

EXPANDING THE *BILDUNGSROMAN* GENRE: VARIATION IN
CONTEMPORARY YOUTH NARRATIVES

By

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(Under the direction of Dr. Christy Desmet)

ABSTRACT

This study describes ongoing debates over the *Bildungsroman* genre, then analyzes the ways that three contemporary authors--Bill Watterson, author of the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, Steve Kluger, author of *The Last Days of Summer* and *C.D.* Payne, author of *Youth In Revolt: The Journals of Nick Twisp*--expand the *Bildungsroman* tradition and envision a new type of precocious youth narrative. These authors' narratives suggest a departure from the traditional *Bildungsroman* narrative, in which protagonists begin at a place of naiveté, go out into the world passing through varied experiences, and finally come to an understanding about the world and their place in it. Instead, Watterson, Kluger, and Payne create precocious youth protagonists who already possess the knowledge and understanding they would traditionally have to go out into the world to acquire.

INDEX WORDS: *Bildungsroman*, youth narrative, *Calvin and Hobbes*, Bill Watterson, *The Last Days of Summer*, Steve Kluger, *Youth In Revolt*, Nick Twisp, *C.D.* Payne, precocious, exile, revolt.

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DEDICATION

To Jamie, Hannah, Spencer, and Lydia--four of my favorite real-life youth protagonists.

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CHAPTER ONE:
THE *BILDUNGSROMAN* DEBATE

Debates over whether certain novels do or do not fall into the *Bildungsroman* genre "rage" even now, 200 years after what is typically considered the "prototype" of the *Bildungsroman* was written. As a term, "*Bildungsroman*" has such influence that it is difficult *not* to continue arguing for the inclusion of certain novels, and yet it becomes increasingly complex to do so, as fewer and fewer novels fit into historic definitions of the term. The *Bildungsroman*, a particularly difficult genre to pin down, has traditionally designated the maturation process of young boys through adolescence, culminating with the achievement of self-identity. The traditional *Bildungsroman* is considered to have originated in the eighteenth-century, with Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* [Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship]¹, and the German term "*Bildungsroman*" has come to signify a "novel of formation." In his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, literary critic M. H. Abrams states that the *Bildungsroman* illustrates:

the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences- and often through a spiritual crisis- into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world.²

Despite Abrams's ability to define the standard elements of the genre, most critics have difficulty agreeing on more specific details, such as the extent to which American novels are able to fit within traditional German definitions of *Bildung*. In his book *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, author James Hardin addresses this German concept of *Bildung*. Hardin cites scholar Wulf Koepke, who explains that the term

Bildung resists translation into English, but in an eighteenth-century context can be generally defined as a "verbal noun meaning 'formation,' transferring the formation of external features to the features of the personality as a whole."³ *Bildung* also connotes "the cultural and spiritual values of a specific people and social stratum in a given historical epoch and by extension the achievement of learning about that same body of knowledge and acceptance of the value system it implies."⁴ Most American novels that are said to fall within the *Bildungsroman* genre do not embody this latter definition of *Bildung*, however, because the acceptance of a particular value system is not so integral to a more contemporary, American coming-of-age process. Therefore, despite what purist critics argue, James Hardin suggests that "it may not be logically defensible to define the *Bildungsroman* as a novel embodying the ideals of *Bildung* presumably extant in the age of German Classicism."⁵

This type of debate leaves critics undecided about how carefully prescribed the genre should remain. In other words, do we only accept as *Bildungsromane* those novels that fit within the parameters of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*? Must we look to the defining characteristics of the few German novels that followed *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* to decide what constitutes the *Bildungsroman*? These questions put the *Bildungsroman* issue on shaky ground, and critic Marc Redfield, author of *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman*, goes so far as to suggest that

as soon as one takes a serious look at the notion of the *Bildungsroman*, it begins to unfold such extravagant aesthetic promises that few if any novels can be said to achieve the right to be so defined--possibly not even the five or six German-language novels that, in post-war German studies, have constantly been put forward as this genre's main (and not infrequently its only) representatives.⁶

Redfield is not the only contemporary scholar who suggests that the *Bildungsroman* is a phantom genre. Critic Hartmut Steinecke describes that

after critical works on the *Bildungsroman* had swollen for decades in an almost inflationary manner, voices have been heard since the 1960s that express doubt as to how appropriate this concept of the genre might be and how much insight it provides into the literary-historical context of that genre.⁷

Steinecke goes on to explain that even German scholars who specifically examine nineteenth-century German novels have begun to object the idea of a true *Bildungsroman* genre, and German scholar Friedrich Sengle refers to a "literary-historical mythology" surrounding the genre.⁸

The genre's ambiguous characteristics have given rise to questions about its relevance to twentieth-century literature and criticism, and increasing numbers of critics inquire whether the "*Bildungsroman*" designation is "effective as a descriptive technical term."⁹ The query is, then, if critics are only to accept the most circumscribed or limiting definitions of the term, is there use for the term in connection to contemporary literature? Critic Susan Gohlman claims that

it is the nature of the *Bildungsroman* to become 'dated' because it is based on the idea that nothing in the external world remains constant. The particular *Bildungsprozess*¹⁰ that was right for *Wilhelm [Meister]* would not and could not be right for the individual growing up twenty, fifty or a hundred years later. The hero of the *Bildungsroman* is at all times representative; he is never universal.¹¹

If what Gohlman argues is true, should we allow for some expansion of the genre, and include novels whose protagonists do not necessarily follow the same "path" as the genre originally described?

Part of the problem with establishing a working definition of the genre is the fluctuations and forced limitations it has had to endure. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* was less restricted by a set of prescribed morals and values existing within his society than were latter *Bildungsroman* heroes. The protagonists in books such as *Der Grüne Heinrich*, *Nachsommer*, and other German novels, for example, were more restricted because "the Lebensraum [literally, living space] in which they develop has absolute boundaries which have the effect of defining [their protagonists'] lives within the confines of a closed society."¹² Thus, as the genre aged it became *less* commonplace for heroes to develop intellectually, emotionally, and socially in a more open society.¹³ The parameters of the genre therefore became increasingly tight, narrowing the group of novels that could be said to follow the *Bildungsroman* tradition. For Susan Gohlman, the relevance of the genre hinges on this issue. She asserts that the "[differences of opinion] regarding the *Bildungsroman's* scope and function revolve around the basic question of whether or not the *Bildungsroman* must, by definition, be informed by a set of absolute social and moral values which serve as the ground work of the hero's development."¹⁴ While some critics argue "yes" to this question, Gohlman asserts that, "if we say that it must than [critic Gerd] Gaiser¹⁵ is right and indeed the *Bildungsroman* is an outmoded genre."¹⁶ As Gohlman puts forth, the genre only maintains the privilege of existing in the twentieth-century if novels in which the hero develops in a more "open" society are included.¹⁷ This seems to be the case at least in contemporary American literature, where adolescent protagonists mature in much less prescribed environments than do their German counterparts. In American literature, "absolute social and moral values" no longer serve as the foundation for contemporary protagonists' development.

Critics generally suggest two primary alternatives when discussing the *Bildungsroman* debate. One school of criticism still maintains that the genre be upheld to

strict historic standards, meaning that the term should still refer to the traditional German concepts of *Bildung*, and what it originally "implied in the early German models of the genre."¹⁸ These critics suggest abandoning the term as a classification for contemporary literature. In this instance, critics would leave the term "*Bildungsroman*" to those authors (presumably a handful of eighteenth-century German authors) whose novels they believe uphold the tradition. Though this resolution might seem judicious given the complex history of the genre and the degree to which critics disagree, this solution does raise some problems. One potential problem with abandoning the term and leaving the genre behind is that authors writing about youth protagonists in the twentieth-century would not benefit from having their novels included in a genre that has historically been granted much critical respect. The term "*Bildungsroman*" would essentially be off limits as a classification for most of contemporary literature. Additionally, contemporary authors' novels would not have the advantage of working from an historical framework. Their novels would essentially lose their history-- the progression of literature that has made room for the creation of contemporary youth protagonists. Even worse, contemporary literature would not be canonized as *Bildungsromane*, eliminating modern novels from the accomplishment of canonization in such a significant genre. Authors whose books are acknowledged for successfully working within such a genre earn critical validation, and contemporary authors may consequently suffer from a complete resignation of the genre. For these reasons, it seems hasty to exclude contemporary novelists from a genre so revered as the *Bildungsroman* simply because critics can not adequately define the genre or because some critics believe only those novels that epitomize its German definitions should be accepted into the genre.

To allow the genre to expand to include novels that begin to depart from historic traditions seems the better of the two most plausible remedies for the *Bildungsroman*

confusion. As times have changed, the development of twentieth-century protagonists has changed, and authors writing coming-of-age stories at the end of the twentieth-century are unquestionably working from the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* genre, despite reasonable incongruities between classical and contemporary protagonists. Because modern protagonists are different from their predecessors and stories of their adolescence are changing, twentieth-century literature already calls for an expansion of the *Bildungsroman* genre. As our society continues to evolve, the nature of adolescence and the coming-of-age process will undoubtedly endure, at the very least, subtle changes. Modern protagonists, and particularly modern *American* protagonists, will resemble their German forerunners less and less, given the dramatic differences between eighteenth-century Germany and twentieth-century America. Cultural changes have brought about evolutions in the maturation process of adolescents, and the characteristics of some modern youth protagonists have evolved to reflect differences in twentieth-century values. This should not exclude *their* stories from a place within the genre, however. The genre should not be so limiting that no room exists for youth protagonists who assume their predecessors' roles. Inevitably, twentieth-century youths' worlds will be different from *Wilhelm Meister's* world and youth protagonists will reflect these differences. The *Bildungsroman* genre should tell their stories too.

