Coming of Age in Crisis:
The Bildungsroman and Resilience in Climate Fiction

Karoline Huber iD
Ruhr University of Bochum

Abstract   This paper analyzes elements of the *Bildungsroman* in climate fiction (cli-fi) and shows how these contribute to the depiction of children's resilience in the texts. The article provides the theoretical background for linking the Bildungsroman to climate fiction and definitions of resilience, and then uses this as a starting point to consider Lily Brooks-Dalton's *The Light Pirate* (2022) and passages from Jessie Greengrass' *The High House* (2021). My analysis shows that *The Light Pirate* suggests a utopian co-evolution of humans and nature, while *The High House* implies a continued struggle in the face of climate disaster. Both novels alter the nature-to-culture paradigm of the Bildungsroman of the past—the same paradigm that served to naturalize the acculturation of the individual into the cultural order of capitalism—while *The Light Pirate* also includes the nonhuman into the idea of culture by imagining how culture can exist within nature. In this process, depicting children's agency and resilience models a way to navigate the environmental transformations that are to come. The aim of this paper is to show the Bildungsroman's renewed relevance regarding the portrayal of agency and resilience of children in the climate crisis, since the genre is uniquely positioned to criticize the representation of the process of a movement from nature to culture that has defined its own literary history.

Climate fiction (cli-fi) contains combinations of different genres, including but not limited to science fiction, historical fiction, magical realism, and the Bildungsroman. This multiplicity of genres in cli-fi is an "integral part of the way it narratively conjures the future" (Evans 95). This paper focuses on the last genre in particular, arguing that an updated and future-oriented version of the Bildungsroman can endow depictions of young people with agency through their display of resilience in times of the climate crisis. In climate discourse, children and adolescents are often portrayed as powerless, in order to elicit empathy for the next generation and motivate readers to change their behavior for the benefit of their own descendants. These predominantly vulnerable depictions can undermine the agency of younger people in facing the climate crisis (Caracciolo 146). This paper aims to critique the depiction of younger people as helpless by tracing instances of children's resilience in cli-fi texts, where elements of the Bildungsroman prove decisive in problematizing the process of social becoming that has always formed the core of the genre.

One of these texts is *The Light Pirate* (2022) by Lily Brooks-Dalton. While the novel focuses on the development of an individual, it situates the protagonist within a larger generational context of family and community, as well as the natural environment. Through the incorporation of an element of magical realism that represents resilience of the individual and the community, the novel adapts the Bildungsroman genre to allow for a less individualistic perspective. My second primary text, Jessie Greengrass' *The High House* (2021), offers a variation of the depiction of children's resilience and provides an alternative understanding of how the Bildungsroman format functions within cli-fi. As cli-fi Bildungsroman novels, both texts engage with resilience. Susie O'Brien argues that resilience can be an effective concept to process the threat of an uncertain future because it implies the possibility of thriving due to adverse conditions, not in spite of them (45). The texts discussed in this paper align with this assumption to varying degrees. Although both novels underline the agency of their young protagonists, *The Light Pirate* takes the utopian route, while *The High House* represents a more disheartening vision of resilience and survival in the climate crisis. To provide the necessary interpretive context for examining these novels, I will first assemble the theoretical framework for linking the Bildungsroman to climate fiction and definitions of resilience, as well as providing useful background information on the cli-fi genre and conceptions of childhood as intertwined with nature.

The Bildungsroman and Ecocriticism

For thinking about the Bildungsroman as a historical literary form deeply entwined with capitalist crises like climate change, there are few better starting points than Georg Lukács, who outlines some of the genre's typical themes and conventions in *The Theory of The Novel*. The first and most important of these is

the "reconciliation between interiority and reality," meaning the individual's ideals and aspirations and the conventions and conditions of society (Lukács 132). This reconciliation, while difficult, becomes possible through a series of "hard struggles and dangerous adventures" (132). In a traditional Bildungsroman of the eighteenth century, outer conditions such as economic disadvantage or social class remain relatively stable, whereas cli-fi novels which contain Bildungsroman elements additionally depict the outer limitations caused by the changing climate as constantly in flux. With the interruption of ecological patterns, the depiction of childhood and the process of maturing are shifting as well.

