became the person who was "nearer and dearer to [him] than anything." Interestingly, the full effect of this revelation is not entirely known because, at this point in the novel, Pip and Estella have very little contact with one another. Internally however, this revelation demystifies Estella's origins for Pip, and finally allows him to think about her as a regular human being, rather than as his ideal other and the epitome of womanhood. His conception of Estella has transitioned from an infuriatingly beautiful girl, to an infuriatingly cruel young lady, to a fallen human being. Estella is no longer the only destiny that he wishes to have, and he can finally move beyond his blind devotion to her image. He doesn't love Estella *less*, but he does love

her in a non-romantic way, exhibiting an end of his mirroring of Estella as the ideal other.

Judith Butler, in her chapter, "Desire", speaks primarily about the nature of desire within language, and expands upon Girard's theories in order to explain the motivations behind a continued relationship with the mediator of one's desire. Butler, in her reading of Girard, asserts that "what appears to be desire for the Other is, in fact, a concealed way of desiring the mediator. This desire is not simply to possess the mediator, but to assume the place of the mediator, to vanquish the intermediary through a mimetic appropriation" (382). Following Butler's logic, Pip does not actually desire Estella, but rather, after entering into a triangulated relationship with Estella as the other and Miss Havisham as the mediator of desire, he wishes to usurp the role of Havisham. By miming her actions and appropriating her role, Pip will take Miss Havisham's place as an authority figure in Estella's life. Butler would claim that Pip has desired Havisham's place in Estella's life since the beginning, and his interest in a full understanding of her origins and situation seem to support that claim. Pip spends a great deal of time investigating Estella's past, and does so because he wants to replace Havisham, becoming the controlling and fully-informed caretaker in Estella's life. Although it is easy to understand this relationship through a Butlerian reading, it is still difficult to determine its motivations. I believe that Pip wishes to fulfill Havisham's role through "mimetic appropriation" because he no longer desires Estella romantically, but desires to become her caretaker. Estella, although flawed, has contributed greatly to Pip's construction of an ideal self, causing him to change his desires to focus on her wellbeing, rather than a pursuit of her mutual desire or her wealth. This is a natural progression after diverging

from her as his ideal other because he still harbors feelings for her, despite the impossibility of a romantic future together.

Not only does Pip diverge from his desire for Estella as an ideal other, but he also replaces Miss Havisham's role as Estella's caretaker, shifting his desires from romantic to protective. Despite his knowledge of her true origins, Pip does not abandon Estella, and instead seeks to usurp his previous mediator of desire. From this point onwards, Pip no longer requires Estella or Miss Havisham as instruments of his desire, as he has secured enough wealth and acumen to comfortably reside in the gentlemanly class that he had desired. Pip abandons his previous desire, and instead attempts to shift his desires to romance, a shift that will cause him to renew his relationship with his original potential ideal other, Biddy.

#### *Another Attempt with Similar Results*

As Pip travels home with Joe, he is not yet aware of the pair's plans to wed, and he finds his plans for a relationship with Biddy both disappointingly unfulfilled, and relievingly concluded. Pip's convictions to marry Biddy are in direct opposition to his previous rejection of her advances, providing humor and to show the great character change that Pip has undergone. As he practices what he plans to say, he ends with, "And now, dear Biddy, if you can tell me that you will go through the world with me, you will surely make it a better world for me, and me a better man for it, and I will try hard to make it a better world for you" (455). In Pip's head, he imagines his reunion with Biddy as a joyful experience where he can finally prove to her that he has undergone character change while becoming a gentleman. Interestingly enough, it doesn't matter

that Biddy is married to Joe and unavailable to Pip. In fact, it seems as though Dickens is intentionally playing with conventions of both *Bildungsroman* and romance genres in order to create an ironic and disappointing outcome for Pip's gained character change. For Dickens, it is not important that Pip ends up with Biddy, but it is important that Pip *wishes* to end up with her. He uses it as an opportunity to prove how Pip has changed his desires from unworthy goals to worthy ones, realizing that Biddy was what he was looking for in a woman the whole time. As his construction of Estella as an ideal begins to crumble, Pip wishes to return to the ideal other who truly helped him to become a better person rather than a woman who happens to be rich or high class.

Pip's plan to marry Biddy shows that he replaces his conception of the ideal other (previously based on Estella) with an idealized version of Biddy, superimposed upon the "common" image of her from his past. From finding it impossible to stomach their union, to wanting the simple life that she and Joe represent, Pip has abandoned the life that he once wanted and moved towards the happiness that he remembers. Pip is different from Wilhelm Meister and other protagonists of *Bildungsromane* because he circles back to his origins rather than constantly changing and moving in a linear trajectory. He realizes that what he desires the most is actually what he could have had all along, and his decisions from this point onward reflect his return to those values. His marriage plans are dashed by Biddy and Joe's marriage, but again, he decides to handle the news with grace and be thankful for all the couple had done for him. Pip is a humbled man by the end of the novel, and values his work and his friends. He is resigned to bachelorhood, but is not saddened by it, for if he did not fulfil the great expectations he

once had, instead he found that he did not need romance to be happy, however much he was molded by his pursuit of Estella.