Not only has the nature of contemporary youth protagonists changed, but the youth narrative has seen some changes as well. The stories that some contemporary authors are formulating about youth protagonists have begun to differ in content and style from the narrative that the classic *Bildungsroman* chronicled. Goethe and later German authors wrote their novels at a time when *the narrative* that was told about youth relayed the protagonist's coming-of-age journey toward maturity and into manhood. Coming-of-age played such a pivotal role in men's lives that the process was explored and illustrated

in literature, creating what eventually becomes the master youth narrative that the *Bildungsroman* depicts. Contemporary fluctuations in this master narrative, however, have created new niches in the genre. Whereas the primary concern of the traditional *Bildungsroman* was the protagonist's journey towards enlightenment and maturity, one new niche in contemporary youth narratives depicts protagonists who have *already* gained understanding of their place in the world and understanding of the way the world works. In this way, these protagonists are much more precocious than traditional renderings of the *Bildungsroman* protagonist. While *Wilhelm Meister* had to go *into* the world to come of age and complete his *Bildungsprozess*, some newer portrayals of modern youths depict their protagonists as enlightened from the very beginning of the novels. This trend can be illustrated with an analysis of three contemporary youth protagonists: Calvin from Bill Watterson's comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, Joey Margolis in Steve Kluger's *The Last Days of Summer*, and Nick Twisp in C.D. Payne's novel *Youth In Revolt: The Journals of Nick Twisp*. Before I continue, however, it is important to note that though each of these works depict youth protagonists--and are certainly appropriate for young or adolescent readers--these works are largely intended for an adult audience. For example, though *Calvin and Hobbes* undoubtedly interests and appeals to young readers as well as adults, a great deal of the strip's themes explore issues too complex for most young readers to comprehend. Similarly, *Youth In Revolt* and *The Last Days of Summer* often rely on a more mature understanding of humor and irony, and both novels address sexual themes that rarely find their way into youth-oriented literature.

Calvin and Hobbes, *The Last Days of Summer*, and *Youth In Revolt* diverge stylistically from the traditional *Bildungsroman* narrative as well, which further demonstrates modifications within the genre. As a comic strip, *Calvin and Hobbes* is the farthest of the three from the third-person narrative structure that marked the original

Bildungsromane, and the strip's immense popularity in newspaper syndication has meant that readers have learned more and more about Calvin's life daily, instead of all at once in novel form. *The Last Days of Summer*, on the other hand, is an innovative mix of letters, newspaper clippings, transcripts from conversations with Joey's psychiatrist, postcards, report cards, telegrams, and even matchbook covers. Every page of the novel is in one of these forms, and though *The Last Days of Summer* resembles traditional epistolary novels, the uniqueness of this particular format makes Kluger's narrative structure a riskier, more contemporary endeavor. Of the three, *Youth In Revolt: The Journals Of Nick Twisp* follows the most conventional narrative structure, though as a contemporary embodiment of the "diary novel" it too verges from the traditional third-person narrative structure of the *Bildungsroman*. These enterprising variations on the principal narrative structure of the *Bildungsroman* go hand-in-hand with the changing nature of contemporary youth protagonists. Joey's steady letters to the novel's other characters and subsequent transcripts of his conversation with his psychiatrist reveal the extent of his precociousness because they are in his own voice. Likewise, the narrative viewpoints in both *Calvin and Hobbes* and in *Youth In Revolt* remain with Calvin and Nick respectively, highlighting their precocity even more distinctly. These stylistic differences give immediacy to these protagonists' narratives because their stories are told predominantly from their viewpoints, instead of through the descriptive filter of a third-person narrator.

Their incredible precociousness is not the only characteristic these three protagonists have in common. Because all three are preternaturally self-possessed and have such well-developed understanding of their worlds, they are predominantly ostracized by their families and their communities. In a sense, these authors describe not a process of coming-of-age, not the achievement of education and acculturation, but

instead a process in which characters are exiled within their own independence. Exiled, they are social outcasts whose position as outsiders heightens the clarity with which they view and comprehend the world, and this clarity leads them into revolt: against society, against their families, and often both. Hence, coming-of-age as a narrative is not the story Bill Watterson, Steve Kluger, and C.D. Payne are choosing to tell about youth. Instead, they create youth protagonists who already possess the knowledge and understanding they would traditionally have to go out into the world to acquire. In so doing, these novelists offer protagonists with the wit and wisdom of adults, but without adult obligations and responsibilities to tether them. This gives the protagonists the ability and the freedom to criticize their worlds and the resourcefulness to stage forms of revolt.

CHAPTER TWO: PRECOCIOUS PROTAGONISTS

Calvin, Joey, and Nick are not only precocious in contrast to their literary predecessors; against a backdrop of their fellow characters, their precocity is equally as striking. In these novels, the individual is exceptional because few characters possess the protagonist's degree of understanding and insight into the world. While the traditional *Bildungsroman* did privilege its protagonist by focusing on his travails and experiences greeting the waiting world, it did not necessarily confer upon him such intellectual superiority over his fellow characters. In contrast, these three contemporary heroes stand out as individuals apart from the herd of other youths, both in their novels and in comparison with other youth heroes.

Before my discussion of the details and significance of these three characters' precociousness gets underway, let me add one caveat. Whatever limited conclusions critics arrive at concerning what elements a novel needs to be interpreted as a *Bildungsroman*, Bill Watterson's comic strip character Calvin of *Calvin and Hobbes* would not, on the surface, appear to comply with even the most accepted components of the genre: after all, Calvin is six-years-old. Because the comic strip never ventures beyond Calvin's sixth year, Watterson does not focus on coming-of-age as a process, and instead seems more interested in depicting Calvin's precocity and the effects of his clever high-jinks instead of exploring what happens to Calvin as he grows and matures. The comic strip never pauses to imagine what will come of Calvin as he ages from six to seven and into his adolescent years. If the *Bildungsroman*, at least primarily, focuses on the passage through adolescence into the beginnings of adulthood and describes the

protagonist's growing understanding of his place in his world, then it seems implausible to suggest that a six-year-old could have any place in the evolution of the genre. In fact, suggesting that Calvin and his comic strip fit into the newest explorations of the genre appears to place too much strain on a genre whose classification is already critically murky. The nature of the novel, on the other hand, does allow for the possibility that Joey and Nick might still undergo a process we would traditionally characterize as "coming-of-age," yet the fact that both characters begin with premature understanding implies that, as in *Calvin and Hobbes*, the process itself is not the most significant narrative to relay about these youths. Although the *Bildungsroman* has created the space for these youth narratives by virtue of the genre's popularity (despite its nebulous characteristics), the focus of these three works is not on coming-of-age as a process. The focus in these three works is rather the extraordinary precocity of these protagonists and the exhilarating ways they interact with their worlds. Therefore, although Calvin's story may not fit within the traditional parameters of the *Bildungsroman* genre, closer analysis of his character illustrates the advantages of regarding Calvin as a modern youth protagonist despite his young age.

Calvin may be 6-years-old, but he is as far from the typical six-year-old as possible, despite the averageness of his middle-class, suburban, nuclear family. Because of the wide readership newspaper comic strips enjoy, most Americans are familiar with Calvin and his best friend Hobbes, a stuffed tiger. The premise of the comic strip revolves around Calvin's active imagination: most of the panels in any given *Calvin and Hobbes* strip are illustrated from Calvin's vantage point, where Hobbes is not a stuffed animal but is simply real. Calvin exists outside the boundaries of six-year-old reality on many other levels as well, which is why, in spite of his diminutive age, he is remarkably comparable to the other two adolescent protagonists this study addresses. The

similarities that these three share are the most compelling argument for Calvin's inclusion in a discussion about a new pattern or sub-genre of youth narrative, despite the fact that a superficial consideration of Calvin's age would seem to disqualify him from any sort of *Bildungsroman* discussion. Like Joey and Nick, Calvin possesses an uncanny precociousness that makes him charming, funny, and sarcastic. Clearly, as contemporary authors, Watterson, Kluger, and Payne are finding new ways to depict youth protagonists, and a six-year-old boy wonder whose intellectual curiosity guides most of his adventures is exactly one manifestation of the ways that new youth protagonists can be embodied. Like Nick and Joey, Calvin's story isn't one that follows his progression from youthful naiveté into a wise adulthood. These three characters begin at a place of precocious understanding and their stories illuminate *not* what it is like to go out into the world to gain understanding, but instead, what it is like to be young and precipitately aware of the way their worlds work. They are able to point out society's flaws, and their premature perspicacity leaves them rebelling against social conformists whose narrow-mindedness unfortunately constructs their realities. Calvin, Joey, and Nick's hyper-awareness of society's failure gives them the voice and desire to critique society.

Perhaps the first characteristic that marks the precociousness of each of these three protagonists is their remarkable vocabularies. Terms like "predestination" and "neo-cubism" roll off Calvin's tongue, alerting readers that Calvin is not your average kid. When eleven-year-old Joey visits a psychiatrist for the first time and is asked to explain what he sees in a Rorschach blot his psychiatrist shows him, he isn't fooled, and answers "a Rorschach blot."¹⁹ Few, if any eleven-year-olds know such jargon, yet both Calvin and Joey are familiar with concepts that ordinary youngsters have likely never heard of, and they are comfortable articulating even the most complex ideas in extraordinary fashion. Of the three, Nick Twisp is the most articulate protagonist. His

vocabulary would outshine the vocabulary of the most erudite of adults, and in fact, his verbal effusion is one of the foremost reasons why Book I of *Youth In Revolt* was initially rejected for publication. Upon reading the beginning of *Youth In Revolt*, literary agent Scott Meredith insisted,

Nick is a chillingly bright kid and we understand that but even conceding this the voice is just too mature, sophisticated and contrived for a fourteen year old, and this utterly diminishes the real credibility of the work.²⁰

By the time I had the opportunity to read this criticism of Payne's novel, I had already read and immensely enjoyed *Youth in Revolt*. What struck me about Meredith's judgment--that Nick Twisp, as a protagonist, was simply too articulate and too clever to be realistic as a character--was that I'd had the opposite reaction while reading the novel. Though I was aware that Nick's inordinately mature voice would not likely come out of the mouth of a teenager, this is precisely what makes Nick so compelling. The paradox of a pimply, sex-craving virgin whose "smart mouth" not only gets him into a lot of trouble but also rattles off astute criticisms of his world is beguiling.