Ecocriticism and the Bildungsroman have already been connected by Helena Feder who points out that, "while explicitly the story of the origin and development of the individual, the Bildungsroman is also culture's own origin story, the humanist myth of its separation from and opposition to nature" (18). Feder exposes the inner contradictions of the Bildungsroman by problematizing the nature-culture binary as a myth, for the concept of nature must be contained in the idea of culture. Therefore, Feder argues, the narrative of the formation or acculturation of an individual must also contain the story of nature, which is to say, a narrative of nonhuman agency or subjectivity as well as the animality of the human (19). Feder identifies a movement from nature into culture parallel to the expulsion from childhood into adulthood as a common paradigm in the Bildungsroman (26). The cli-fi Bildungsroman reconceptualizes notions of nature and culture by imagining the falling-apart of our familiar contemporary culture—and its reformulation in a climate changed world.

In the cli-fi novels this paper investigates, the protagonists' development does not follow a linear movement from nature to culture. Rather, the texts show a transition from a nature which has been altered by human impact to a culture which is redefined as not standing in opposition to nature. The novels thereby significantly alter the nature-to-culture paradigm of the Bildungsroman of the past. Beyond this, *The Light Pirate* includes the nonhuman in the idea of culture by depicting how culture can exist within nature. This updated and future-oriented version of the Bildungsroman can endow young people with agency by depicting how they display resilience in overcoming adversities in times of climate crises. Attempts to merely *dissolve* the concept of the nature-culture boundary in fiction can lead to a simplification of the complex socio-political causes for ecological devastation and thereby downplay the significant political changes needed to stop the climate crisis. However, *redefining* the nature-culture paradigm in cli-fi can articulate the necessary cultural shifts towards a deeper environmental consciousness that the climate crisis necessitates.

The debate surrounding the role of realist conventions and human agency in cli-fi highlights tensions between traditional narrative forms, like the Bildungsroman, and the urgent need for new storytelling frameworks that capture

the complexities of ecological interdependence and the Anthropocene. Sylvia Mayer identifies two main directions in cli-fi, the first type of novel is set in the distant future and heavily influenced by conventions and techniques of science fiction, while the second category includes stories set in the near future and follows conventional narrative strategies of world-building (21). The latter have become predominant in contemporary cli-fi and use a realist technique (Johns-Putra 38). This presents a problem for theorists like Timothy Clark, who argues that adhering to realist conventions reinforces old paradigms such as the anthropocentric perspective and the focus on the individual – the very patterns cli-fi seeks to overcome (36). Clark maintains that conventional methods of plot, characterization, and setting expose an "anthropocentric delusion," which is to say, a sense of self-importance or control (164-65). This anthropocentric delusion manifests perhaps most powerfully in the realist subgenre of the Bildungsroman, with its primary goal of portraying the progress of the individual. From Clark's perspective, it would seem reasonable to conclude that the Bildungsroman is not suitable for depicting the complexity of ecological changes and the interdependence of humans and nature.

Similar to Clark's "anthropocentric delusion," Bruno Latour proposes that the idea of the Anthropocene is flattering to humans since it signals that they have gained "power over the planet" (44). Yet, he argues that this "power to influence may well have already been lost" (44), alluding to ongoing planetary changes, such as the continued effects of the greenhouse gasses already in the atmosphere, which cannot be stopped by humans, even if we were to cease the burning of carbon immediately. Latour concludes that being a subject in the Anthropocene requires "sharing agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy" (62). This is to say that Anthropocene narratives can also produce conceptions of the limits of the power humans collectively hold over the environment, specifically the power to mitigate the climatic shifts that are already underway. The cli-fi Bildungsroman not only redefines the nature-culture binary of past iterations in the genre but also highlights how the vulnerability to the effects of climate change extends beyond the individual.