### *Unhappy or Unsatisfying? The End of Pip's Progress*

In the final, oft-debated lines, Pip gains some of the closure that he seeks regarding his relationship with Estella, demonstrating his lasting development. The pair meet eleven years after Pip's return to a humble life abroad, while Estella has suffered through an abusive marriage<sup>1</sup> and now has very little left. The meeting is solemn, but not sad, and Estella tells Pip that her "suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be" (466). Pip has lived on without Estella, and, while he certainly hasn't forgotten her or her influence on his life, he does not define himself through her or his pursuit of her. Estella was an important part of Pip's life and development, perhaps the most important part, however when the pair meet again, it is as long-lost friends rather than long-lost lovers. Estella shows regret for her treatment of Pip, but all is forgiven before she says the words. When the two finally part and the novel ends, there is no promise of rekindling their relationship, yet both seem to realize that everything has, in a way, worked out for the best. Pip has the closure he may have wanted but didn't require. In a sense he knows that even though he will never again *need* Estella, in a way he has her, at least as a painless memory, and perhaps as a friend.

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<sup>1</sup> Although this information is only revealed within the original ending to the story, first published in John Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1847).

Franco Moretti's book, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, contains a section regarding the role of an "unhappy ending" within the *Bildungsroman*. He describes that in the "classical *Bildungsroman*, such as *Wilhelm Meister*...the amalgam of time, meaning, happiness and closure was especially suited for emphasizing the irreversible move from youthful experiments to mature identity" (118). Pip does not end up with either of his ideal others, but the conclusion of the novel is not unhappy. In fact, it is the loss of and departure from his ideal other that marks the final stage of Pip's development towards a "mature identity". There is an "irreversible move", or departure, from Estella and towards a lonelier, contended existence, and none of the "time, meaning, [and] happiness" are lost in the ending of the novel. In fact, there is a fair amount of "closure" when he and Estella meet for the final time. Pip doesn't have Estella at the end of the novel, but he doesn't need her. He has actualized and matured enough where having his ideal other is unnecessary. Pip has, like Wilhelm and other *Bildungsroman* protagonists, successfully completed the Mirror Stage, even though his original ideal other does not end up resembling his eventual ideal self. Although the ending might appear unhappy or unsatisfactory, it does not reflect the development that Pip has undergone, or the happiness that has come from his departure from the necessity of having an ideal other to mirror.

In his younger years, Pip's construction of the ideal other is based entirely on his desires for his ideal self. He does not pursue Estella just because he finds her beautiful, but because she is a lady, and he wants to become a gentleman. His ideal woman is simply the correct pairing to his ideal self: a woman of class and tact who will help him navigate in a higher social sphere than he is used to. Like Wilhelm, Pip changes his

construction of self to fit his ideal partner. Unlike Wilhelm, who realizes that the Amazon fantasy is in fact Natalie, a more accomplished, appealing, and complete partner, Pip only realizes that Estella is more like Havisham and far less like the fantasy of his constructed ideal than he had originally anticipated. Shortly after realizing that he owes no benefit to Havisham and that Estella is not highborn, he is torn further from his original goals of becoming a gentleman and gaining Estella's love. Although Wilhelm and Pip both change their social statuses and constructions of an ideal self in order to win their ideal other, Wilhelm must continuously work harder in order to impress and pursue an increasingly appealing partner. Pip, on the other hand, works hard to change who he is and what he can become, only to realize that his goal wasn't what he had wanted all along. His eventual realization that Estella is not perfect for him (which stems from his observations of her willingness to appease Havisham) is what sets *Great Expectations* apart from earlier *Bildungsroman* works, particularly *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. While the romantic narrative still adheres to the genre, Pip alters his ideal self and other, due to an unsatisfactory realization of the true nature of Estella as a human being rather than an idealized love object.

Interestingly, this change in how Pip perceives himself, as well as how he eliminates Estella as his ideal partner, is not devastating to his conception of self. The process of change that he undergoes is worthwhile even if the targeted romance is no longer viable. Pip has successfully become a gentleman, and may pursue women who benefit his new social status. In fact, once Pip loses his fortune and finds peace in an honest, modest living, he contents himself with his lifestyle, despite his loss of gentlemanly status. Pip's expectations are shattered, but his attempt to successfully

gain Estella's love, like Wilhelm's pursuit of the Amazon, is more important to his development than the end result.



### Chapter 3

#### Rumo's Silver Thread - Power Dynamics and the Repercussions of Reobjectification

*Rumo and His Miraculous Adventures* is a unique blend of young adult and literary fiction, with sections that challenge readers' understanding of science and philosophy, and push the boundaries of their vocabulary. Written by German author Walter Moers in 2003, and translated into English by John Brownjohn in 2004, the novel is clearly influenced by its *Bildungsroman* predecessors, while diverging in instructive ways from the conventions of the genre. What really sets *Rumo* apart as a novel, and Moers as an author, is Moers's fantasy world where the plot reflects both typical and atypical *Bildungsroman* romantic relationships and constructions. Rumo's ideal other is more powerful and nuanced than any of the women I have previously examined, and she changes the shape of the novel, and facilitates Rumo's journey through the Mirror Stage.

The novel challenges classification, not for its genre or message, but in terms of its target audience. The book is illustrated by Moers himself,<sup>2</sup> yet the content is sometimes violent, sometimes cerebral. An entire chapter is devoted to a professor's scientific notes, while another chapter is a journey through a physical manifestation of the professor's doctoral thesis. The story reads like a young adult novel, however, it is the type of book that reveals new details on each subsequent read. Beneath the fantasy

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<sup>2</sup> Moers began his career as a political cartoonist and artist and is most famous for the German comic strip, *Kleines Arschloch*.

