Literary Identification from Charlotte Bronte to Tsitsi Dangarembga

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THIS BOOK seeks to account for the persistence of a particular genre of realist fiction, the novel of formation, from nineteenth-century English through contemporary Anglophone literature. Through readings of novels by nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century women writers, as well as of memoirs, essays, and interviews that record reading experiences, I argue that this genre reproduces itself through the elaboration of bonds between and among readers, characters, and authors that I call, collectively, “literary identification.” These connections begin but do not end with a reader’s recognition of aspects of her- or himself in a fictional character. Forms of literary identification may also extend beyond the boundaries of the text to create relationships between readers and authors. Particular literary identifications may be limited by historical and cultural change or difference, but themes and rhetorical structures that foster literary identification continue to undergird the novel of formation in new and evolving contexts.

I have preferred “novel of formation” to the still common though contested term “Bildungsroman.” With its origin in late-eighteenth-century German literary culture and Romantic criticism, the term Bildungsroman trails a history of debates, distinctions, and categories, many of which never applied comfortably to nineteenth-century English fiction and which are even less appropriate to Anglophone fiction of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.¹ The nineteenth-century English authors I discuss, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, may have been influenced by the
Enlightenment and Romantic German models to which the term initially refers, but the twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors draw on other literary influences (including, but not limited to, those English forebears) in extending the tradition in different social and national contexts. “Novel of formation” is the alternative phrase used by, among others, Marianne Hirsch, who proposed it some years ago as “a neutral term, free of prior critical associations” (295). I have also preferred it to the phrase “novel of development” because, as the readings below will show, while the protagonists of these novels are always depicted at formative—self-constructing or self-defining—moments, their continued psychological development is sometimes withheld, incomplete, or cast into question.

To the extent that the term Bildungsroman, even when used outside its original Romantic context, associates the genre with Enlightenment culture, with European literary traditions, and with a normatively male authorship (beginning with Goethe), it also fails to reflect the prevalence, in the English and Anglophone literary tradition, of female-authored and female-centered fictions of individual formation whose trajectories differ from the masculine model of Bildung or apprenticeship while nevertheless continuing a recognizably related project of narrating the formation of a self in relation to a world of others. The past several decades have seen the consolidation of a critical and pedagogical canon of novels of female formation. More recently, queer and postcolonial novels of formation have begun to recast the conventions and concerns of both the initial European tradition and the revisionary female canon. While critics often signal these developments by the addition of modifiers such as “female,” “postcolonial,” or “counter” to the term Bildungsroman, at this point, even such compound phrases seem to concede unnecessary defining authority to superseded historical conditions and literary conventions. As the European history of the form has not been discarded but rather sublated and transformed in contemporary iterations, so the “novel of formation” includes and expands beyond the genre of the Bildungsroman and its critical history.

I conceive of the novel of formation, in other words, as a capacious genre, potentially including any novel whose focus is the mental and moral growth of a character, within a specific social situation, who is positioned as the novel’s central consciousness. Novels of formation, as my examples illustrate, have since the early nineteenth century been a dominant English, and later Anglophone, genre, which has continued to adapt and transform itself in postmodern and postcolonial contexts. The narrative’s larger arc may move from early childhood to the brink of maturity (as in George
Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss and Jeanette Winterson’s Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit), or it may be restricted to the events of a year or two in adolescence (as in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions). The protagonist may dominate both plot and point of view (as in Charlotte Brontë’s Villette) or share the stage with characters who approach her in importance (as in Nervous Conditions). Novels of formation may be narrated in the first or the third person, ignore or incorporate events in the public sphere, and end in marriage, death, the discovery of vocation, or inconclusion. The mood of a novel of formation may be one of rebellion (as in Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness), confusion (as in Virginia Woolf’s The Voyage Out), disaffection (as in Jamaica Kincaid’s Lucy) or despair (as in Dangarembga’s The Book of Not). Often implicitly or explicitly building on authorial experience (as do all of these examples), the novel of formation shares many narrative characteristics with more directly autobiographical genres.