Because of its historical identification with the development of the individual, a category which only exists because it is created and recognized by the collective, the cli-fi Bildungsroman possesses this capacity to represent collective vulnerability. The German term *Bildungsroman* emerged at the height of humanism, with Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-96) widely considered the prototype of the genre (Jeffers 49). A common thread in most definitions of the Bildungsroman is that it "follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity" (Baldick 27). The word *Bildung* refers to both education as well as formation, in this case the formation of body and mind. This narrative of the individual coming into culture depicts the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist and how

they "find responses to the innermost demands of [their] soul in the structures of society" (Lukács 133). From an initial state of loneliness due to the misalignment of their desires and ideals with those of society, the protagonist resigns themself to society as the "crowning of a process of education, a maturity attained by struggle and effort" (Lukács 133). In this way, the focus on the development of the individual also foregrounds how the individual finds their place within the capitalist system. As Franco Moretti proposes, the Bildungsroman is "the 'symbolic form' of modernity" (5) and emerged during the rise of early capitalism (25-27). Thus, the genre itself is implicated in the climate crisis, as capitalist accumulation and the need for endless growth has led to the irreparable damage of the environment. This places the Bildungsroman in a unique position from which to criticize the depictions of the transition from nature to culture by confronting its own literary history.

Since the Bildungsroman depends upon and produces a "movement from innocence to knowledge," that is, as Feder has shown, already permeated by nature, the genre is especially relevant in connection to children's agency and environmental violence because children's innocence has historically been associated with nature (Quinn 53). In the Romantic period, the definition of childhood was characterized by "naturalness and proximity to nature, innocence, and sanctity" (Baader 3). Jean-Jacque Rousseau shaped the image of the child as inherently innocent, arguing that children's education ought to be nature-centered and shelter children from being treated equal to adults (Vitorino et al. 9). This highlights the lack of agency awarded to children and adolescents at the time. Following Rousseau's ideas, Romantic poets such as Wordsworth popularized the figure of the "innocent child of nature" in English literature (Austin 75). A similar depiction of childhood innocence was adapted by American Romantic writers, such as Emerson in his work *Nature*. During the twentieth century, a shift in the portrayal of childhood occurred where the focus is no longer on the protection of innocence but the loss thereof (Goldstone 796). As Bette Goldstone puts it, more contemporary children's literature "no longer shelters children in a world of fantasy. It clearly teaches them about reality" (796). This is particularly noticeable in popular young adult fiction of the 1950s and 60s such as *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), *Lord of the Flies* (1954), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), and *A Kestrel for a Knave* (1968). This development mirrors changing societal conceptions of childhood. Rather than being viewed merely as objects of protection, children are considered subjects who are entitled to make their own choices and therefore "must be aware of the problems and complexities of the modern world" (Goldstone 797). This loss of innocence through early confrontation with reality becomes more prevalent in cli-fi, with climate change producing an accelerated childhood. In the novels that will be discussed in this article, children are portrayed as capable and resilient, maintaining the close connection to nature that was idealized in

the Romantic period, while also experiencing a process of education shaped by contact with both society and nature that makes them more capable—and more resilient.

(Climate) Resilience

Resilience as a term has shifted from the delimitation of systems to individuals. The origin of the word 'resilience,' John Leary notes, refers to the persistence of ecological systems throughout an experience of disturbance (150). Crucially, the resilient biological system does not return to its original state but "simply persists in an altered but basically intact state," as the system nonetheless sustains damage and does not fully recover (Leary 152). In this context, resilience describes a process of transformation rather than adaptation. In contrast, the current predominant conception of resilience, Ben Anderson suggests, is the responsibility of the individual subject to "adapt to, or bounce back from, inevitable shocks in an unstable world" (61). Other definitions also reflect this connection of resilience and individuality. According to Zatura et al., resilience can be understood as "an individual trait", a "dynamic developmental process" or the "outcome of successful adaptation to adversity" (4). In their view, it can be determined by two factors: First, how well an individual is able to recover from facing opposition and, second, how sustainably they can maintain their well-being in an environment of adversity (4).

