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Empire Girls: White Female Protagonists, the *Bildungsroman* and Challenges to Narrative

Mandy Dyson

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Abstract

The *Bildungsroman* was the dominant literary form of the nineteenth century, and in its English manifestation encapsulated a particular set of values about the individual and society. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the novel was undergoing considerable upheaval with regard to form, subject matter and narrative outcomes. The three women writers whose works I examine all approach the *Bildungsroman* from a particular perspective which is deeply informed by both their colonial origins and their gender. I argue that the impact of this perspective results in distinctive versions of the genre which challenge some of its underlying values.

Olive Schreiner, Sara Jeannette Duncan and Henry Handel Richardson all function in a space which is peculiar to the white woman writer, a space which finds them both outside and within the areas occupied by the dominant discourses of their time. Their position of ambivalence in relation to these discourses means that while they partly endorse the dominant imperialist and patriarchal ideologies of their day, they also challenge and subvert them. This results in versions of the *Bildungsroman* in which the form is forced into new directions and, in the case of Schreiner, virtually rejected. The heroines of these narratives embody much of this ambivalence. Ultimately, the role of the *Bildungsroman* hero is found to be at odds with that of literary heroine. The happy compromise between individual and society which had characterised the denouement of the traditional *Bildungsroman* is not possible when the

protagonist is a female with longings normally associated with the male hero. I examine the way in which these texts interrogate the institutions which enable the British Empire to function, set as they are on a farm, in a boarding school, and in the metropolitan and artistic centre, London.

These narratives, affected as they are by the gender of their protagonists and writers and also by the colonial origins of their authors, contribute to the great changes which occur in the novel in English during this period. They also enlighten us with regard to the way in which two oppressive systems, patriarchy and imperialism, are imbricated in producing the societies from which these fictions have sprung.