In his rejection letter, publisher Scott Meredith includes a few snippets from *Youth In Revolt* that he feels represent Nick's implausible lexicon. The first excerpt that Meredith cites comes in an early paragraph on the first page of *Youth In Revolt*. Nick explains:

I am 14 years old (nearly) and live in Oakland, a large torpid city across the bay from San Francisco. I am writing this in the tenuous privacy of my bedroom on my annoyingly obsolete AT clone.²¹

Apparently Meredith feels words like "torpid" and "tenuous" have no place in the vocabulary of a fourteen-year-old. Nick is not the only youth protagonist whose vocabulary and mature voice suggest wisdom beyond his years, however. Calvin and

Joey are almost as enchantingly articulate, suggesting that Watterson, Kluger, and Payne are willing to envision youth protagonists who surprise us with their verbal and intellectual acuity, despite risking their protagonists' credibility. These authors reconfigure traditional conceptions of youth, bestowing on their young protagonists the worldliness and intellectualism normally reserved for adults.

Scott Meredith could have chosen almost any of the paragraphs in *Youth In Revolt* to illustrate Nick's improbable lexicon. For example, when Nick goes on his first date with Sheeni Saunders, his love interest throughout the novel, his ensuing description of Sheeni in his journal offers an even better demonstration of his command of the language:

Sheeni answered the door in a knockout yellow swimsuit that concealed yet paradoxically revealed her flowering nubility. She was so breathtakingly lovely, the pleasure I felt in gazing upon her jonquil-draped curves bordered upon physical anguish. Sheeni invited me in and introduced her father-- an immense, outsized, larger-than-life, gray-haired, florid faced, verdant-eye-browed, loud-voiced ogre in a rumpled blue suit.²²

Nick's outlandish displays of intellectual brilliance, like the one above, are no accident, despite the fact that C. D. Payne runs the risk raising readers' objections to Nick's striking astuteness. Nick's "chillingly bright" voice and his extravagant intelligence are purposefully fashioned to make him stand out from his teenage peers. By authoring a protagonist who is so exceedingly smart, C. D. Payne creates a teenage hero with the keen ability to renounce the status quo. But these protagonists' impressive vocabularies are almost incidental to their overall precociousness. The sophistication of their speech becomes the means to an end by which they address mature issues. In fact, all three of

these characters use their verbal dexterity to shed light on the shortcomings existing within their societies. Their prominent vocabularies signify their incisive thinking, and readers can hardly distrust their views of the world. Were these three not so clearly adroit, their reproach of society would not be nearly so convincing.

Nick, for example, is intensely proud of his verbal prowess, and uses it intermittently to dazzle and intimidate the novel's other characters. Nick uses his flashy language to convince Sheeni that they are intellectual soulmates, and his rhetoric outshines that of all other rivals for her affections. Nick gets almost more satisfaction, however, from using his verbal skills as a weapon against the novel's more simpleminded characters. He has no tolerance for ignorance, and will use his verbal arsenal to mock or chastise anyone who is less enlightened than he is, though the novel's other characters rarely realize they are being mocked. Nick's favorite target is his moronic neighbor Dwayne, who constantly pesters and aggravates him. Nick and Dwayne represent two divergent ends on the spectrum of teen intelligence, and Nick rarely hesitates to point out Dwayne's ineptitude. When Dwayne tells Nick that he thinks Vijay, a fellow Indian student, "should go back where he come [*sic*] from. Like all the rest of them for'ners. They take all our jobs and steal all our wimmen!" Nick thinks, "I could understand the source of Dwayne's prejudice. Clearly he face[s] a lifetime of scrabbling for dates and unemployment at the bottom of the pile [...]"²³ Of course Dwayne is not astute enough to anticipate this fate, but Nick shows a keen understanding of the way Dwayne's uninformed mind works, and a clear perception of what becomes of ignorant people. Though Nick's haughtiness occasionally gets the best of him, his criticisms are usually right on the mark, whether he is turning his attention to other characters' inadequacies or to more pervasive defects in his society.

Nick is frustrated with the mediocrity that surrounds him, and he is fed up with suburbia's numbing impact on its residents. He wants more out of his parents and more from his public school education. On Monday, October 1, Nick writes:

Today I experienced my second day of second-rate public school education.[...] Again, I encountered the same odorous corridors teeming with bored, disinterested scholars; the same bedraggled ranks of discouraged, harassed teachers; the same officious administrators; the same scrupulously inoffensive textbooks; the same pervasive sense of a relentless institutional retreat from reality [...] By lunchtime, Redwood High School had made it perfectly clear it proposes to waste the next four years of my life. Furthermore, through a perfidious combination of ennui, rote repetition, peer pressure, reactionary doctrine, intellectual dishonesty, and school spirit, it intends to extinguish the curiosity of my mind and the independence of my thought. But at least it will be accomplishing these tasks on a pleasant, tree-studded campus surrounded by acres of manicured lawn.²⁴

Few high schoolers display such a cogent awareness of the shortcomings of their education and even fewer would devote so much energy to criticizing the weaknesses of public school. But Nick wants to be challenged and wants to be even more enlightened than he already is. His school systems, however, are stuck with lazy and indifferent attitudes toward education, and Nick's disgust with a world that nobody else questions is echoed throughout the novel. Nick's ability to articulate and philosophize about society's failings allows him to criticize his world profoundly.

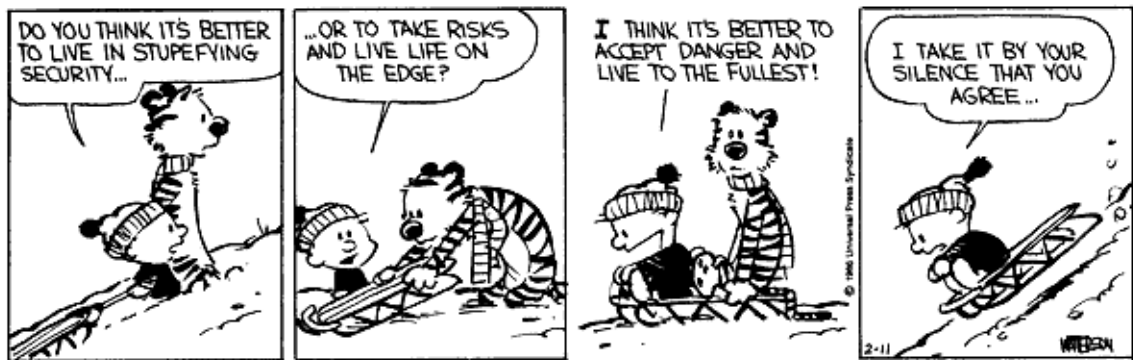
Though Calvin is faced with typical childhood obstacles--bedtimes, dinners he hates, an aversion to girls, bullies, and rainy camping trips with his overzealous father

and his grumpy mother--he is also wonderfully philosophical. Many of the *Calvin and Hobbes* storylines feature Calvin romping through the woods with Hobbes, discussing such complexities as destiny, reincarnation, life on other planets, and the fate of the world. Strip creator Bill Watterson named Calvin after John Calvin, the sixteenth-century theologian who believed in predestination, and Hobbes is named after Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth-century philosopher with a "dim view of human nature."²⁵ Watterson admits that the characters were inspired in part by these two historical figures, and their philosophical discussions reflect this fact. As in the strip below, Calvin frequently questions Hobbes about predestination:



The woods that run behind Calvin's house serve as a backdrop for his philosophical ruminations, and he spends many of his days either hiking through the woods or traversing them in his wagon. Calvin moves fluidly from pondering the secret to happiness, to criticizing defects in the distribution of the world's resources, to questioning Hobbes about whether he thinks morality is defined by our actions or by what's in our hearts. Watterson does not suggest that Calvin is a genius, however. Calvin is so bad at arithmetic, for example, that he calls on Hobbes to help him with his homework and they foul up even the simplest addition problems. Calvin does poorly in

school, which sets up a dichotomy between his two sides: one, the resourceful schemer-philosopher-social critic and the other, a regular six-year-old underachiever. Yet few six-year-olds can toss questions like "are your maladjusted antisocial tendencies the product of your berserk pituitary gland?" to the school bully.²⁶ Calvin moves freely back and forth between his wild youthful side and his more philosophical, critical side because the two are inextricably linked. His youthful energy informs his more adult-like enthusiasm for exploring truths about human nature. Bill Watterson admits he uses Calvin as an "outlet for [his own] immaturity, as a way to keep [himself] curious about the natural world, as a way to ridicule [his] own obsessions, and as a way to comment on human nature."²⁷ Interspersed between bouts of throwing snowballs and fighting imaginary dinosaurs, Calvin illuminates society's foibles and raises the complex questions that provoke us as adults:



By posing the above question, Calvin encourages readers to rethink the complacency in their lives, and demonstrates an understanding of life's more perplexing binaries.

That Bill Watterson portrays Calvin with so much intelligence accounts for at least part of the grown-up intrigue with *Calvin and Hobbes*. Calvin's critiques of human nature reflect questions we still debate and discuss. When Calvin asks Hobbes, "Hobbes

do you think human nature is good or evil? ...I mean do you think people are basically good with a few bad tendencies, or basically bad with a few good tendencies...?" he poses the kind of philosophical question that drives us as adults.²⁸ The reason Calvin's queries resonate with adult readers is that they come from someone so young. Calvin's six-year-old innocence is disarming, and when he moves so effortlessly from tree climbing to cogitating on toxic waste, he reminds us to not get so wrapped up in our daily lives that we stop asking ourselves the important questions.