Within these broad boundaries, novels of formation share some defining characteristics. A genre emerging within nineteenth-century fictional realism, the novel of formation assumes both the singularity and coherence of the self and the facticity and totality of the social world. The social world, in turn, includes other singular and coherent selves as well as events that are causally and consequentially related in space and time. The selfhood of a protagonist may, in the course of a narrative, be assailed and fractured (mental breakdown and illness are frequent hazards), and the significance of other people or events may appear chaotic or obscure. But the aimed-at, even if not fully achieved, coherence of the subject and the essentially causal relations between people and events give the novel of formation its characteristic structure. Because these relations are most visible retrospectively, the novel of formation is not only a representation but perhaps more important a history of the effects of persons and events, private and public, on the subject whose formation it narrates.

The broad generic range that I ascribe to the novel of formation is narrowed in this study by a focus on novels of formation written by and about women. Novels of formation are and have been written and read by men and women, and the gender of readers and the trajectory of their identifications are not predicted or exhausted by the gender of a novel’s author or protagonists. Men may identify with female protagonists in novels written by men or women, and vice versa. Nevertheless, to point to identification and the formation of the self in the context of both literature and psychoanalytic theory—the discipline on which I draw in using the term “identification”—is to invoke processes to which gender identity has been and
remains central. In the novel of formation, as in the classic psychoanalytic narrative, the self always forms as a gendered self, although the protagonist’s experience of gender may be neither simple nor satisfactory.

To a significant though not exclusive degree, the exemplary self of the novel of formation is gendered female. As Nancy Armstrong has influentially argued, the rise of English domestic fiction not only disseminated the gender ideology that emphasized separate spheres for women’s experience (subjective, private, organized around sexual and social reproduction) and men’s (active, public, organized around the accumulation of financial or political power) but also established the psychology of the female subject as the bourgeois norm: “The modern individual was first and foremost a woman” (8), particularly, perhaps, as a subject of discursive representation. As the Germanic Bildungsroman tradition, initially indicatively male, encountered and was partly incorporated by nineteenth-century English domestic fiction, a genre developed whose exemplary protagonists, along with its readers and its writers, increasingly were women.1

Since the normative cultural narrative of female formation, throughout the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth century, culminated in marriage, plots of courtship and marriage dominated novelistic representations of women’s experience from the eighteenth century (e.g., Richardson, Burney, and Austen) onward. Novels of courtship center on a moment at which the protagonist’s romantic career commences, generally cover at most a year or two of her life, and minimize the importance of childhood experience or formation. While they may represent their period of focus as one of transformation for the protagonist, courtship novels ultimately emphasize a change in her circumstances rather than in her mental or moral interior. In Samuel Richardson’s novel Pamela, for example, the heroine’s virtue, never in question, finally triumphs over Mr. B’s assumption of droit de seigneur; in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth Bennett’s superior merits similarly enable her triumph over the vulgarity of both her mother’s low relations and her husband’s lofty ones. Although Elizabeth renounces a mistaken attitude—“Vanity, not love, has been my folly. . . . Till this moment, I never knew myself” (137)—this self-recognition takes the form of a single, plot-driven éclaircissement (the letter from Darcy revealing her misunderstanding of his and Wickham’s relationship) rather than of a prolonged internal evolution. By the time Darcy proposes, Elizabeth has retreated from this initial vehemence of self-blame, insisting only that “the conduct of neither, if strictly examined, will be ir reproachable; but since then, we have both, I hope, improved in civility” (240). By what will come to be the conventions of the novel of formation, such an “improve[ment],”
at the level of “civility” rather than morals, hardly registers as change or
growth. Courtship plots in novels of courtship are less about the forma-
tion of selves than about, to borrow the final words of Pride and Prej-
udice, “uniting them” (298)—the heroine and her appropriate mate—in
ways that largely reinforce other unities, such as those of class, and that
produce a sense of resolution.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, plots of formation
begin to reshape, though not to eliminate, the courtship plot. The novel of
formation absorbs the courtship-and-marriage plot as just one, often con-
tested, element of its protagonist’s ethical and intersubjective challenges. In
a novel of formation, events emphasize change over time, rather than sud-
den revelation, and the working-out of the courtship plot exceeds or even
opposes a social “truth, universally acknowledged” about the necessity of
marriage as its end. Novels of formation expand the narrative lens so that
the concentrated moment of romantic or marital choice is not the sole cri-
sis for the female protagonist; while that crisis may remain important to
the resolution of her narrative, it occurs in the context of a larger web of
self/other relations and other conflicts. As Susan Fraiman observes, novels
of female formation “insist that personal destiny evolves in dialectical rela-
tion to historical events, social structures, and other people” (10).