Some scholars have criticized how current definitions of resilience, specifically when understood as successful adaptation, reflect an emphasis on individual adaptation that becomes problematic in the climate change discourse. O'Brien suggests that narratives of resilience, both fictional and nonfictional, are a conventional way to picture the future because "the idea of resilience compels us as the foundation of a belief in a survivable future" (45). However, in the context of climate change and natural disasters, "ecological conceptions of resilience" become a problematic topic (45). As O'Brien explains, "[i]n this domain in particular, resilience has a strongly normative flavor; more than a measurable characteristic of systems or communities, it is a value to be aspired to" (45). The concept of resilience presupposes that one must develop one's ability to adapt or bounce back from adversity while operating within a system. Striving for resilience does not encourage challenging the system within which adversity is faced or the questioning of the status quo. Promoting climate resilience as aspirational displaces responsibility for managing natural disasters from the state and industry to the individual, the voter, or the consumer.

Political philosophers Brad Evans and Julian Reid observe that resilience has become increasingly politicized within the domain of sustainable development (34). They voice their disapproval of the fact that the concept of resilience has become "a property within human populations that now need[s] promoting,"

which defers responsibility to the economically disadvantaged subject (Evans and Reid 33). They suggest that "the resilient subject is [the] embodiment of neoliberal thinking" and this conception of resilience takes away agency from endangered populations (37). In addition, O'Brien argues that resilience should not mean continuing practices that are harmful to the environment and preserving the current way of life in the face of ecological disaster (49). Rather, as Evans and Reid suggest, to be resilient can be to embrace a radical transformation and "welcome this inevitable event as the process of passage to a new world and new life" (163). It is this kind of resilience that *The Light Pirate* and *The High House* seek to model and produce.

The Light Pirate and Resilience as Restructuration

While a traditional Bildungsroman often follows the protagonist's journey of leaving home to travel in pursuit of knowledge or acquiring a trade, Wanda, the main character in *The Light Pirate*, remains in her hometown in South Florida while it evolves from a rural town into a flooded swampland. Her story contains the classic elements of a Bildungsroman outlined by Lukács: She is a lonely child who does not fit into society, she receives an education, experiences a period of struggle and loss, and finally finds her place in the world. However, the moments where the plot deviates from the Bildungsroman formula highlight not only Wanda's resilience and agency but also her unwillingness to conform or resign herself to a society desperately struggling to keep the influences of nature at bay. Instead, she helps to create a society in which there is space for her, a society within nature. The extraordinariness of her powers of resilience is underlined but not undermined by the magical powers she develops during her coming-of-age process. Through both adherence to and adaptation of the abovenamed Bildungsroman features, *The Light Pirate* models an alternative to resigning to societal norms and upholding capitalist infrastructures by depicting a transformation of society in response to climate change.

From its early pages, the novel creates the sense that Wanda has no place in the world in its current state. Because she feels uneasy and out of place at school, she acts shy and reserved and tries to avoid asking too many questions in class, keeping a low profile although she is actually a curious student (Brooks-Dalton 121). Due to sharing her birthday with the anniversary of a hurricane, she is disliked by her peers and blamed for the destruction caused by her namesake storm (102). Additionally, wearing used men's clothes with holes in them makes her stand out visually as an outsider (102). As her power reveals itself for the first time when she encounters opposition in the form of a bullying incident, it can be read as analogous to resilience. At an encroaching waterfront nicknamed the Edge to which she is forbidden to go, a group of older kids approach her and push her into the ocean. As they hold her head under water, suddenly "[t]he struggling