According to Bill Watterson, many of Calvin's struggles are metaphors for his own struggles. He believes that "most [people] get old without growing up, and that inside of every adult (sometimes not very far inside) is a bratty kid who wants everything his own way."²⁹ Clearly, Watterson sees some plasticity between child and adult roles, and plays with that flexibility. Inside the bratty kid that Watterson has created is an adult, and the adult in Calvin is ready to take on the world:



Above, Calvin challenges his father by asking yet another question his father is ill-equipped to answer. Calvin comes up with precocious questions his parents aren't prepared to answer so often that he eventually quips, "I take it there's no qualifying exam to be a Dad."³⁰ Bill Watterson has said that while he would not want to *live* with a six-year-old like Calvin, "on paper, he helps me sort through my life and understand it."³¹ In

effect, *Calvin and Hobbes* does this for its readers, too. As a six-year-old, Calvin has the freedom adults do not have to romp in the woods and act out the role of philosopher. He elucidates the questions and issues we would think about more if we had the time, and he does so sarcastically and hilariously.

Like Calvin, Joey sets himself apart from the ranks of average youngsters with his incredible grasp of the problems with the world. His journal entry for April 9, 1940 reads:

I have decided to turn to a life of crime. My dad was supposed to take me to Coney Island but he never called back, my left eye is black and blue again, the Japanese say they're only borrowing Nanking temporarily but nobody believes them, and Hitler is beginning to scare the holy heck out of me.³²

Though Joey is only eleven when *The Last Days of Summer* begins, he has reason to be conscious of the power of politics and dogmatism. Both threaten his safety as a young Jewish boy growing up in Brooklyn during World War II. Joey faces more adversity than an eleven-year-old should endure--a selfish, reneging father and steady assaults from bigoted bullies--yet he still manages to knock the socks off every character in the novel. Author Steve Kluger presents Joey as a bright star at a disturbing time in American and world history. Despite the fact that he lives in a precarious world marked by prejudice, Joey's brazenness charms almost everybody he meets, including a slew of national figures. Throughout the novel, Joey has an ongoing correspondence about war strategy with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Administration, which Joey apparently initiated as early as nine-years-old, two years before the novel begins. Joey's fearless interplay not only with the President's Press Secretary, but later with the President himself, is a

testament to Joey's precocious chutzpa. The first letter to Joey from the President's Press Secretary reads:

Dear Joseph,

President Roosevelt has asked me to respond to your most recent letter, and to assure you that he, too, is keeping an eye on Denmark. No doubt you will understand that it is far too premature to consider arming the Royal Air Force as you suggest, although your reminders relative to the *Lusitania* are sobering indeed. In any event, I am sure the President will pass your recommendations on to Neville Chamberlain at his earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Stephen T. Early

Press Secretary³³

Clearly, a twelve-year-old with an open line of communication to the White House is more than extraordinary, and this is one element that makes Joey so outstanding as a modern protagonist. As in the case of Calvin and Nick, Joey's cleverness and pluck are disproportionate to his young age, but are integral to his charm. Joey's precociousness keeps him always one step ahead of the President's war strategists, for example, and each time he writes the President to warn him of impending adversity in the United States' war efforts, he receives a letter like the one above. What makes Joey's advice so remarkable is that each time this happens it isn't long before Joey's suspicions are confirmed: readers learn via front-page newspaper clippings that Joey accurately anticipates every attack.

The crux of *The Last Days of Summer* is Joey's precocious friendship with Charlie Banks, third baseman for the New York Giants. As the novel begins, all that Joey knows is that his father's second marriage leaves him too busy to participate in

Joey's life and that, as the only Jewish kid in a predominantly Italian part of Brooklyn, he's the punching bag for the neighborhood. He needs an idol, or at the very least a father-figure. In order to get the neighborhood bullies to leave him alone, Joey starts a campaign to get newcomer Major League baseball phenomenon Charlie Banks to hit a home run in his honor. Joey's letters to the ballplayer include gigantic lie after gigantic lie in an effort to win Charlie's sympathy. For example, Joey writes,

Dear Mr. Banks, I am a 12 year old boy and I am blind. This is a terrible thing. But I was not always blind [...] then one day my eyes started to fill up with mucus and the sunshine went away forever. [...] Mr. Banks it would do me a lot of good if you would hit one out for me the way Iron Horse [Lou Gehrig] did that other time.³⁴

Joey is convinced that the only way to get the bullies to stop attacking him is to have Charlie hit a home run just for him. But how many eleven-year-olds (even in the 1940s) would be imaginative enough to decide that the best way to stop bullies is to write a professional baseball player and ask him to hit a homerun in his honor? Joey's tactics are incredibly clever, yet at first Charlie refuses to respond to Joey's letters, so Joey must heighten the drama to get Charlie's attention:

Dear Mr. Banks, I am a 12 year old boy and have just enlisted as a drummer in the marine corpse [*sic*] [...] I am writing because me and the other boys are shoving out for Montazuma and Tripoli and other places where fighting is already fearce [*sic*], and we are not expected to come back alive [...] Anyway last night we were in our bunks wondering how many more sunsets we would get to see when all of a sudden the Sarge said, "Gee, wouldn't it be great if Charlie Banks could hit but one more before we go off to lay down our life? [...]"³⁵

Joey's ability to add such flourishes of detail, like those above that demonstrate his knowledge of the fighting at Montazuma and Tripoli, and his understanding of pre-war fears make his letters seem like far more than average adolescent playacting. Part of Joey's charm as a youth protagonist is his astonishing creativity. Joey's story is entertaining, but it is also illuminating. He shows us what it's like to be young and Jewish in Brooklyn during World War II, and what it's like to be so mindful of a war that is prejudiced against him that he anticipates Hitler's every move. Through his eyes we are also shown what it's like to be so painfully conscious of a father's failings that he seeks out the attention of a gruff, bachelor- rookie-baseball player with twenty-something bravado to fill the void.

Joey finally touches a nerve with Charlie and Charlie's ensuing letter is the beginning of a shaky correspondence that grows into a luminous friendship. Charlie writes,

Now look you little pisser. You write one more letter like that last one and you're going to *wish* you had an incurable disease. Because if there's a war-- and there better not be as long as that dime store New Dealer keeps his damn nose where it belongs-- there's going to be a lot of guys scared to death who figure that if they're lucky, maybe they get to come back with all their parts. That's if they come back at all. So you just think about that before you pick up another pencil, you understand?

If was your old man I would take a hair brush to your butt and fix it so you would not be able to sit down again until you were old enough to vote.³⁶

As reluctant as Charlie is to reward Joey's determined harassment, even his steely resolve cannot last. By the time Joey's dad refuses to participate in Joey's Bar Mitzvah,

responding to Joey's Rabbi's letter with a painfully brief, "My wife and I expect to be out of the country from Labor Day through early November. However we will be with you in spirit," Joey and Charlie have become loyal friends.³⁷ Joey takes it upon himself to get his new best friend Charlie to fill in for his emotionally absent father, which turns out to be no easy task. Charlie is not Jewish, doesn't speak a word of Hebrew, and is also the aforementioned 'gruff, bachelor- rookie-baseball player with twenty-something bravado.' Not only is Joey up against these odds, but he also has to find a way to convince his Rabbi to let a Gentile perform the weekly rehearsals and ceremony with him. For someone with Joey's charisma, however, this is no problem. Joey's ensuing letter campaign to both men works, although Joey has to make up the fact that Charlie wants to convert to get his Rabbi to agree. Joey takes advantage of his ingenuity and precociousness to win Charlie over because he is smart enough to know that he needs a father figure. Joey is emotionally astute and although he is only eleven, he acts as though his feelings are informed by a psychology degree. In an early letter to Charlie, Joey writes,

Dear Mr. Banks,

[...] Know what I wish? I wish that I played third base for the New York Giants and your last name was Margolis and that you lived in Flatbush next door to the Hitler Youth. Then we'd see how fast you'd be writing to *me*. Only I'd have my secretary send you a greeting card or some such that said "Many Happy Returns" even if yours said "Help." Maybe you think I'm just some knucklehead, but I don't have enough time in my life to worry about Bierman and Delvecci and The Third Reich and neither would you.³⁸

Unlike most eleven-year-olds, Joey always seems to know why he feels or behaves the way he does, which makes his conversations with his psychiatrist very interesting:

Q: Joey, do you think maybe you got into trouble so you'd get caught and they'd call your father?

A: You mean negative attention?

Q: Uh-- yes.

A: Wouldn't work. Even the police couldn't get him to come over .³⁹

Conversations like this one with his psychiatrist are common, and Joey is as adept at understanding his motivations as his psychiatrist is, despite the fact that he has only just started visiting the psychiatrist at the beginning of the novel. Joey's comprehension of psychiatric terms and concepts is especially rare because the novel takes place during the 1940s, and Joey has not grown up in a society where television dramatizes psychoanalysis and provides instant access to pop-psychology. Nevertheless, Joey is always one step ahead of where you'd expect him to be, and Joey never looks back.