Jane Eyre, appearing at the beginning of the Victorian period, is a
generic as well as a chronological boundary case: Like predecessor nar-
ratives by Richardson or by Austen, it features a prominent and trium-
phantly resolved plot of courtship and marriage, and a heroine whose
virtue is rewarded. The courtship plot, however, is interwoven with exten-
sive, independent attention to the protagonist’s childhood and to adult
relationships other than those with Rochester; and Jane’s retention of her
chastity is represented not as a sign of her impregnable virtue but rather as
the outcome of an emotionally costly psychological struggle.

More radically, courtship plots in novels of formation may fail to
resolve themselves in marriage or any other form of unity. Writing about
the Victorian “failed-marriage plot,” Kelly Hager makes this point about
courtship plots more generally: “All English novels of the eighteenth and
nineteenth century do not, in fact, end with the marriage of hero and hero-
ine, and the domestic novel does not always establish closure and ask its
readers to believe that society has thus been stabilized” (12). In nineteenth-
century and early twentieth-century novels, such a failure often comes about as the result of a natural tragedy (the flood of The Mill on the Floss,
the shipwreck in Villette, the fever of The Voyage Out) that gives symbolic
form to the protagonist’s irresolvable conflict with social norms (particu-
larly gender norms) or her ambivalence about marriage itself. In narratives of female formation from the twentieth century and after, it is possible to imagine alternatives to marriage other than death: the narrative may suspend questions of courtship by attenuating its temporal moment, focusing, as in *Nervous Conditions*, on a preadolescent moment; deemphasize courtship in relation to other aspects of self-formation (intellectual in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*; political in *The Book of Not*; vocational in *Lucy*); or focus on non-normative (e.g., queer) forms of courtship not resolvable in marriage (as in *The Well of Loneliness* and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*).

This is not to deny, however, that nineteenth-century (and many Modernist) novels of formation are shaped by a powerful and widely disseminated ideology of sexual difference and complementarity. As Armstrong has claimed, “the gendering of human identity provided the metaphysical girders of modern culture—its reigning mythology” (14). One of the most profound results of this “mythology” for women and the novel of formation is that, as Fraiman points out, “The female protagonist’s progress, at least until the twentieth century, is generally contingent on avoiding the abyss of extramarital sexuality, on successfully preventing ‘things’ from happening to her. Her paradoxical task is to see the world while avoiding violation by the world’s gaze” (7). This is the “abyss” that Jane Eyre so dramatically avoids. But, as that novel suggests, the taboos on direct representation of women’s sexuality or desire, as well as the ideological confinement of women within domestic space, could produce as well as circumscribe narrative. Jane’s efforts to repress and avoid her desire for Rochester, for example, lead her to elaborate moments of self-assertion and provide an opportunity for the elaboration of other kinds of intimacies, such as her various relationships to the Riverses.