Moers makes many deliberate choices which lend themselves well to a close reading of the novel as an example of romance in the *Bildungsroman*. Just like Wilhelm and Pip, Rumo constructs a vision of his ideal partner based on his life's goal. Unlike in the other two narratives, however, Rumo's ideal begins as an imaginary, inanimate object which transforms into a person. Because Rumo follows an ideal other based on an object, his true ideal other, Rala, challenges his previous construction of an ideal after he reaches her. Rala becomes more powerful as the novel progresses, causing Rumo to reexamine his conception of self, as well as the power dynamic of their relationship, until her literal death once again places Rumo in the position of power. The nuances contained within the personification and re-objectification of Rumo's ideal other show the power dynamics contained within Lacan's Mirror Stage and Girard's Triangular Desire.

#### *The Silver Thread, An Independent Ideal Other*

From the first pages of the novel, Rumo's conception of an ideal self stems from his desire to follow "the Silver Thread" that he sees in his mind's eye. Rumo is a "Wolperring": a bipedal canine with horns who possesses both intelligence and the ability to fight. When his story first begins, though, he is essentially a puppy, and is able to envision scents when he closes his eyes. The narrator describes all of the odors that Rumo detects, and says, "High above all these terrestrial scents floated a silver ribbon.... Rumo was overcome by a strangely restless feeling, a vague and unprecedented yearning to leave everything behind and set off into the blue on his own" (Moers 16). This moment replicates the classic, journey-starting scene found in most

*Bildungsromane*, where the “restless” character feels strongly about leaving and setting out on their own, however, Moers innovates with the reason *why* Rumo wishes to leave. Wilhelm left because of Mariane’s betrayal and his innate desire to better himself. Pip left because he inherited a large sum of money and wanted to fulfil his dream of becoming a gentleman. Rumo seeks nothing specific, rather, he has an intense, visceral desire to follow a scent for reasons he cannot explain. Even before determining where the Silver Thread will lead, Rumo commits to following it, from a desire forged by instinct. The lack of past or certain future allows Rumo’s character change to be completely independent of anything other than the Silver Thread.

The Silver Thread leads to Rumo’s romantic interest in the novel, but he changes who he is in order to find and follow the thread, resulting in the formation of an ideal self, unwittingly based on the ideal other that the thread leads to. Unlike Wilhelm and Pip, Rumo knows that he wants the thread long before he has any understanding of sexual attraction, romantic relationships, or even what girls are. His quest for his ideal other begins with an imaginary, inanimate object and ends with his predestined soulmate, and the transition between the two is important to Rumo’s understanding of who his ideal other is actually based on. Another distinction between Rumo’s journey and that of Pip or Wilhelm is his adherence to the original, developmental context of the Mirror Stage. Lacan describes the creation of an ideal other during the “*infans* stage”<sup>3</sup> that Rumo passes through, saying that it “would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified

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<sup>3</sup> “The Latin word means ‘unable to speak.’ Lacan is pointing to the fact that this occurs before the development of language” (644, Footnote 8).

in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it... its function as subject" (644, emphasis original). Here, Lacan describes the self before the formation of an *ideal* self. Rumo has no ability to "identify with the other" because the other only exists as a Silver Thread within his mind's eye. He constructs an "I", which is still "primordial" through necessity. Lacan argues that this "primordial form" of the self is the basis for the eventual formation of the ideal other (and subsequent ideal self), and Rumo remains in this stage for some time. He quits his "*infans* stage" and physically matures before fully entering the Mirror Stage, but the Silver Thread prompts this construction of self before Rumo is exposed to any outside influences. It is not until he encounters other Wolpertings, and learns the mechanics behind the Silver Thread, that he fully enters the Mirror Stage, and begins to construct an ideal self in relation to others.

Rumo begins to change in order to follow a thread that only he can see, but learns that he can trust its guidance, according to the specifics of his species. As he meets the mayor of Wolperting, the narrator describes Rumo being asked what his aim in life is, to which he responds, "I'm looking for the Silver Thread.' The mayor cast his eyes up to heaven. 'So are we all, youngster'" (Moers 182). Because *Rumo* is a fantasy, readers accept that all Wolpertings have a Silver Thread that they follow. For Wolpertings, the Silver Thread symbolizes destiny, and following it takes them through their lives and toward their goals. This destiny can take the shape of a vocational calling, or an ideal other, but it accurately leads to a Wolperting's destiny. For Rumo, the Silver Thread both leads to a physical person, Rala, who will become his ideal other, and provides constant, reliable guidance towards her.

Although Rumo knows the Silver Thread will guide him toward his ideal other, not every Wolperting's Silver Thread leads them to a happy end. His best friend, Urs of the Snows, had once found his ideal other by following his Silver Thread, but she decided to leave for another country rather than stay with him. This points to the thread indicating your potential other, but not guaranteeing your relationship will work. In this sense, the thread is both a guideline towards the love object, and a form of encouragement to become worthy of that person. Character change is required, therefore, in order not only to *find* one's ideal other, but to *keep* them as well. Before Rumo even interacts with a woman, he begins to change drastically to seek the thread and to be ready for what he finds. When he first sees the thread, he senses that "if he used this Silver Thread of scent as a guide and followed it to its source, happiness would await him there" (16). Innate to Rumo is the Wolperting understanding that adhering to the Silver Thread as a guide would grant him the happiness of finding his predetermined ideal partner of whose love he must demonstrate worthiness. Unlike *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* or *Great Expectations*, there is no succession of ideal women, but a transformation of the ideal other based on a symbolic object to one based on an individual. Instead, when Rumo meets Rala, he begins to develop in order to be good enough for a now-complete conception of his other. In fact, Rumo's vision of the ideal other only changes insofar as Rala continues to challenge his understanding of who she is and what he wants.