The most significant elements of Calvin's, Joey's, and Nick's precociousness are the characteristics that I have laid out thus far: they are brilliant, articulate, and attuned to society's flaws, and they start out this way instead of following the traditional path of enlightenment that leads them into maturity. As the oldest of these three characters, Nick is precocious in a way that Calvin and Joey are not, however, because their six and twelve years keep them largely removed from sexual themes. In this regard, Nick differs from twentieth-century versions of the youth protagonist as well. In addition to being intellectually precocious, Nick is also sexually precocious. Because he is fourteen going on twenty, Nick is in the throes of raging puberty. He is unselfconscious in the expression of his carnal proclivities, and before he reaches the end of the first page of *Youth In Revolt*, Nick has confessed his obsession with sex. Unlike the embarrassed

contemplations of most teenagers, however, Nick's journal entries are surprisingly candid and eloquent about his sexual longings:

When I close my eyes, ranks of creamy thighs slowly part like some X-rated Busby Berkeley extravaganza. Lately I have become morbidly aware of my penis. Once a remote region accessed indifferently for businesslike micturition, it has developed-- seemingly overnight-- into a gaudy Las Vegas of the body, complete with pulsing neon, star-studded floor shows, exotic animal acts, and throngs of drunken conventioners perpetually on the prowl for depraved thrills.⁴⁰

Accounts like this demonstrate Nick's strikingly awareness of his burgeoning sexuality, and throughout the novel he is on a quest to re-unite with Sheeni Saunders ("The Women Who Owns The Pawn Ticket to [his] Soul") and to lose his virginity.⁴¹ Though many teenagers in the late twentieth-century experience sexual intimacy and desire at increasingly early ages, this level of frankness regarding teen sexuality still remains predominantly absent in literature. *Youth In Revolt* addresses Nick's yearning to lose his virginity more explicitly than most other coming-of-age novels, and C. D. Payne portrays Nick's sexual ventures more unabashedly than do other contemporary authors. Instead of ignoring those elements of his life, Payne shows Nick reveling in his developing hormones.

No less than fifty times does Nick mention having a "thunderous erection," and though most teens titter such embarrassing bodily functions, Nick rarely blushes at his body's 'hair-trigger erectile response'. On the surface, this might give Nick's personality an element of the improbable. Reading about Nick's sexual capers in diary form, it sometimes seems unlikely that any teen would put onto paper descriptions of masturbating with his best friend, but Nick regales us with his enterprises without

hesitation, for example when he writes, "Lefty dropped by and we wanked off to my *Penthouse* collection. He has marked all his favorite spreads (so to speak) [...] After wiping up he informed me his sister found his addendum to her diary and is now on the warpath."⁴² Nick is comfortable with his sexuality and is never embarrassed by his sexual urges. In fact, Nick's overt sexuality plays a fundamental role in the novel, making the novel part lively sex farce, which heightens our understanding of Nick's precociousness.

Nick's repeated attempts to shed the "burden" of his sexuality motivate many of his precocious stunts, including a late night rendezvous with the mother of one of his friends:

The door opened and Fuzzy's mother, wearing Dad's electric blanket, entered in a clatter of dangling cords and control dials.

"Mrs. DeFalco!" I exclaimed.

"Hello, Nick," she said, smelling of expensive perfume and cheap liquor.

"Oh, I'm stuck honey. Help me with my cords."⁴³

If the scene above can be believed, a careful consideration of the novel's explorations of sexuality suggests that Payne's unflinching inclusion of such events renders Nick's character even more realistic. Historically few youth protagonists have been given *such* license to explore their sexual urges within the pages of literature, despite the fact that sexual experimentation is clearly a component of most contemporary adolescents' lives. The sexual arena is just one more of the areas that youth narratives are having to expand from their conventional parameters. Traditionally, a protagonist's goal after reaching maturity was to marry and raise a family, but this is happening at increasingly later ages in the late twentieth-century, giving contemporary youth protagonists the room to explore their sexuality more freely.

Calvin's, Joey's, and Nick's precocity sets them apart from their peers and their cleverness and ingenuity keep us turning pages. What we eventually see as we follow their stories is that this precocity is not always as beneficial as it would appear to be; for these protagonists, being precocious has notable side effects.

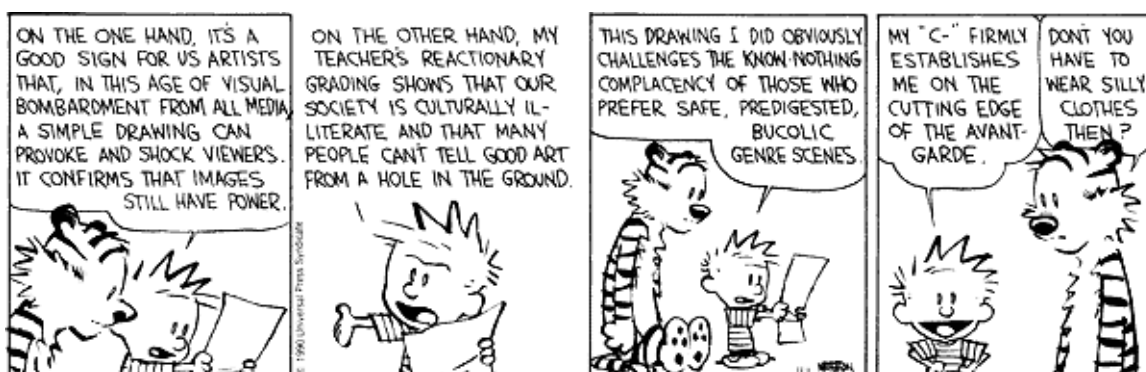
CHAPTER THREE:

YOUTH IN EXILE

Though their cleverness makes these three protagonists' stories incredibly engaging to read, their precocity does not come without a price. Both Calvin and Joey are socially ostracized by their peers. Nick's smart brains and crazy antics get him into so much trouble that he is forced to go into hiding. In essence, these three are exiled by their own precociousness. Their shining vocabularies and their creative imaginations distance them from other characters in their stories, including their parents. Though it is common for youngsters who are different from their peers to be ostracized, it seems unusual that two of these three characters also remain surprisingly isolated from their parents, and are generally left to fend for themselves. Their parents mostly ignore Calvin and Nick, and Joey is the only one taken seriously in an adult world. It is as though these protagonists have become so inordinately precocious because they are so isolated.

Calvin, as the youngest of the protagonists, should stand out the most when he contemplates subjects such as morality, aesthetics, and destiny, yet his parents rarely seem to notice Calvin's philosophical ruminations. Often Calvin will approach his parents to ask a clever question--a question you would never expect a six-year-old to devise--and even then, his parents remain blasé over his displays of intelligence. What they constantly seem to focus on, instead, is Calvin's misbehavior. Calvin's parents are understandably frustrated by his constant high-jinks, and many of the strips Watterson writes depict their frustration. He does not portray the side of them that would realistically be amazed and perhaps even proud of Calvin's precocity, however. Bill Watterson certainly does this on purpose; if Calvin's parents accept his attacks on toxic

waste dumping without blinking, readers are encouraged to do the same. Watterson is clearly willing to stretch the line between fantasy and reality, and this is just one more of those instances in which Watterson wants to take readers along for the ride. Calvin's parents and even his teacher, Miss Wormwood, however, are less willing to be enchanted by Calvin's ruminations than readers are, and Calvin's creative imagination and his intellectualism remain invalid according to the adults in his world:



Calvin is forever being reprimanded or penalized for his creativity like Mrs. Wormwood does to his drawing, above. The adults in Calvin's life seem determined to suppress his inventiveness and his intellectualism and instead want him to conform to their understanding of what is appropriate for a six-year-old. Thus, Calvin's social world is generally solitary, peppered only by occasional hostile interactions with his next door neighbor Susie and Moe, the school bully. Calvin never attempts to fit in with any of his fellow students, which leaves him free to contemplate the universe in solitude with Hobbes.

Nick, too, is essentially abandoned by both of his self-centered parents and left to fend for himself, which is why his voice is the voice of reason in *Youth In Revolt*. There are no sage advice-givers here, with the possible exception of Sheeni's hippie brother

Paul, who spends too much time using psychedelic drugs to be much of a role model for Nick. Nick has no respect for either of his parents because they are utter failures as human beings. Nick's mother is emotionally needy and self-absorbed, and will sacrifice Nick for the sake of a boyfriend. The men Nick's mother brings home act as aggressive rivals for his mother's affections, and, not that she cares, they are also completely unsuitable father figures. Nick's father, on the other hand, is a greedy, alcoholic, womanizer. When Nick decides to try to move in with his dad to be closer to Sheeni, his love, his phone call is met with a resounding lack of warmth:

"Hi, Dad this is Nick," I said trying to chisel some ersatz affection into my voice.

"Nick, I got a truck here costing me \$39.50 an hour. What do you want?"

"Uh, I hear you and Lacey are moving to Ukiah," I said brightly.

"We're certainly trying to," he said peevishly. [..]

"Well did Lacey talk to you about my staying with you awhile?"

"Gee I don't know," said Dad. "That's a big responsibility. [..]"

"I don't want any swishy characters hanging around."

"I'm not gay, Dad."

"Since when?" he asked, surprised.

"Since always." I considered mentioning Sheeni, but feared the mention of another female might trigger his competitive instincts.

"Well," sighed Dad, "I guess we could do it on a trial basis. But don't bring too much of your stuff-- in case it doesn't work out. [..]"

"Great! Dad, you won't regret this."

"I doubt that," he said. "I regret it already."⁴⁴

Nick's father does not provide any sort of emotional support for Nick, and is barely willing to fulfill his parental duties. Because Nick is thoroughly aware of what a raw deal he has gotten in the parent department, he avoids his parents as much as possible. Instead of wasting his time trying to make his mom pay more attention to him than to her miserable boyfriends or trying to get his Dad to show up for one of their state-mandated visits, Nick devotes that time to describing and criticizing their failings in his journal. Nick's parents frustrate him to such a degree that he seeks his own exile and uses his journal as a retreat from the injustice in his life.