Nineteenth-century novelists themselves frequently reflected on the aptness of such psychologized female protagonists as subjects for modern narratives of formation. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot’s narrator invokes such a distinction between female interiority and male activity:

While Maggie’s life-struggles had lain almost entirely within her own soul, one shadowy army fighting another, and the slain shadows forever rising again, Tom was engaged in a dustier, noisier warfare, grappling with more substantial obstacles, and gaining more definite conquests. So it has been since the days of Hecuba, and of Hector, Tamer of horses; inside the gates, the women with streaming hair and uplifted hands offering prayers, watching the world’s combat from afar, filling their
long, empty days with memories and fears; outside, the men, in fierce struggle with things divine and human, quenching memory in the stronger light of purpose, losing the sense of dread and even of wounds in the hurrying ardor of action. (308–9)

The feminine action “inside the gates” moves inside the soul in Eliot’s novel, which can evoke the “shadowy army” of Maggie’s psychomachia with more detail than it musters for Tom’s “substantial obstacles.” By the time Henry James explicates his similar choice to center The Portrait of a Lady (1881) on something so apparently insubstantial as “a young woman affronting her destiny,” in order to “show what an ‘exciting’ inward life may do for the person leading it even while it remains perfectly normal” (10, 17), his labored defense is already belated. Not only Eliot, but also before her Richardson, Austen, Brontë, and Gaskell, and after her Hardy—to round up only some obvious suspects—had by the 1880s demonstrated thoroughly “how absolutely, how inordinately, the Isabel Archers, and even much smaller female fry, insist on mattering.” They not only embody an affective world of struggle and choice but also adumbrate its further evolution. In Hardy’s Tess of the D’Urbervilles (1887), it is Tess, the female protagonist, who experiences “feelings which might almost have been called those of the age—the ache of modernism” (124).

While gender norms may be more varied, less explicitly invoked, or more explicitly resisted in twentieth- and twenty-first-century novels of formation, self-formation continues to be represented in gendered terms—in relation to some norm of gender expression—even if other aspects of identity may also be important. In focusing my analysis within those terms, my aim is not to delineate a separate female tradition but rather to trace within the genre of the novel of formation one of the trajectories of identification that subtends it—a relay of reading and recasting that travels partly along a network of shared, deeply felt, but not exclusively defining gender identities. The novels I discuss themselves exhibit doubled or divided ends: the representation of shared features of women’s formation as subjects, on the one hand, and a conception of subjectivity as fundamentally individual, on the other. While they represent the individual’s formation, and obstacles to it, as specifically gendered, they also implicitly and explicitly insist that their female protagonists’ experience and emotions have a claim on the human universal. Gender identity is often, but not always, the most prominent aspect of self-construction and trajectory of identification represented in these narratives; other group-level aspects of identity, such as sexuality, race, class, or national belong-
ing may be equally or more important; the narratives may not address an exclusively or predominantly female readership; and they may draw to varying degrees on conventions of realism. Nevertheless, in their representations of the formation of female characters through relations of identification, in their invitations to readers to identify with those narratives through shared experiences and psychic structures of gender, and in the readerly and authorial identifications with other women’s narratives embedded within them, these novels reproduce, across almost two centuries, certain rhetorical strategies and challenges. Without denying difference and distinction, I hope to demonstrate the continued importance of the novel of formation to writing by women, and of identification to the novel of formation.

In unfolding these claims, I draw on more than thirty years of study of English narratives of female formation from the points of view first of feminist, lesbian, and ethnic studies and latterly of queer and postcolonial studies, beginning with such foundational works as The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Formation, edited by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland. Studies of such fictions from the 1970s and 1980s often emphasize the deviation of narratives of female formation from a human norm and fictional tradition identified as masculine, white, European—the norm still called to mind by the term “Bildungsroman.” For more recent critics, the contributions of several decades of feminist analysis, as well as the continued production of fictional narratives of female formation, have dislodged the authority of masculine narratives of formation sufficiently that they no longer provide a central reference point for the discussion of female development. Despite these differences, the work done by several generations of feminist critics has enabled me to take for granted in my own study that representations of female formation, ranging across literary-historical and national boundaries (e.g., among Victorian, Modern, and contemporary literatures, and among English, European, and postcolonial texts) and among works by canonical, emerging, and popular authors, present a broad and varied scope of inquiry in themselves, without needing to be set in relation to a presumptive masculine norm. My study is thus organized not by questions of gender difference but by a focus on the paths of transmission, through the identification of readers in a variety of circumstances with characters and authors. I highlight relations of identification in, and around, novels of formation by women, beginning with the nineteenth-century English novel and extending across its continental and colonial spheres of influence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, uncovering the shared narrative features of
a multivalent and multidirectional tradition through what I call “literary identification.”