### *Girls: The Fabled "Other"*

After Rumo reaches Wolperting, but before he finds Rala at the end of his Silver

Thread, he is introduced to the concept of girls as “*other*,” which is similar to how Lacan, Girard, and Butler use the term. When he first reaches the city filled with his own kind, he notices that there are two types of Wolperting that look similar yet have several subtle differences. The narrator describes Rumó’s observations:

Their clothes were identical...but somehow they fitted them better. Their eyes were different - bigger, more lustrous, more mysterious. Above all, their movements were more graceful. Although their characteristics appealed to Rumó, something about these *other* Wolpertings made him feel rather nervous of them. What could it be? (177)

Rumó has no conception of sex or gender roles, and is only able to observe these subtle differences generally and without attributing a specific reason for the difference. Nonetheless, despite his confusion, all of women-Wolpertings’ “characteristics appealed to Rumó” who is attracted to women entirely before understanding what women are. He is attracted to the “*other*,” but they also make him feel “rather nervous.” Moers is playing with the reader’s preconceived notions regarding gender and romance by creating a protagonist who is completely ignorant of such things. Unlike Wilhelm and Pip, the sum of Rumó’s knowledge of this fantasy world is also the sum of the reader’s knowledge, allowing Moers to dictate both Rumó’s and the readers’ understanding of the world in equal measure. Rumó begins with no understanding whatsoever, which puts him on an equal playing field with readers to whom a fantasy may be invented out of whole cloth, allowing them to more intimately experience his journey through the Mirror Stage.

Rumó’s view of women as an unknown yet attractive “*other*” is relevant for two reasons. First, it shows that the Silver Thread, which leads to Rala, is accurately

represents what Rumo desires, although he does not yet know it himself. This seems to support the theme of destiny within the novel, and places the thread as symbol of fate in Rumo's development of an ideal self and an ideal other. The second thing that Rumo's incomplete understanding of women provides is an implied guide to sexual attraction. Rumo has no conception of sexuality, yet the thread leads him to a female Wolperting, automating his preferences and attraction. Moers has created a protagonist who can see his destiny leading directly to an ideal female character who is still classified as the "other" in order to emphasize the importance of their first meeting as a life-changing experience that will force Rumo to construct an ideal other based on Rala.

### *Rala- Embodying the Silver Thread*

Rumo's first day in school (where he will learn to read, write, and fight) also marks the transition from his quest to follow the Silver Thread into a quest to win Rala, his ideal other. The narrator describes this event, writing,

Finally, he saw *her*. *Rala*. He didn't know, of course, that her name was Rala - he didn't even know she was a girl, still less what girls actually were, but despite his embarrassing state of ignorance he instinctively sensed that she was the reason for his long trek to Wolperting. (187, *emph. orig.*)

Rumo has found the end to his Silver Thread, and knows that the "girl" in front of him is the ideal other preordained for him, and recognizes this even without understanding the sexual desire that would typically fuel such an attraction. Rumo's "embarrassing state of ignorance" suggests that his subconscious construction of the "other" members of his species is not intentional and not strictly heteronormative, but Rumo's attraction stems

from a single individual who happens to be “a girl,” establishing him as heterosexual. In seeing Rala for the first time, Rumo alters his understanding of his destiny by finding out where the Silver Thread leads. Presumably, Rumo would have pursued whatever his Silver Thread led to, and has no preconception of the living being/love object at the end of the thread until he learns more about the nature of attraction. This step into the unknown allows Rumo to construct an ideal other based objectively on the merits of Rala, rather than what he might have been predisposed by society to look for.

Rumo’s foray into Wolperting also marks the advancement of his understanding about all aspects of the world, including a more complete conception of women and what relationships with the “*other*” are like. Unlike Pip and Wilhelm, who certainly *objectify* women during their inner dialogues regarding romance, Rumo’s ideal other begins as an imaginary object. Following the Silver Thread is a universal experience of all Wolpertings, and it is completely understood and acceptable to speak and wonder about it. Due to this accepting and understanding environment, the nature of Rumo’s journey and progression does not cause Rumo to become possessive of Rala. In fact, the Silver Thread, while a symbol of the path to Rala, is not an inherently objectifying concept. The thread is more of a predilection towards Rala as a representation of destiny than a damaging, objectifying agent leading Rumo towards Rala. The Silver Thread leads Rumo and other Wolpertings to living beings who become their ideal others, vanishing as an objectifying representation of their ideal. Although the Silver Thread does not necessarily render Rala an object to be won, it has the potential to create a sense of entitlement for Rumo, who may believe that he deserves or must have her in order to achieve fulfillment. Whether or not this thought pervades Rumo’s



relationship with Rala is evident in his early interactions with her as he begins to construct an ideal other with her at its base.