When Nick gets his father's tentative approval to move with him to Ukiah, Nick decides for the hundredth time that his dad is a "prize winning asshole." What he soon realizes is that his mother will prove, yet again, to be just as selfish. Nick figures his mother will be glad to get rid of him, but when he tries to tell her the good news, she responds with a nasty "Oh yeah? Well you can just forget that idea, Buster [...] I'm not going through this alone. You're going to help me."⁴⁵ Nick is baffled until she sends him upstairs to a room she has been keeping locked. Nick's narrates the following scene in his journal:

Distressed, alarmed, puzzled, Nick races upstairs, unlocks door, stares into room in horror. Pink walls, frilly curtains, framed scenes of bunnies and lambs, toys scattered about, big crib in center. Only one conclusion is possible: Joanie IS PREGNANT BY A MARRIED MAN! Oh, the shame! The inconvenience!⁴⁶

Nick races down the stairs to find out when his sister Joanie is having her baby, only to have his mom shout with her usual impatience, "Don't be stupid [...] Joanie's not pregnant. She's been on the pill since she was 12." Nick is appalled as he realizes his careless and irresponsible mother has accidentally gotten pregnant. Right after Nick

realizes this he has his "second jolting realization: PROBABLE FATHER IS JERRY, LATE KING OF THE MORONS."⁴⁷ Not only is the baby's (already married) father dead from a sudden heart attack two weeks earlier, but Nick's mother has already moved on to a new lover. Nick recognizes that his mother only wants him around now to be, in Nick's words, "PUTATIVE HOUSEKEEPER, AU PAIR, AND GENERAL BABY-CARE SLAVE." Again, Nick has to face the reality that neither of his parents is capable of providing him with a nurturing and stable home life. Worse is the fact that both parents ignore and neglect him until they need him for their own selfish purposes. Nick's inability to rely on either of his parents drives him further into a self-protective state of exile.

Joey's mother and his aunt are far more compassionate and responsible as caretakers than are either of Nick's parents. Despite this, they invariably leave Joey to his own devices. Though their behavior could not be characterized as neglectful, Joey's mother and aunt have a decidedly laissez-faire approach to parenting. Joey's dad, on the other hand, is just as bad as Nick's parents are. He has divorced Joey's mom and disappoints Joey every chance he gets. Whenever Joey needs his father, the response is the same, whether it comes from his father's secretary or his new wife: "I'm sorry honey but he's all booked up. [...] He's sleeping, dear. Call him in October, dear. We're going to Monte Carlo, dear."⁴⁸ Once, Joey's father even abandons Joey at the top of a broken Ferris wheel while he and his wife leave the amusement park for dinner with friends. Later, Joey tells Charlie that "the only thing I could see when they got into their limousine was Nana Bert's fingernails. But my Dad gave the ferris wheel guy \$20 for me to take a cab home in case I ever got down again. Instead I bought dirty postcards and took the subway."⁴⁹ Joey is painfully aware of how unsuitable his father's behavior is,

yet clearly, his father never realizes how devastating his actions have the potential to be to Joey.

Calvin's, Joey's, and Nick's treatment at the hands of their parents mirrors the way these protagonists are treated in the outside world, which creates their exile. In essence, no one knows what to make of their precocity, and instead of having their ingenuity celebrated, they are ostracized and punished for their uniqueness. As in the cases of Calvin and Nick, most people do not know how to handle Joey's roguishness and the mischief that is common from a precocious adolescent. Though Joey gets A's in all his school subjects on his semester reports, his Obedience grade goes from a D to an F to "not applicable" over the course of the novel. His teacher sends home long letters reproaching Joey for the mischief he creates:

Teacher' Comments:

Either Joseph has too much free time on his hands or he is deliberately attempting to undermine the entire infrastructure of World Literature.

Thanks to his debatable oratory, my entire class now regards Stephen Crane, Sir Walter Scott, William Shakespeare, Samuel Clemens, Jane

Austen and the Brontë sisters as Communists, racists, anti-Semites, and--

worst of all-- rock-heads.⁵⁰

Instead of being pleased that Joey sparks intellectual debate in her classroom, his teacher, Mrs. Hicks, would rather Joey keep his non-conformist ideas to himself. At the end of one of Joey's semester reports, she offers this advice to Joey's mother: "Joseph has a mind of his own--but he will need to learn that he cannot expect to amount to much unless he does what he is told."⁵¹ Almost all of the adults in these three works seem to share her opinion, which explains these protagonists' independence and isolation: they have seen what the adult world has to offer and they use all of their smarts to avoid

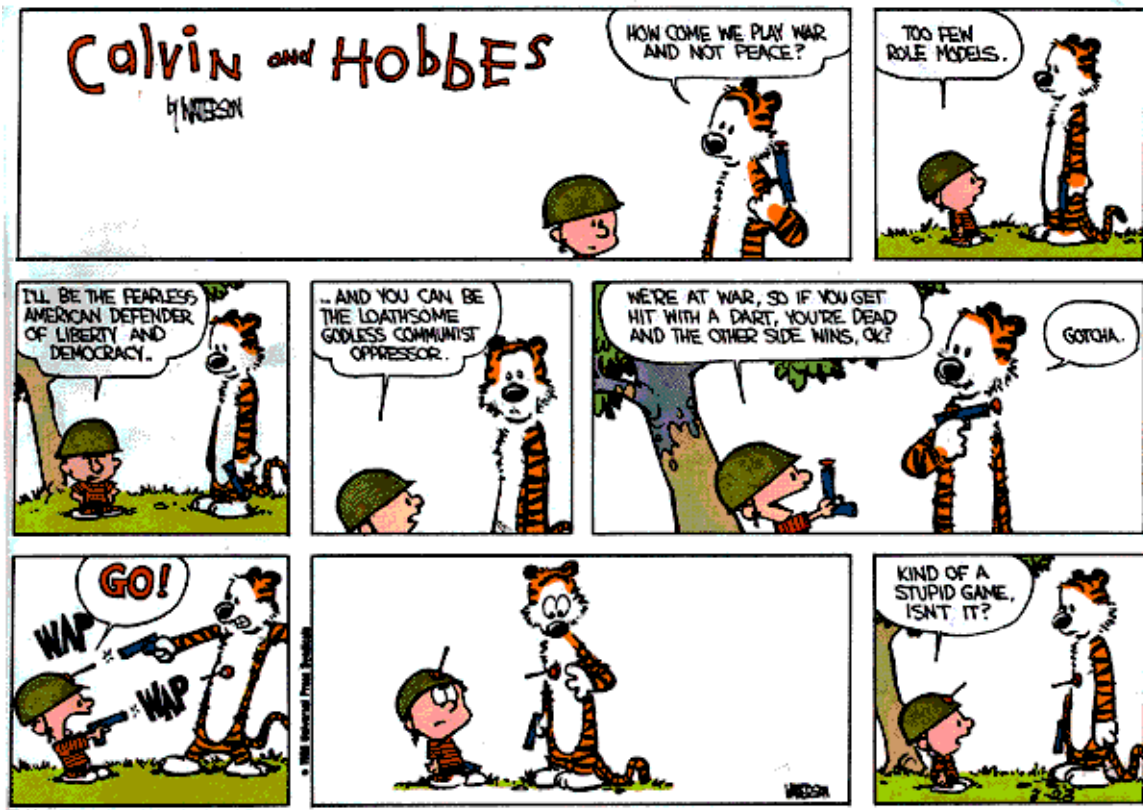
falling into such complacency. Calvin explores his philosophical queries and ruminates on aesthetics while his parents go about their ordinary lives. Joey is a league ahead of his grown-up counterparts when it comes to his ingenuity and resourcefulness, and spends his time offering sound war advice to the White House, and when Joey's not doing that he charms the pants off the country touring around as the New York Giants bat boy. Nick records his parents' ineptitude, his schools' deficiencies, and society's apathy all in his journal for posterity.

Life on the periphery of the status quo gives Calvin, Joey, and Nick the clarity to see through the thin veneer that masks society's flaws. Despite Nick's terrible genes, for example, he has turned into an intellectual rebel who spends the novel tongue-lashing idiocy and hypocrisy. His society has let him down, and he thrives on articulating its failings. Nick talks circles around everyone in *Youth In Revolt* except Sheeni, all the while regaling us with scathing opinions of the mediocrity in his world, as in his stinging condemnation of the drudgery of work:

After school, I shuffled up the dusty stairs of doom and entered the World of Work. Only 10 minutes later I could feel brain cells starting to wither and die. Why are all the jobs offered to youths so cripplingly boring? You'd think the gods of capitalism would give us interesting jobs. Then, when we're safely shackled into the system with marriages and mortgages, they could turn the tedium up full blast. Nope, we're immediately abandoned, naked and defenseless, on the icy tundra of ennui--and paid peanuts for our suffering to boot.⁵²

Tirades such as the one above are common for Nick; he rarely resists the opportunity to offer biting commentary about the monotony others embrace.

Calvin's reflective musings also encourage us to question the sometimes-dubious value system we've been conditioned to ignore, as in his subtle criticism of war, below:



Calvin often points out the inherent senselessness in concepts we take for granted. Here, the fact that both he and Hobbes wind up "dead" after defeating each other highlights one of the problems with war--people die and often nobody wins.

These protagonists have the intellectual resources to vocalize the problems they see in society and they are capable of causing a ruckus that draws attention to unpleasant situations. Joey, for example, never misses an opportunity to speak up about the injustice he observes. He hates people who believe Hitler's rhetoric, hates that people throw bricks through his best friend's window just because Craig is Japanese, and hates that Craig has to move to Santa Monica because bullies break his nose and his collarbone.