By the term “literary identification” I mean to indicate an occurrence emerging from the encounter of the psyche of a reader and the rhetorical construction of a narrative by its author. “Identification” and its cousin “sympathy” have been used casually, often interchangeably or in tandem (as in common references to “sympathetic identification”), in twentieth-century literary criticism and theory to describe a reader’s involvement with the represented emotions of a fictional character, her willingness to animate a fictional character’s actions and relationships with her own affects. I intend my use of the term to be more focused, drawing (as detailed in the following chapter) on the model of subject formation proposed by Freud and later developed in different directions by twentieth-century schools of psychoanalytic thought and by many feminist and queer literary theorists. I use “literary identification” to indicate three ontologically distinct kinds of relations depending on the interaction of real and fictional female subjects: relationships between characters within novels; responses of readers to characters rhetorically invited by the text or actually recorded elsewhere (in other texts); relations between readers and authors sponsored or mediated by textual representations. My terminological expansiveness is intended to capture the intricate relations among readers, characters, and authors of the novel of formation, and the way in which these roles can be transferred through identification. None of these forms of literary identification fits the model of a Freudian “primary” identification, that is, an early, unconscious, and preverbal relation. These literary identifications are, in Freudian terms, “secondary” or “partial,” rhetorically constructed and accessible to consciousness, but, I contend, they can powerfully mimic, supplement, and shape the reader’s relations with real (non-textual) as well as fictive others.

The text is the arena in which these relations occur; the reader is the subject who identifies, whether with a textually represented character or with the figure of the author. In some cases, the reading subject may also be the object of representation, as in autodiegetic memoirs, such as Lynne Sharon Schwartz’s Ruined by Reading (discussed in the next chapter) or Beauvoir’s Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, or at moments within novels, as in the case of Maggie Tulliver’s reading in The Mill on the Floss (discussed in Chapter Two). In these cases, the force of the term “reader” is more or less unproblematically deictic: the reader is Schwartz or Beauvoir or Maggie. But difficulties arise in speaking more generally of, say, “the reader” of The Mill on the Floss, where the definite pronoun implies a
normative or paradigmatic figure. Where does the norm come from; who establishes the paradigm? If it is the critic, might she not be mistaking her own (particular) reading habits and responses to a text for those of the (abstract) figure of “the reader” of that text? She might turn to testimonials or studies of actual readers, as Janice Radway does with great subtlety in Reading the Romance, a pioneering ethnographic study of reading and identification in the particular genre of the romance. As Radway suggests, however, her study is ultimately an investigation of “the way romance reading as a form of behavior operated as a complex intervention in the ongoing social life of actual social subjects” (7)—that is, empirical readers and the way they interpret their activity of reading a particularly homogeneous genre. She observes of her interviewees, “Because the women always responded to my query about their reasons for reading with comments about the pleasures of the act itself rather than about their liking for the particulars of the romantic plot, I soon realized I would have to give up my obsession with textual features and narrative details if I wanted to understand their view of romance reading” (86). Is it possible to posit an abstract figure of “the reader” in the context of a more heterogeneous set of texts, distributed more broadly in space and time, while maintaining a critical orientation toward the rhetorical features of text itself?