As Rumo gets to know Rala, the omniscient narrator reveals the mechanism of the Silver Thread's generation, giving Rala power over Rumo. After Urs explains the "miracle of life" to Rumo, the narrator explains: "Girls were very important. They had a scent that drove boys mad: the Silver Thread that lured them to Wolperting. Every girl could emit that scent and every boy wanted to follow it to its source, and nobody knew why this was so" (201). Here, readers, along with Rumo, learn that not only do girls emit a scent "that drove boys mad" that comprises the Silver Thread, but that they do it at will. This detail is incredibly important because it gives Rala the agency in the pair's relationship, allowing her to control whether or not Rumo finds her initially, while still being able to elect to discontinue the Silver Thread entirely. Although it may seem reductive to boil down the difficult concept of the Silver Thread to a pheromone emitted by the opposite sex, Moers's choice to have Rala lure Rumo to her is relatively contemporary in terms of gender roles. Although she never retracts the Silver Thread from Rumo, Rala could leave him at any time, simultaneously escaping his romantic advances while shattering his conception of self based on her as his ideal other. Mariane and Estella both reject their suitors, however they did not chemically engender that pursuit. Rumo's life is so closely linked to tracking his Silver Thread that losing it would demolish both his purpose and his progress towards a fully realized construction of self and a relationship with his ideal other.

Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, writes about the nature

of destiny, arguing that it is central to the hero's journey. He describes the trust that the protagonist places in destiny, which is "a reassurance — a promise that the peace of paradise, which was first known within the mother womb, is not to be lost; that it supports the present and stands in the future as well as the past" (Campbell 72). For Rumo, Rala represents the "promise" of "the peace of paradise," as he works towards her to regain the peace that he once enjoyed before his journey. The Silver Thread is a physical symbol of Rumo's destined relationship with his ideal other, and he never has to wonder if Rala is his ideal other because he can see his destiny leading him to her. Just as Pip returns to his agrarian roots, the return confirms Campbell's idea that all destiny is circular, and that any hero will return to their original state of being. The Silver Thread might seem to be a Girardian mediator, but instead it provides a method for Rumo to discern and follow his destiny towards his ideal other, devoid of preconceived notions about the "future as well as the past."

Although other Wolpertings affirm that the Silver Thread leads to a person's destiny, Rumo's first interactions with Rala show that he doubts Rala loving him is necessarily preordained. Rumo has not had many life experiences, and is still uncertain and nervous around Rala, despite the Silver Thread confirming the match. As the pair meets at the yearly fair, the narrator describes Rumo's trepidation toward Rala, asking, "Why did her proximity always make him feel as if there were two of him — as if he could see himself and his own awkward gestures? What was the magical power that emanated from this girl and why was Urs unaffected by it?" (Moers 289). Perhaps this "magical power" refers to the mechanics of the Silver Thread, and Rala's ability to drive Rumo mad with longing. Just as the scent that creates the Silver Thread is "emitted" by

Rala, her power over Rumo “emanates” from her and only affects Rumo. Again, the reader is exposed to the sheer power Rala has over Rumo, a power which is in part attributed to a biological explanation, but is also explained by classic conventions about the power of attraction that women exert over men (Butler 375). Where women are typically seen as exerting sexual or romantic power over men through their actions towards and interactions with those attracted to them, Rala not only possesses conventional feminine power, but has a biological mechanism to influence Rumo. Rala is not a typical woman (even for a Wolperting), and as her power continues to be revealed, Rumo’s construction of an ideal woman based on Rala changes considerably.

### *The Cult of Public Mediation*

Towards the end of his stay in Wolperting, Rumo falls into the river and Rala saves him, adding to the abilities that he values in her, to the reader’s understanding of her exceptionality, and to Rumo’s obligation to her. No Wolperting had previously been able to swim, and this deficiency was believed to be a biological defect of their species, yet Rala swims in order to save Rumo. As she drags his unconscious form out of the water, there is a dreamlike scene that is very similar to Wilhelm Meister’s first interaction with the Amazon. “Rala mopped Rumo’s face and looked at him as if she expected him to say something special. He stared back uncomprehendingly. Then he vomited into her lap” (Moers 343). Beyond the obvious gross-out humor, this scene both alludes to and rewrites the life-altering experience in Goethe’s text — a strong, masculine female saves the male protagonist, leaving him not only indebted to her, but smitten by her.

Moers alters the interaction by removing the protagonist's feelings of elation entirely. Instead, he offers a rather unsatisfying outcome to Rala's heroism in order to show Rumo's difficulty accepting that Rala's abilities eclipse his own. This scene further shifts the power dynamic of their relationship as Rala matches Rumo's physical and courageous prowess, and puts him in her debt. Where Rumo felt entitled to his Silver Thread, and believed that Rala was not only his ideal other but his predetermined soul mate, he now realizes that Rala is not a static apparition in his mind, but a dynamic, powerful woman, capable of challenging his conception of her as an ideal other and thereby his construction of an ideal self.

