

# The Coming-of-Age Novel

In its traditional form, the coming-of-age story is the story of a character's transition from youth to adulthood. Coming-of-age stories tackle the loss of the protagonist's illusions and the often difficult lessons s/he has to learn in the face of social, personal, or cultural challenges on the threshold to maturity and independence.

## The roots of the coming-of-age genre

The coming-of-age novel is also known as a *Bildungsroman*, a German term which means 'educational novel.' (for instance Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, 1795/6 or Gottfried Keller's *Der Grüne Heinrich*, 1854) The roots of the genre lie in late 16th century German literature, but the style quickly became popular in English literature and experienced a heyday during the Victorian period. Classic coming-of-age stories include *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, *Emma* by Jane Austen, and *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens.

## The shape of the coming-of-age novel

Coming-of-age stories begin slowly with the 'before', the state of innocence. In this phase we get to know the protagonist in his or her child-like state, and are shown some of the ways of thinking and acting that brand the character naive, innocent, or immature. At the same time, we are usually given a clear message that the protagonist is, by virtue of experience, age, or social convention, potentially ready to grow and earn the spurs of adulthood.

The overall authorial attitude toward the main character is empathy. Even if the main character commits bad acts, the reader should be able to understand his/her skewed reasoning and see it for what it is: an immature and inappropriate survival strategy.

Once the character is established, the story focuses for a while on the trigger event and its immediate effects. It shows how the main character flounders for lack of skill, knowledge, or (self-)insight.

At the bottom of the hill, metaphorically speaking, the protagonist finally sees that his/her expectations and strategies do not work. S/he sees that the environment, the situation, and other people are not going to change to accommodate his/her desires. That is the point where s/he gives in and accepts the inevitability of personal change.

The return journey is an uphill climb. Insight and good intentions alone are not enough to create a positive outcome. Though now willing to change, the protagonist has no tested tools and strategies, possibly even no real idea of what the 'right thing to do' is, and has go through a period of trial and error to learn-by-doing what works and what does not—what is acceptable and what is not.

Toward the end of the story the protagonist has come up with a set of new beliefs and behaviours and is ready to face one final test that will show whether they work. For the sake of the story, they will work, and the coming-of-age novel will usually come to a positive, hopeful conclusion.

The reader will leave the story with added insight into how people are shaped by their experience and the ways in which we create new identities when we move into adulthood.

Adapted from Susan J. Letham (<http://www.bowerybay.com/home/comingofage.html>)