Reader-response theory and some strains of narratology have attempted to hypothesize such abstractable readers who can be posited as the subjects of an act of reading not only in default of but even in distinction from embodied, socially located readers. The most relevant set of such terms for my purposes are those that posit readers in the first instance as rhetorical effects of the text; examples include the “implied reader” the “mock reader,” and the “narratee.” Like the “reasonable person” of legal discourse, these fictional subjects attain their analytic purity at the expense of social, physical, or psychological specificity. They pose difficulties for analyses interested in situated or transactional accounts of reading—ones in which readers are particular subjects located within particular cultural, political, or affective situations. On the one hand, there is no necessary correspondence between even the most painstaking critical construction or textual projection of a reader and the situation or experience of any actual reader. As James Phelan points out, “As anyone who has followed the reader-response movement even in passing must already recognize . . . different readers bring different subjectivities to texts and therefore sometimes have different experiences of the same textual phenomena” (231). On the other hand, there must always be at least one actual reader present to recognize the textual address to or construction of the reader—that is,
the critic. Forming a data set of one, the critic will always run the risk of oversampling his or her own competencies and responses in hypothesizing those of a model reader. This limitation may have political and ethical consequences, since particularly situated critics might read into, or out of, the text the impact of subjective differences, such as those of gender. Patrocinio Schweickart, for example, observes, “It is but a small step from the thesis that the reader is an active producer of meaning to the recognition that there are many different kinds of readers, and that women—because of their numbers if nothing else—constitute an essential class. Reader-response critics cannot take refuge in the objectivity of the text, or even in the idea that a gender-neutral criticism is possible” (38). Even the “essential class” of women readers is itself not indivisible, and the figure of “the woman reader” runs the same risks of totalization as the figure of “the reader” itself.

To conceptualize “the reader” abstractly, in other words, can often be tendentious rather than illuminating. And yet, as Phelan goes on to point out, “to celebrate difference and argue for the incommensurability of different accounts of the reading experience . . . though it has the advantage of validating different responses, has the significant disadvantage of endorsing a prison-house of subjectivity” (231), making it difficult to generate any hypotheses or speculations about reader response. If concepts such as “the implied reader” risk reducing the reader to an epiphenomenon of the text, affective, identity-based, or political approaches risk subordinating the text to the experiences of individual readers or classes of readers.9 To navigate between the rock of overgeneralization and the hard place of overspecification, Phelan proposes an account of the reader as a unique subject but one addressed and positioned in particular ways by generalizable rhetorical performances of a given text. To describe this reader, he turns to the concept of the “authorial audience” posited by Peter Rabinowitz, on which I shall also draw.

Rabinowitz’s tripartite construction of the reader begins with the “actual audience”—the “flesh-and-blood people who read the book.” As Rabinowitz points out, this is the audience over whom the author has the least “control,” since “each member of the actual audience . . . reads in his or her own way, with a distance from other readers depending upon such variables as class, gender, race, personality, training, culture and historical situation” (20–21).10 This fluctuating, asymptotic “actual audience” is functionally replaced, in Rabinowitz’s paradigm, by the “authorial audience.” The authorial audience is “some more or less specific hypothetical audience” (21; emphasis in original) constituted by its recognition and
“acceptance of the author’s invitation to read in a particular socially consti-
tuted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers” (22). This “invitation” can be facilitated by the presence within the nar-
ra-tive by a third, separate but overlapping, set of readers that Rabinowitz calls “the narrative audience” (95)—another hypothetical audience, for whom a novel’s data are not fictional but “real.” In The Mill on the Floss, for example, the “authorial audience” shares Eliot’s familiarity with the plots and cultural status of Madame de Staël’s novel Corinne and Sir Wal-
ter Scott’s novel Ivanhoe, as well as Maggie Tulliver’s familiarity with the con-
ven-tional fates of literary heroines (and probably corresponds quite well with a sizable contemporary “actual audience”). The “narrative audi-
ence” knows these things and additionally “knows,” along with Maggie Tulliver, that her ontological status (as a “real” person) differs from that of Corinne or Ivanhoe’s Rebecca (as fictional characters). (I discuss this example further in Chapter Two.) The acceptance of this distinction by the narrative audience encourages the authorial audience to accept it as well.