This realization begins to distress Rumo when the entire town begins to marvel at Rala's newfound ability, and he continues to feel powerless compared to her. Rumo's friend, Urs, cautions him against running away, saying, "Look at it any way you like, you're in her debt. You can't just run off..." (346). Rumo is "in her debt" and is not only powerless against her pheromonic attraction, but is now expected by his community to stay with her. Here, the community of Wolperting mediates Rumo's desire in his relationship with Rala. Rumo internalizes the voices of his peers, interpreting their awe as an attack on his worthiness of Rala. Girard speaks about the contagious proclivity towards mediation, writing, "In the world of internal mediation, the contagion is so widespread that everyone can become his neighbor's mediator without ever understanding the role he is playing" (99). Here, Girard describes the protagonist's internalization of peer expectations, which, for Rumo, appears to be a distressing pressure to be with Rala. Suddenly, Rumo's ideal other becomes unappealing because of the immense "debt" that he is told that he owes Rala, causing him to escape. Just as

Miss Havisham became a sadistic mediator of Pip's desire for Estella, Rumo's friends and neighbors become an unhealthy influence on his relationship with Rala. Rala now possesses far more power than Rumo: she not only controls the Silver Thread, but the entire community considers her the most powerful Wolperting alive. Rumo will be forced to deconstruct and reconstruct his conception of an ideal other after Rala is kidnapped and a rival emerges, which creates turmoil in his process through the Mirror Stage and his development of his ideal self.

### *Respect, Rivalry, and the Re-Objectification of Rala*

In the second half of the book, Rala's experiences become as important as Rumo's own, and these experiences mirror Rumo's struggle, showing just how resolute Rala is as a character. Rala is captured by General Ticktock, a mechanical giant with murderous tendencies, who is enamoured of her because of her willpower and potential to defy death. Ticktock intends to torture Rala and draw out her end as long as possible, making Rala the damsel in distress that Rumo is compelled to rescue. What differentiates Rala from typical depictions of women-in-peril is her courage in the face of danger. The narrator describes her thoughts when first waking up, writing, "Was she frightened? No. She was awake, alive and undaunted. That was strange. She ought to have been at least a little bit frightened, but although she couldn't see, couldn't move and was imprisoned in something, her composure steadily increased" (Moers 460). Not only is Rala unperturbed despite waking up inside an iron maiden, completely at the mercy of an unseen enemy, but she realizes that the "strangest" thing is that she was not the "least... bit frightened." The Wolpertings are known for their bravery, but only

Rumo, Rala, and a few other heroes of their species are so adept at facing danger. Just as she overcame her fear of water, she quickly quashes her fear of what's around her and begins to fight to survive. Here, Rala becomes a major character in her own right, but she remains Rumo's goal, and does not transition from love object to protagonist, despite a significant increase in attention to her.

Rumo and Ticktock interact with Rala for drastically different reasons, yet there is an underlying similarity in their motivations, causing them to become rivals for her affection. General Ticktock has created the special Metal Maiden, with which he, himself, tortures her, and the narrator describes his opinions of Rala, writing, "The Metal Maiden might have been made for her — and her beauty was overpowering.... In the case of this girl Wolperting, he detected an immense determination to survive and as little fear of death as a corpse would have had" (477). In certain ways, the same reasons lead both Rumo and Ticktock to Rala. Where Rumo followed her Silver Thread to his destiny, Ticktock kidnaps Rala because of a desire to kill the strongest person he has ever encountered. Rumo believes he is meant to be with Rala, and eventually makes his feelings known in order to win her over. Ticktock, on the contrary, abducts Rala by force, and rips her freedom away from her. The struggle between Rumo and Ticktock is not only to win the life of Rala, but a contest between rivals in attraction. Where Rumo seeks the love of his ideal partner, whose potential he does not yet fully comprehend, Ticktock, who has an eye for power, seeks Rala for her immediately apparent merit. Although she may be more powerful than Rumo, she become encased in metal, unable to move, and subjected to immense torture. It is Rala's forced passivity that allows Rumo to defeat Ticktock as a rival. Her stasis under Ticktock's control

provides Rumo with the opportunity to adjust the power dynamic in his relationship, rescuing her and paying off his debt for saving him.

Where Rala once existed as a living, autonomous being, she is now surrounded by a metal coffin filled with torture devices, causing her, both physically and symbolically, to become the object of Rumo's desire. Immobilized, Rala's energy and vigor are exhausted, becoming pure willpower and a desire to live, reducing her to a fairytale maiden in need of rescue: a goal for Rumo to achieve. Rumo does not know the details of Rala's imprisonment, but fights tirelessly through the Netherworld to save her, a common occurrence in the Hero's Journey (Campbell 229). Again, he must traverse the unknown in order to reach his ideal partner, but now he has no Silver Thread to guide him. Unlike his original journey towards the end of the Thread, Rumo holds a vision of *Rala* in his mind, one that fuels his travels into the unknown, and prompts him to fight for her without knowledge of the pair's shared destiny. It is the uncertainty that Rumo faces that demonstrates his maturation. He no longer needs predetermination, rather he determines for himself to rescue his recognized yet still mysterious, ideal other. Rala has superseded the Silver Thread, and Rumo no longer holds onto her as his destiny because he believes now in a *need* to save Rala. The necessity is bred of a continued, intense desire to be with Rala as his ideal other because he has learned that the thread can be extinguished were Rala to die. Rumo has, through learning and training, tried to make himself worthy of Rala, and whether or not he *is* good enough for her will be determined by the outcome of his struggle to free her. This is the challenge of Rumo's development — a test created by a rival admirer — and saving Rala's life will prove his worth and end his quest.