Joey is especially angry when Craig and his family are forced to give up all their belongings and move to a Japanese concentration camp. What makes Joey so remarkable is that he finds a way to do something about most of the injustice he witnesses. He actually succeeds in befriending Charlie, a *New York Giant*, and gets Charlie to make the neighborhood boys stop beating him up. He gets Charlie to stand up for him at his Bar Mitzvah when his father lets him down. He changes the topic of an essay contest from "If My Father Were President" to "If Charlie Banks Were President" because he has such a lousy father and can't stand the idea of writing a paper glorifying his dad. Joey wins the contest, gets to meet President and Eleanor Roosevelt, and shows everybody what a fabulous father figure Charlie is-- so fabulous that Charlie wins the title of "Father of the Year." The most remarkable part is that Joey does all of this before he turns fourteen. Despite the fact that Joey is a target for abuse because he is Jewish and is stood up repeatedly by his worthless father, he refuses to accept his fate, and instead tries to create change, even if he has to do so from a position of relative isolation.

Their precociousness leads all three of these protagonists into exile. Calvin's precocity alienates him from other kids his age and drives him to spend most of his time in imaginative conversations with his stuffed tiger. Joey cannot help the fact that he is the only Jewish kid in a neighborhood comprised of ignorant bullies. His social life only gradually expands from a solitary world of writing letters to the President and to the Major League's most famous rookie into actualized friendships. Though Nick has a small group of friends, his parents utterly disregard him. As exiles, and particularly as youths in exile, these three are in a position to scrutinize their societies from a unique perspective. Bill Watterson, Steve Kluger, and C.D. Payne give these youths the wisdom to critique society and the articulate voices to do just that. Though these characters might reflect their authors' opinions more than they reflect the thoughts of the average six,

twelve, and fourteen-year-old, what these youngsters have to say is almost more effective coming from their young mouths. Instead of offering older protagonists whose criticisms of the world get lost in the realms of adult grumbling, these authors startle us with adult viewpoints emanating from adolescent mouths, and when this happens we take notice. We are impressed by a six-year-old with a better perspective on the world than we have as mature adults, as Calvin demonstrates below:



And we believe that Joey, as a twelve-year-old with VIP contacts, can identify his next door neighbor with the wooden leg as a German spy, then turn out to be right. Nick's caustic commentary on suburbia rings true because he is so clearly intelligent: we are willing to listen to the insights these characters offer because their opinions are worthy and informed.

One final consequence of these heroes' precociousness is their penchant for getting into a great deal of trouble, however. Troublemaking and staging revolt are ways for these three to reject the adult worlds they find lacking. Obviously, their varying ages have some effect on their ability to rebel successfully. As teenagers, Joey and Nick have more freedom to maneuver than Calvin, but even Calvin's ability to fight the powers that be (his parents, his teacher, and in some instances, his principal) is quite impressive.

CHAPTER FOUR: YOUTH IN REVOLT

While the mischief that Calvin, Joey, and Nick get into may seem like average adolescent mischief, their antics are much grander and more inventive than you would expect, even out of unruly teenagers. They each spend *a lot* of time in trouble. Readers might question a six-year-old's ability to stage open revolt, but Calvin uses his ingenuity to hoodwink the babysitter, to escape his daily baths (in one "episode" Calvin is shown flushing himself in the toilet instead of enduring his bath), and to get out of doing his homework. Calvin's cleverness gives him the upper hand in the majority of his interactions with his parents, and his actions usually leave his mother and father fluctuating between exasperation and bewilderment, as in the strip below where Calvin creates his own picket line to protest his parents' rules:



Calvin's ability to challenge his parents is unprecedented, and because he is much more quick-witted than either of them, he is usually out the front door with a handful of illicit cookies before his mom even suspects something is amiss.

Joey's precociousness gets him into just as much trouble. As *The Last Days of Summer* begins, Joey is being held at a Brooklyn Juvenile Detention Center for peeing in a reservoir, which he did just to get his dad's attention. While he's there, Joey "claims to be suffering from a variety of ailments that mandate his immediate release [. . . including] appendicitis, heart attack, diphtheria, polio, and gonorrhoea."⁵³ To get out of doing something he doesn't want to do, Joey will come up with the most inventive tricks and tales. Joey is willing to adopt any persona to manipulate Charlie into doing what he wants. When Charlie enlists in the war, Joey does everything he can to convince Charlie not to go, including impersonating his junior high school principal in a letter he drafts to Charlie. Joey writes,

Dear Charles:

I write at this time to express my deep concern for Joseph's well being. I have been a school principal for 25 years and I have never seen a student in such terrible shape. He has lost at least 10 lbs. in the last two weeks, he does not speak very often anymore, and he is failing all of his subjects. Also, his mother tells me that he stays locked in his room with the lights off most of the time, except when he is out late with his new friends The Scavengers, a group of 17 year old boys who carry knives and pistols. He probably won't even get into college now. What a pity. Such a promising lad too. I would be surprised if he lived to see 16 [. . .].⁵⁴

Though Joey signs the letter from his principal, Mr. Demarest, and lays the guilt on thick, Charlie's earlier correspondence with Joey's principal gives Joey away. Charlie's ensuing response is scoffing:

Dear Joey,

"He does not speak very often anymore"???? What a laugh. Bucko you would still be talking if you were knocked out cold and in a comma [*sic*].

Couple of hints for next time. (1) Your principle [*sic*] calls me Mr. Banks, not Charles. (2) He never signs his whole name but his initials, HD. (3) If he has been a principle [*sic*] for 25 years, then I am May West. (4) Now give him back his stationary and cut it out. What do I look--stupid to you?⁵⁵

Joey's creativity is almost enough to get him his way whenever he puts his mind to it, but just as Charlie sees through the above ploy, occasionally he's able to anticipate Joey's misdeeds and thwart even Joey's best attempts to rebel.

Even Joey's letters to the President are a way of staging revolt. Joey wholeheartedly supports President Roosevelt and had even secured the President forty-seven additional votes in Brooklyn during the election (for which President Roosevelt personally thanks him). However, after the government imprisons Joey's friend Craig and his family in the Japanese concentration camp and arrests his parents on trumped up spy charges because the FBI erroneously thinks their tomato plants point to an airplane factory (!), Joey loses his faith in the President and writes to express his dissatisfaction. When President's Press Secretary writes to assure Joey that Craig and his family are safer in their concentration camp, Joey goes into action, stowing away on a military vehicle that delivers him unwittingly to Charlie's Marine Corps base. Joey then convinces Charlie to go with him to the Army Base at Manzanar to rescue Craig. They are successful because Joey dupes the Major in charge with a series of fabrications that leave the Major dumbfounded. Again, Joey is able to trick adults (who should theoretically be more knowledgeable than he is) into believing his version of the truth.

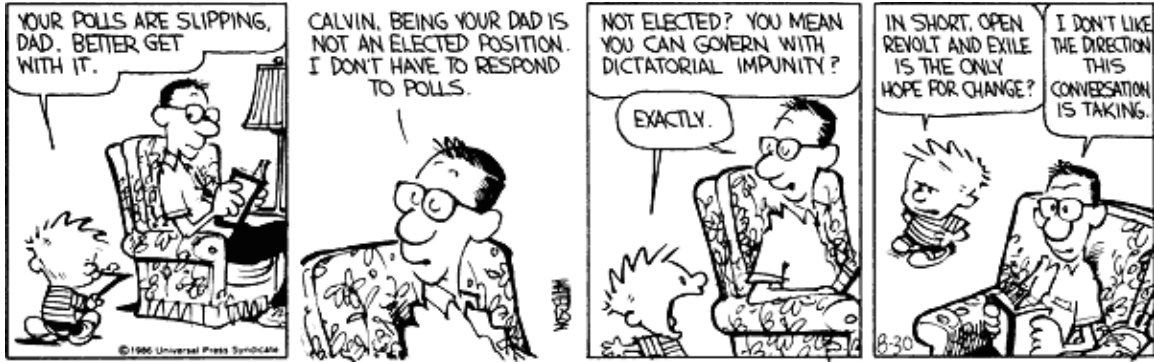
First Joey recites the entire U.S. Constitution to prove that there is nothing in it about tomato plants. After that, Joey revises the nineteenth amendment, claiming it is called the "Unlawful Detention" amendment which mandates "The right of the citizens of the United States to life and liberty cannot be taken away or restricted because of a person's national origin."⁵⁶ Joey knows the nineteenth amendment actually covers voting rights for women, but he is so persuasive that the Major never knows what hit him.

When Charlie describes the scene later in a letter to his wife Hazel, he writes,

It was like being in a train wreck when all you can do is watch it happen. I was never so scared stiff in my whole life. Joey wasn't. He just kept going. By the time he got to the part about Clarence Darrow being his uncle and taking him and Craig to baseball games, the Major was on the horn with Tule Lake and Craig had his family back.⁵⁷

Not only is Clarence Darrow not Joey's uncle, but by the time Joey goes up against the Major, Clarence Darrow has been deceased for 4 years, which Joey doesn't give the Major the chance to remember. Joey has no inhibitions when it comes to fighting injustice, and he is willing to devote all of his creative energy to creating change, even if it means telling white lies and engaging in tomfoolery to accomplish his goals.

These protagonists are able to use their resourcefulness and ingenuity to manipulate their environments to get what they want. Their high-jinks are an outlet for their intellectual and creative energies, and they place themselves in a position of revolt to try to change what they don't like about the world. Calvin even routinely chides his dad for his "poor showing in the polls," and every so often he demands either to be granted more freedom or to have his father replaced. In the comic below, Calvin extols the merits of revolt and exile.



Calvin, too, recognizes that sometimes in order to get what he wants he has to be willing to rebel.