shadow that is Wanda's flailing, submerged body brightens. The light spreads, consuming the waves in streaks, until it looks like the water has swallowed a swirling, living galaxy" (105). Befuddled by this spectacle, the bullies scurry away, scared by this light which appeared out of nowhere. In this context, the Edge symbolizes the boundary between civilization and wilderness. By crossing this boundary, Wanda takes a first step towards her coming of age and coming into herself as a character. Her brother takes note of this beginning change in Wanda when she returns from the Edge: "She looks different somehow. Older. What surprises him is this extra layer she's brought home with her, clinging to her. Another skin" (108). Lucas' comment highlights that she immediately looks more mature after the incident. The figurative thicker skin she acquired through this experience signifies her quick recovery, a determining factor of resilience (Zatura et al. 4). Wanda herself acknowledges that facing adversity has permanently changed her, "she feels different, like something inside her that used to be closed is now open," which suggests a psychological or spiritual growth (106).

Wanda's growth does not lead her down the traditional Bildungsroman's path of "enriching resignation" to the given societal conditions and structures (Lukács 133). This becomes obvious when comparing her attitude towards infrastructure in particular with her family's. Born into a world of increasingly concerning weather phenomena, Wanda witnesses climate destruction accelerate as the landscape around her is drastically altered during her early childhood. A utility worker, Wanda's father clings to the life to which he is accustomed, struggling to repair the infrastructure of their town despite the slow but steady shutdown of government institutions such as schools and public transport (Brooks-Dalton 117). Wanda's older brother Lucas wants to leave their town and study engineering so he can change the way in which their infrastructure is built from the inside (115). Infrastructure, in this context, represents upholding the status quo and attempting to fend off developments that can no longer be stopped. Despite the predominant opinions in her family that the climate crisis can and should be contained, Wanda herself is accustomed to an environment that is constantly changing and accepts transformation as a fact of life:

> She has been watching the town empty, the water rise, the storms pummel, as far back as she can remember. This is the rhythm she was born to. [Her father] is old enough to remember arguments about whether climate change was real. Lucas is old enough to remember when tourists still came. But to Wanda, these things are only stories, so distant they might as well be fiction. (99)

Children like Wanda, born during or after a fictional catastrophe, did not experience the 'normal' world, "the Before", and therefore do not hold on to outdat-

ed ideas and structures which no longer apply to their post-catastrophic reality (102). She is attuned to the rhythms of the world in its current state and has trouble imagining what things were like for the previous generation or even older members of her own generation. Through years of ongoing transformation, Wanda has gained the flexibility to adjust to her environment, embodying the neoliberal resilient subject of Reid and Evans' critique.

And yet, rather than accepting the status quo of reparative measures, Wanda undergoes an alternative education that prepares her to live outside of society. Her neighbor Phyllis, a retired biology teacher, acts as Wanda's mentor and helps the young girl facilitate personal growth. This is also where sustainability, the second resilience factor, enters Wanda's developmental process. From her interactions with a more benevolent teacher, Wanda begins to develop a curiosity for natural sciences and phenomena in nature. She asks Phyllis many questions and is surprised by the results, since she "is not used to her questions being taken so seriously or answered with such patience" (126). Wanda also remarks that her "anxiety about learning indoors is gone – there are no bullies who snicker when she raises her hand" (126). In a different learning environment, free from the constricting surroundings of the classroom, she wants to learn about the creatures that live around her and how their environment is changing. This is pertinent to reading *The Light Pirate* as a Bildungsroman, since *Bildung*, in this instance, refers to education. As opposed to a traditional Bildungsroman, where the protagonist acquires a trade or formal education, Wanda receives a more hands-on education which is immediately relevant to her outside of school. As opposed to her father and her brother, she learns not to work against nature or find reactionary solutions that try to contain events like floods and storms. Instead, Phyllis teaches her survival skills such as fishing and self-defense which Wanda will come to rely on when their hometown is flooded. In other words, she is not taught to maintain the status quo of capitalist society under changing environmental conditions by attempting to maintain its infrastructure, but rather she learns how to navigate the volatile situation in which infrastructure becomes untenable due to environmental shifts.