Rala's interactions with Ticktock prove her strength of character because she garners immense respect from her admiring enemy. After injecting Rala with "the insanity drug" and finding the results less than satisfying, Ticktock feels, in the narrator's words, "proud": "Yes, Ticktock was proud of Rala. Because any relationship should be based on mutual respect, however, he proposed to teach her some respect the next day" (Moers 501). Just as Rumo alters his conception of Rala from an ideal object to a challenging, exciting person, Ticktock begins to respect Rala for more than her courage and strength. "Ticktock was proud of Rala," but does not enjoy the "mutual respect" that he feels he deserves, and seeks to gain Rala's respect by force. Where Rumo seeks to improve himself to be worthy of his ideal other, Ticktock attempts to change Rala through physical and psychological torture. Rather than changing himself to fit his conception of Rala, Ticktock attempts to change her conception of him from a nameless, faceless source of torture to an individual to be feared. These opposing relationships to Rala creates rising tension between Rumo and Ticktock as distorted romantic rivals. Rala, as a strong, independent character has only one option when faced with the choice of respecting her mortal enemy or dying — a decision which leads to the climactic conclusion of Rumo's conception of the ideal other.

To Girard, General Ticktock, while torturing Rala, becomes Rumo's new mediator of desire. What sets Ticktock apart from previously examined mediators is his role as Rumo's rival due to his respect and admiration — both forms of desire — of Rala. Ticktock mediates Rumo's desire for Rala because he is an obstacle to overcome, and Rumo clashes with him because he desires to usurp Ticktock's possession of her (though nefarious and by force). As Girard writes, "The mediator here is a *rival*, brought



into existence as a rival by vanity, and that same vanity demands his defeat" (7).

Although it might seem odd that the driving force behind the pair's conflict is "vanity," the motivations behind the rivals' relationships with Rala seem to support this claim. Rumo is consistently nervous around Rala, and seeks to better himself in order to equal her power. Ticktock exhibits vanity as he tortures Rala with the singular intent of garnering her respect. Both men, although with opposite approaches, desire Rala's respect. Their desires, based on their own vanities, are the same; Ticktock becomes Rumo's rival from this point on. Rumo must kill Ticktock to destroy his mediating influence and to complete his development towards an ideal self, based on Rala as his ideal other.

Much like Pip, who attempted to replace Miss Havisham in her relationship with Estella, Rumo attempts to take Ticktock's place as the dominant member in his relationship with Rala. Rumo's violent destruction of Ticktock embodies Butler's "aggressive mimetism," when their climactic battle allows Rumo to displace his mediator and rival and gain power over Rala. As Butler writes, "The desire for the Other is the concealed condition for a mimetic desire, the desire to be in the place of the mediator, the one who is conjured as occupying the position of desire" (382). Rumo's desire to regain power in his relationship with Rala causes him to desire "to be in the place of the mediator," namely General Ticktock. Where Pip attempted to supersede Miss Havisham as Estella's protector, Rumo wishes to gain the same amount of control over Rala as Ticktock enjoys. Rumo's relationship with Rala has been strained from the beginning, as she was significantly more powerful than he was, and he channels his discomfort and dislike of the situation into his desire to take on Ticktock's role as Rala's captor. Ticktock acts out of malice and hatred towards Rala, and Rumo, after destroying his mediator

and rival, must choose whether to use his newfound power in a loving or domineering way. Although the eventual outcome of their relationship remains unknown, if nothing else, Rumo's intense desire to assume Ticktock's position exhibits his passion and devotion to his ideal other, even after her tragic death.

### *Death Cannot Stop This Hero*

After Ticktock's poison kills Rala, Rumo sees her dead body, transforming Rala once more into an imaginary ideal, rather than the corpse that he is presented with. When Rumo enters Ticktock's torture chamber, he faces "a terrible reality: he saw Rala's lifeless body lying in a coffin. Rala was dead" (Moers 579). The "reality" of Rala's death impels Rumo to return to the idealized version that he kept in mind while trying to save her. Rumo's friend and mentor, Smyke, remarks on the sad event, exclaiming to himself, "What a noble, beautiful creature.... What an ideal mate for Rumo she would have made!" (588). Here, Moers is pointing out what an "ideal mate" Rala is for Rumo – a fact that is plain to all readers – one that he works towards and follows throughout the entire story, and then the author intentionally rips her away from him. This choice to kill Rala, although her death only lasts a few dozen pages, allows Rumo an escape from the necessity pursuing Rala by giving him the freedom to choose his ideal other, rather than simply follow his destiny. Rumo had nothing to do with Rala's death, and he is granted freedom from the regret of losing an ideal other due to his mistakes. Here, Rumo completes his Mirror Stage as his ideal other is destroyed, allowing him to achieve heroism by rescuing his friends and defeating his rival, General Ticktock.