Rabinowitz’s model enables him to navigate between overspecification of the reader (Phelan’s “prison-house of subjectivity”) and underspecification (for example, what Schweickart identifies as the “pretense of gender-neutral criticism”). Relatedly, the model’s transactional nature—according to which relations between readerly interpretations and authorial inten-
tions, as embodied in texts, are mediated by a shared context of literary conventions—keeps simultaneously in view the text, the reader, and the social situation of both. Rabinowitz’s actual/authorial/narrative distinc-
tion locates the reading transaction across the three levels that are key to my own analysis: within the text, where the narrative audience, as I will argue, often models the kinds of reading the reader should do (or avoid); within the reader, who is the object of the text’s invitation to read in a par-
ticular way, and who has the power to accept or reject that invitation (and sometimes to testify, in her own acts of authorship, about her acceptance or rejection); and within the author, conceived of less as a biographical subject than as an ethical or aesthetic intention behind the arrangement of the text—the sender of its invitation, the other party to the transac-
tion. In what follows, when I speak of “the reader,” I will most frequently have in view a version of Rabinowitz’s “authorial audience.” I have also taken the liberty of adapting Rabinowitz’s “narrative audience” to my purposes. Like Rabinowitz’s, my narrative reader is located within the text and instantiates its epistemological assumptions, but she does so literally by being a reader. That is, the “narrative reader” in my analysis will refer to those characters in the text who model the act of reading for the autho-
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I also choose to speak of the “reader” rather than the audience, since part of the invitation of a novel of formation is to make the autho-
rial reader feel addressed more individually and intimately than the word “audience,” with its collective and theatrical implications, suggests.

In fact, the term “identification” calls to mind a particular unit of inti-
macy—the pair. As their titles—“Coming Together,” “Coming Apart,”
and “Coming Out”—suggest, each of the three main sections of this book is partly structured by intimate intersubjective encounters among pairs. The first, introductory, chapter outlines the way in which these intimate
encounters are constructed and analyzed within some strands of psycho-
analytic theory. In settings ranging from provincial Victorian England to
pre–World War II Paris to late-colonial Rhodesia, the three narratives of
the second chapter, “Coming Together,” dramatize questions about the
ethical relations between self and other through the psychological oscilla-
tions of identification and disavowal between women with close ties and
shared ambitions. In the third chapter, “Coming Apart,” the protagonists
share, also across different temporal, geographical, and political circum-
cstances (nineteenth-century Europe, the twentieth-century United States,
and post-independence Zimbabwe), the trauma of not being recognized as
subjects, but rather mobilized as representations of abject otherness, a dis-
torted mirror image, by more fortunately situated other women. And the
fourth chapter, “Coming Out,” considers three twentieth-century novels
of formation that both invite and deflect relationships of queer identifica-
tion among characters and between readers and authors.

The pair in a different sense—the textual pair—has become a promi-
nent feature of literature syllabi and scholarly analysis over the last several
decades, encouraged by critical and literary developments. Postmodern
writers and critics have found in the revision of canonical works of litera-
ture a method of revelation and critique, often giving voice to previously
obscured subjects—for example, Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea (1966),
whose revision of Jane Eyre quickly became part of the feminist peda-
gogical canon; J. M. Coetzee’s Foe (1986), which revisits Robinson Cru-
soe; Peter Carey’s Jack Maggs (1997), which recasts Great Expectations;
Michael Cunningham’s homage to Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Dalloway in
The Hours (1998). Julie Sanders suggests that “in the late twentieth cen-
tury, as the postmodernist movement developed its own interest in meta-
fiction and writing which acknowledged its sources in a more explicit and
deconstructive mode than previously, the Victorian era offered a diverse
range of genres and methodologies to examine and appropriate” (122).
Such revisions, as theorists of adaptation suggest, offer intrinsic textual
pleasures—“the tension between the familiar and the new, and the recognition both of similarity and difference, between ourselves and between texts” (J. Sanders 14)—that, because they provide their own context, may be more easily conveyed in the classroom than certain kinds of literary history or critical methodology. Further, students often want to read contemporary literature, even as English departments continue to value knowledge of canonical texts. Pairing classic texts and contemporary adaptations answers the wishes of both groups.