The practical application of her education is tested by the "hard struggles and dangerous adventures" of the Bildungsroman which far outweigh what a young person of her position in society would have to face (Lukács 132). The novel makes it clear that this is due to the drastic environmental changes and their fallout, as scenes of trauma and hardship occur during or right after extreme weather events. Wanda goes through a series of hardships after she loses her father in a flash flood, making Phyllis her default guardian. A pivotal moment occurs when Wanda has to defend Phyllis and herself from intruders who are planning to ransack their house after yet another flood (Brooks-Dalton 257). The scene is focalized by Phyllis who points out how Wanda, still an adolescent, is

already "taller than her, stronger than her, quicker than her" (257). Wanda's physical strength and capability underline her prematurity required by the extreme conditions in which she is growing up and foreshadows further escalation. Phyllis tries to fend off the burglars with a gun but loses her weapon and sustains a head injury (258). In an act of self-defense, Wanda shoots both intruders before they can cause further harm (258). Later, Wanda describes this event as "[t]he night she left the vestiges of childhood behind" (268). The incident, reminiscent of the abovementioned departure from innocence in twentieth-century children's literature, shows how the escalation of the climate crisis forces children to grow up faster and make decisions which that are well above their level of maturity, often decisions nobody should ever have to make. This becomes clearest when considering how the novel uses the Bildungsroman genre to contrast Wanda's struggles with those of a traditional Bildungsroman heroine like Jane Eyre who may have to make a difficult decision or stand up to an aggressor in more mundane and indirect ways than what *The Light Pirate* depicts.

The way in which Wanda's mental flexibility and the practical education she received from Phyllis prepare her to act quickly and protect herself and others portrays her as an extraordinary character. Her survival skills develop even further after she is separated from Phyllis and has to adapt to the harsh environmental conditions by herself. After the heat becomes unbearable and dangerous during the daytime, she switches her daily rhythm to nocturnal. She procures her own food and maintains her own shelter, a platform on a small island in the swamp – all extraordinary achievements for an adolescent child. Crucially, her resilience is not determined by her supernatural abilities. Resilience and magic have a historical connection, with Ann S. Masten describing resilience as "ordinary magic" (227). While early research on resiliency was prone to argue for the extraordinariness of resilience in children, suggesting that they were somehow special or unique in their abilities to resist adversity, Masten concludes that "resilience is made of ordinary rather than extraordinary processes" (227).

The Light Pirate literalizes the oxymoron of *ordinary magic* through Wanda's abilities. The light she can conjure in the water can be read as an element of magical realism, but the novel alternatively offers more rational or ordinary explanations. Phyllis theorizes that bioluminescence of a type of plankton or a reaction of certain bacteria which causes light reflections in the water could be responsible for Wanda's ability (Brooks-Dalton 150, 220). When the biologist takes a water sample from the lagoon and attempts to analyze it under a microscope, "[s]he sees something she's never seen before–organisms that are awake and shimmering and moving in the kind of intricate pattern such simple creatures should not be capable of. Yet they are" (152). Despite the scientific approach, there remains something unexplainable about the luminescence. Wanda herself is "thrilled by the hunt for an explanation, but she doesn't require one. To

her, these organisms are a magic she doesn't need to name" (159). Thus, the light remains ambiguous, both magical and ordinary, which foregrounds Wanda's agency and resilience. Wanda's magical abilities that connect her to natural forces carry an element of magic without presenting a solution or reversal of the climate disturbance which occurs in the narrative. There are hints that the light has a restorative power, since the area around Wanda's small platform in the swamp appears to be cleaner and animals start to return to the area (275). And yet, the magical realist element in the novel does not explain away Wanda's capacity for resilience and thus does not undermine her agency. The light cannot solve Wanda's problems for her. It cannot reverse the flooding of her hometown or bring back Phyllis or her family. It is merely a presence which accompanies Wanda on her journey. The light only enhances the portrayal of Wanda as a resilient child and young woman and emphasizes her ability to embrace environmental transformation.