Moers does not fully destroy Rala in Rumo's mind, however, and only provides Rumo with enough evidence of her death to abandon her an ideal, without completely destroying the hope and guidance that she brings him. In fact, after passing out from the shock of her death, Rumo comes to and remarks, "She can't be dead, I can see the Silver Thread. I can still detect her scent" (581). Not only has Rala returned to the idealized version of herself from Rumo's perspective, but she reverts to the inanimate, imaginary object that symbolizes her. This scene harkens back to *Wilhelm Meister*, however, when Moers's protagonist wakes up, he finds an intense lack of an ideal other, rather than a life-altering introduction of one. It is this return to Rala as an ideal that allows Rumo to complete his character development, even without her presence or guidance. In fact, Rumo makes "a resolution: everything he did from now on he would do for Rala's sake alone" (582), showing that he is no longer making choices for Rala as an attainable ideal other, but rather for her "sake." This resolution shows that he no longer requires an ideal other, but chooses to act on behalf of the realized ideal other that he had found. Rumo, though bereaved and sorrowful, makes a mature decision to leave Rala and save his friends — a decision that may be done for Rala's sake, but is not done specifically for Rala.

Rumo does not appear to save Rala since he discovers her dead body. He is not a typical knight in shining armor, and she is not a typical damsel in distress. Rumo initially fails to save Rala, and must instead turn his attention to the rescue of the rest of their species. He does this "for Rala's sake alone," but physically and emotionally separates from her in order to save as many of the living as possible. This pragmatic reaction to the death of his ideal other marks the end of Rumo's development based on

her image. He no longer needs Rala or the promise of her love to guide his actions and decisions. Rumo is terribly bereaved, nonetheless he immediately returns to his other friends in order to do the greatest good with his heroic combat ability. Even though Rala's death is not permanent, Rumo believes it is, and so the relationship that he knew dies with her. What will emerge differs from their original relationship because it is based on mutual respect, and does not rely on the Silver Thread but rather mutual desire. Rumo must leave Rala in order to return to Rala because the relationship that then emerges is not based on destiny.

#### *Rala's Return — Ending as it Began*

When Rala is brought back to life, her reunion with Rumo is reserved and curious rather than joyful, portraying the true dynamic of the pair's relationship. When he first sees her, Rumo stands "rooted to the spot. He found the sight of Rala as disconcerting as ever" (661). This is, at first glance, a strange description of the reunion of two lovers. However, it is important to remember the strange relationship that the pair had. Rumo's constructed ideal other originates in an imaginary object. Although Rala and Rumo are chemically destined for one another, Rala exerts a considerable amount of feminine power over their relationship, as she is able to remove the security of the Silver Thread at will. Rala also possesses impressive masculine traits of courage and power, which create the "disconcerting" feeling that Rumo experiences. She is intimidating, not only as a lover or partner, but inherently as a powerful being. Rumo is attracted to her, beyond the predestined attraction that he feels, *because* of her power and courage. Just as Wilhelm was drawn to the Amazon and Natalie's traditionally-defined masculine

physical and mental characteristics, Rumo is drawn to the androgynous aspects of Rala that he seeks to emulate. The simultaneous understanding of both his status as Rala's predetermined mate, as well as her considerable abilities, create the pressure that Rumo feels. He knows that she is *his* ideal partner, and he knows that he is *her* predetermined "perfect mate," yet the two have spent very little time together. Rala's rebirth is the true beginning of their relationship with one another – a relationship that is built on a mutual respect and trust that they've gained through shared hardship.

In Moers's modern *Bildungsroman*, destiny and desire appear to be inextricably linked, as Rumo's creation of an ideal other has a biologically-guaranteed basis. Although culturally and biologically Rumo's relationship with Rala is assured, he still undergoes meaningful character change to become more like her, and sufficiently appealing to her as a partner. Rumo's development, although caused by a desire to mirror Rala's positive character traits, remains even after Rala's death, showing that it is lasting character change independent of a lasting relationship. Although Moers's *Bildungsroman* looks vastly different from the other works that I have examined, the progression of the protagonist based on the creation of an ideal other remains similar. What sets the novel apart is its willingness to feature the literal and figurative death of the protagonist's love interest, going further than the other books to prove the necessity of character change prompted by the formation of an ideal partner, but not necessarily a lasting relationship with that partner.

## Conclusion

The *Bildungsroman* is not, by any measure, an unknown genre. It has warranted the scrutiny of countless literary theorists and scholars because of the universality of its content. The “education” that the genre portrays is something that everyone can relate to as one moves toward adulthood and independence. The shape, scope, and outcome of the relationships in the novels I examine change drastically from work to work, affected by modernity, yet they all reflect the relationships present in our own lives. It is through an understanding of the genre that we can begin to condense the messages in each novel into knowable, explainable truths about the human experience. Each *Bildungsroman* seeks to convey universal truths about our relationships with others and our understanding of ourselves.

My thesis teases out one of these truths, hidden in plain sight within the romantic relationships of three exemplary *Bildungsroman* texts. With the help of Lacan’s Mirror Stage and Girard’s Triangular Desire, I show the necessity of forming an ideal other and resulting ideal self, as well as the importance of successfully completing the Mirror Stage. Despite positive and negative mediators of desire, discarding a mistaken ideal, and the literal death of an ideal other, becoming one’s ideal self is necessary to achieving lasting self-worth. How we view those around us, particularly those we love and admire, determines how we will one day view ourselves. The *Bildungsroman* lasts because it teaches us, through an example to follow or one to avoid, that we must value others if we are to value ourselves. The relationships we form, as well as the actions we take to maintain or destroy those bonds, determine our eventual feelings of self-worth

and lasting happiness. Lacan, Girard, Butler, Moretti, and Campbell can only tell us so much about a genre so vast. The *Bildungsroman* is a journey for the protagonist and the reader. Read one and see who you become — or at least what ideal self you *want* to become.

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