From a critical perspective, however, the very familiarity of the pair, its aptness for relations of comparison and contrast, can limit its interpretive effects. The high-relief of comparison and contrast can, certainly, be revelatory. The juxtaposition of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* in Gayatri Spivak’s seminal essay “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” for example, makes vivid the dependence of Jane’s subjectivity, as a British proto-feminist proto-citizen, on Bertha Mason’s complementary disintegration, as the “native” female unworthy of human inclusion. As Julie Sanders observes, “The study of appropriations in an academic context has in part been spurred on by the recognized ability of adaptation to respond or write back to an informing original from a new or revised political and cultural position. . . . Many appropriations have a joint political and literary investment in giving voice to those characters or subject-positions they perceive to have been oppressed or repressed in the original” (98). But such comparisons can also enshrine hierarchical relations between texts. Juxtapositions of earlier exclusions and later voicings of textual “others” (Brontë’s Bertha Mason, Defoe’s Friday, Dickens’s Magwich) can easily shift from analysis of prior textual and ideological assumptions to disdain for their apparent inability to see what is clear to present-day readers. It is perhaps to work against such a smug teleology that Spivak, having drawn a sharp contrast between Brontë’s and Rhys’s representations of Bertha Mason/Antoinette Cosway, triangulates her reading, closing with a third novel, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). *Frankenstein* has a less directly intertextual relation to either of the other novels than they do to each other, but in Spivak’s analysis it is the antecedent author, Shelley, who provides the most suggestive critique of the liberal-imperial project of “soul-making.”

Against the potential Manichaeanism of the pair then, my study is also structured by the figure of the trio. Dyadic interactions between characters are counterposed with triangulated relationships among authors, characters, and readers; likewise each chapter analyzes intertextual relationships among not a pair but a triad of texts. These triadic groupings, I hope,
will disrupt hierarchies that might array texts according to relationships of priority and belatedness, origin and imitation, error and correction. The relationships among texts, as I will emphasize, are not unidirectional or even reversible (as a paired model cannot help suggesting) but rather multidirectional and sometimes indirect. Though the overall arc of the study moves from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, the texts are grouped together on the basis of their intertextual relations rather than by literary historical periods (which also are three: Victorian, Modern, postmodern). I hope this syncopated chronology makes visible the novel of formation's own struggle with a logic of chronological unfolding: the projection of a version of a future self enabled or impeded by identification with a version of a past self. I also wish to emphasize the extent to which struggles over the role, effect, and limits of identification—among characters, between reader and character, between reader and author—are not new developments (i.e., of Modernist reflexivity or postmodern metafictional practice) but have marked the novel of formation from early in its career. Relationships of identification in the novel of formation, both of characters within novels and of readers with their characters and authors, have always been vexed. Protagonists who struggle with their existential debts to characters who embody developmental alternatives; narratives that indict the social inequities shaping psychological opportunities; authors ambivalent about the readerly identification they encourage—these effects of the novel of formation recur across centuries and in new contexts.

In the sense that literary identification has something to do with the way that the novel of formation as a genre reproduces itself, the final triangulation of this study might be that of my phrase, "literary identification," with two more familiar terms: "influence" and "intertextuality." What analytic or categorical shifts does my new term enable? In essence, I have attempted to steer a middle course between strongly author-centered, psychoanalytic accounts of authorial influence (such as those of Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's feminist revisions of Bloom's model in *The Madwoman in the Attic* and *No Man's Land*) and author-decentering, postructuralist accounts focused on intertextual relations, such as those of Roland Barthes ("The Death of the Author"), Julia Kristeva (*Desire in Language*), and Gérard Genette (*Palimpsests*). The concept of the author—and not just of the author, but of selves in general, including characters within the work—seems inevitably central to the novel of formation. Regardless of the actual or apparent degree of overlap between events in the author's life and those in the
protagonist’s, the biographical structure of a novel of formation emphasizes the significance of singular authorship to the life story. Readers of novels of formation may project beyond the text an author who becomes an object of identification; and authors may return the projection. Yet these relations between biographical authors and “actual” readers, whether instantiated (e.g. in letters or meetings) or not, do not supersede relations of readers to characters, or of texts to their precursors. Rather, all these vectors of intimacy, on different ontological planes, compose the web of readerly and intertextual relays whose effects I hope to capture under the heading of “literary identification.”