Because Nick's parents are self-seeking and irresponsible, C. D. Payne gives Nick's world more validity than the adult world. Nick is better than his needy, promiscuous mother and his grudging, mean-spirited father. Sheeni's parents are "ancient" and unenlightened: so sanctimonious and uncompassionate that they are utterly incapable of relating to their kids. Nick's wild capers are his way of retaliating against this shameful adult world, and there is no end to what Nick can get away with because his parents are not accountable enough to keep track of his antics. The majority of his capers are done to win Sheeni's affections so that they can create independent lives together free from their parents' ineptitude. This goal, and losing his virginity to Sheeni become Nick's quest, and he invents scheme after scheme to reunite with her. He plots to move in with his father in Ukiah, Sheeni's hometown, only to have her transfer immediately to a French boarding school hours away. He then resorts to a variety of crazy methods to get her to come back to Ukiah, including spreading rumors that she and her roommate are selling black market birth control pills, which he intends to have her pious parents hear about. When that fails, he applies for a foreign exchange scholarship in Pune, India. Once he wins the scholarship, he convinces everybody that he has moved abroad while really masquerading as Carlotta, a female transfer student. Nick's antics finally work,

and Sheeni's parents force her to return to public schools, convinced Nick is too far away to be a negative influence on her.

Nick's craziest stunt accidentally sets an entire block in Berkeley on fire. To get back at his mother for deciding that she needs him living at home to be the de facto babysitter, Nick plans to steal his family's decrepit RV, hitch it to his mother's Lincoln, and torch it in a deserted lot in Tilden Park. His plan goes wrong when he hits a bump at the top of one of Berkeley's infamously steep hills. The trailer detaches from the Lincoln and careens down the hill, dragging a small Fiat in its wake:

By then the Fiat's suicidal dash into the flaming building would have come as an anticlimax, except for the trail of gasoline left by its broken fuel tank. As a stream of liquid raced up the hill like God's divine vengeance, I screamed and fled. Propelled by waves of adrenaline, I flew above the pavement, achieving speeds undreamed of by Olympic hopefuls. I passed curious spectators, I passed thrill-seekers and rubberneckers, I passed clanging fire-trucks and wailing police cars, I was unstoppable.⁵⁸

With stunts like this, Nick pushes the envelope to see what he can get away with. What these works--*Calvin and Hobbes*, *The Last Days of Summer* and *Youth In Revolt*-- show us is that with these characters' brains and ingenuity anything is possible, and Calvin, Joey, and Nick are willing to try just about anything to test the limits of their creativity. Their acts of rebellion form a release for their pent-up energy and are a way for them to reject the social values and practices that their parents embrace. These protagonists confront the world with independence and precocity, blazing a path of rebellious adventures that reverberate in readers' minds .

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSIONS

These protagonists and the narratives their authors have chosen to tell about them suggest a difference in the way adolescence and youth are imagined by these three authors. The notion that adolescents are naïve and must pass through a formative journey in order to gain an adult-like understanding of their identities and roles in the world is rejected in each of the three works. Instead, these authors have imagined something far more spectacular for these young protagonists. Their personalities are a commanding mix of ingenuity, humor, and insight, and they use these characteristics to entertain and enlighten us as readers. Their subtle commentary on the problems that beset their worlds does what most literature does: it opens our eyes to other situations, both bad and good, and shows us at once what is and is not possible. Calvin, Joey and Nick's adventures are largely unrealistic; the three of them exist in a world that could not possibly be. This world does exist, however, within the pages of their narratives, and these authors challenge us to imagine what the world might be like if these characters were real.

Youth narratives are often characterized by nostalgia because so many of us look back on our formative years fondly. By amplifying the heroism and intelligence of their protagonists, these three authors reinvent the adolescent experience. Their protagonists have the intelligence and profundity of adults, yet are free from the obligations and responsibilities that characterize the adult world. This appeals to those of us who wish such unencumbered years had not coincided with such an awkward time period in our own lives. As adults, we lack their same opportunities to manipulate our environments without consequence; we can't make such reckless, daring choices or exercise our desires

at our own whims. These three can, however, which is what makes them so compelling as contemporary protagonists.

Bill Watterson, Steve Kluger and C.D. Payne show us microcosms of society through a unique lens: the perspective of precocious adolescents. Because these characters are so gifted and so bright, we cannot help but listen. Nick and Joey show us what it is like to be ignored or neglected by parents who are supposed to love unconditionally. Joey illustrates how to thrive even in the face of extreme prejudice, and Calvin gives us his enlightened perspective on how the world ought to work. These authors capture what happens when adolescent protagonists possess precocious, adult understanding and manage to teach us something along the way.

Although Calvin, Joey, and Nick are separated by as much as eight years, their precociousness and its effects--exile and revolt--unite them as one new rendering of the twentieth-century adolescent. In *Calvin and Hobbes*, *The Last Days of Summer*, and *Youth In Revolt*, *bildung* as a process is not what is at hand, and these three youths do not have to go out into the world to gain understanding. Their insight and intelligence are ever-present, which suggests that there are new narratives to tell about youth and adolescence--that Watterson, Kluger, and Payne are using the literary space the *Bildungsroman* has created to envision new youth narratives. Suggesting that these characters fit neatly within the *Bildungsroman* genre is impractical, yet the popularity and pervasiveness of the *Bildungsroman* genre *has* created the space for their stories. The *Bildungsroman's* focus on the lives of youth protagonists has led to the popularity of youth narratives. While the coming-of-age tradition in American literature still holds sway, these three works seem to suggest a new sub-genre of the *Bildungsroman*. Though strictly speaking their works differ in significant ways from the *Bildungsroman* tradition, the works are inevitably a part of that genre. If critical scholarship eventually outgrows

the *Bildungsroman* genre and sees the need for a new term to describe variations in youth narratives, let this new term create as much respect and popularity for youth narratives as the *Bildungsroman* tradition has done.⁵⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (1795-1796). *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* embodies a quest away from a bourgeois life in business toward an independent life as an artist. The story is characterized by a loose, episodic structure and Meister's passage into adult life follows an epiphany in which he acquires a burst of inner knowledge. For more critical scholarship on the German Bildungsroman see Todd Kontje, *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre* (Columbia: Camden House, Inc., 1993) or Michael Minden, *The German Bildungsroman: Incest and Inheritance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

² Abrams, M.H., *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), 193.

³ Hardin, James, ed. *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), xi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁶ Redfield, Marc, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 40-41.

⁷ Steinecke, Hartmut, "The Novel and the Individual: The Significance of Goethe's Wilhelm Meister in the Debate about the *Bildungsroman*." In *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, ed. James Hardin (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 70.

⁸ Steinecke cites German scholar Friedrich Sengle's analysis of the *Biedermeier* period and Sengle's ensuing observation that during this period there were scarcely any

works that one could call *Bildungsromane*. From Sengle' *Biedermeierzeit: Deutsche Literatur im Spannungsfeld zwischen Restauration und Revolution 1815-1848*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1971-80). See 2:906.

⁹ Hardin, *Reflection*, x.

¹⁰ Susan Gohlman uses the term *Bildungsprozess* to signify the traditional German coming-of-age process. Susan Gohlman, *Starting Over: The Task of the Protagonist in the Contemporary Bildungsroman* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵ Gohlman cites *Bildungsroman* scholar Gerd Geiser, author of the article "The Present Quandry of German Novelists" which appears in *The Contemporary Novel in German* edited by Robert Heitner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 74-75.

¹⁶ Gohlman, *Starting Over*, 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸ Hardin, *Reflection*, xi.

¹⁹ Kluger, Steve, *The Last Days of Summer* (New York: Avon Books, Inc., 1998), 18.

²⁰ *Nick Twisp* (Home Page). Aivia Press. 22 Feb. 2002 <<http://www.nicktwhisp.com/smletter.html>>.

²¹ Kluger, *Last Days*, 3.

²² Payne, C.D., *Youth In Revolt: The Journals of Nick Twisp* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁴ Ibid., 165-166.

²⁵ *UComics Featuring Calvin and Hobbes*. 1 March 2002.

<<http://www.ucomics.com/calvinandhobbes/characters.htm>>.

²⁶ Watterson, Bill. *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes: A Calvin and Hobbes Treasury* (New York: Andrews and McMeel, 1988), 50.

²⁷ *UComics Featuring Calvin and Hobbes*. 20 Feb 2002.

<<http://www.ucomics.com/calvinandhobbes/characters.htm>>.

²⁸ Watterson, *Essential Calvin and Hobbes*, 198.

²⁹ *UComics Featuring Calvin and Hobbes*. 10 March 2002.

<<http://www.ucomics.com/calvinandhobbes/characters.htm>>.

³⁰ *UComics Featuring Calvin and Hobbes*. 06 March 2002

<http://www.ucomics.com/calvinandhobbes/viewch.cfm?uc_full_date=19870721>

³¹ *UComics Featuring Calvin and Hobbes*. 10 March 2002.

<<http://www.ucomics.com/calvinandhobbes/characters.htm>>

³² Kluger, *Last Days*, 8.

³³ Ibid., 8.

³⁴ Ibid., 22.

³⁵ Ibid., 32.

³⁶ Ibid., 33.

³⁷ Ibid., 109.

³⁸ Ibid., 53.

³⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁰ Payne, *Youth In Revolt*, 3.

⁴¹ Ibid., 219.

⁴² Ibid., 10.

⁴³ Ibid., 308.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 123.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁸ Kluger, *Last Days*, 39.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 61-62.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 203.

⁵¹ Ibid., 203.

⁵² Payne, *Youth In Revolt*, 180.

⁵³ Kluger, *Last Days*, 13.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 225.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 226.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 296.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 298.

⁵⁸ Payne, *Youth In Revolt*, 149.

⁵⁹ Hartmut Steinecke advocates scrapping "*Blidungsroman*" in favor of "*Individualroman*." For more information on "*Individualroman*" see Hartmut Steinecke' s "The Novel and the Individual: The Significance of Goethe' s Wilhelm Meister in the Debate about the *Bildungsroman*." In *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, ed. James Hardin (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 69-96.

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