While the final stage of a Bildungsroman depicts a resignation to societal conventions and the satisfaction of their ideals in existing societal structures, the heroine of *The Light Pirate* gains the knowledge that the project of keeping nature away from society, as her father and brother attempted, is only a futile solution. Instead, she uses her powers to create a society in which both she and the environmental forces to which she feels connected have space to grow. Wanda puts this insight into practice when she connects with a young non-binary person, and they establish a small community which operates within environmental structures. Together, they build tree houses by carefully integrating structures into the natural growing patterns of the trees themselves. In this process, "the trees were their architects, showing them where they could build and where they couldn't. How high. How heavy. And the ruined town gave them the materials. Their nest among the boughs made sense in a way the homes in [her town] never had. It belonged here" (280-81). The scene emphasizes the agency of the nonhuman not only through anthropomorphism but also by placing the foliage into the role of the guide and the human entities in the roles of the followers. Later in the scene, Wanda also mentions that the houses are built without doors, which highlights the absence of physical boundaries between human and nature or culture and wilderness and presents a stark contrast to the Edge at the beginning of the novel (300).

The Light Pirate adopts certain conventions of the Bildungsroman but adapts them to portray the process of coming of age in the Anthropocene. Wanda's education is not only a practical preparation for the times to come; it also brings her closer to nature, instead of further away from it. Rather than resigning herself to a society that caused environmental destruction, she contributes to building a different kind of culture which is not defined by a juxtaposition to nature but by the inclusion thereof. The element of magical realism in the novel serves to connect the protagonist to nature and the nonhuman without undermining her resilient capability. Through Wanda's powers and her ultimate project of realizing

a new social infrastructure, the novel works towards including the nonhuman in the idea of culture by depicting how culture can exist within nature and thereby transgresses the nature-culture binary of the traditional Bildungsroman. *The Light Pirate* thus transforms the Bildungsroman – the genre of resignation to the social relations of capitalism that have caused climate change –into an allegory for deconstructing the binary opposition of nature and culture that has underwritten capitalist exploitation and destruction of the environment. In doing so, this novel confronts the literary historical tradition from which it emerges, negating that tradition's ideological project of resilience as repair of infrastructure, and instead endeavoring to anticipate utopian possibilities by building a home among the trees, producing a theory and practice of resilience as restructuration.

The High House: Resilience as Obligation

Where *The Light Pirate* takes the utopian route, *The High House* presents a disheartening vision of resilience and survival in the climate crisis by depicting multiple instances where resilience is not a trait or a choice, but an obligation. It is important to keep in mind that the younger generations in these novels did not contribute to the condition of the destroyed climate in which they find themselves. Rather, these novels draw attention to the fact that the climate crisis has been produced by previous generations and their contributions to a capitalist society, which demands resilient behavior of the younger generation as an obligation. This first occurs at the very beginning of the narrative, where eighteen-year-old Caro is tasked with taking her half-brother Pauly to the titular high house, a remote safe house Pauly's mother has prepared for them in the event of a climate emergency (Greengrass 45). Their parents, both climate scientists, call Caro from a conference overseas and instruct her to bring her younger brother to safety (45). Before they arrive, the house is tended to by a local man, Grandy, and his granddaughter Sally. On the arduous journey there, Caro receives news that their parents have died in a fatal storm. Caro continues on foot, despite their heavy luggage and Pauly's growing weariness (53-54). When the child starts to cry out of exhaustion, Caro leaves their bags behind and carries her little brother in their stead (55). In Caro's situation, giving up is not an option, as she ponders "how I would go on – but what else can I do?" (55). The rhetorical question highlights that there is no viable alternative to moving on – both towards the literal safety of the high house and from the literal and figurative dangers represented by the news of the death of their parents.

This foreshadows later situations in the book, where survival and resilience are not presented as a choice, since there is no alternative. When the nearby village is flooded and Caro and Sally narrowly escape drowning, they both feel joyous at first, before realizing that this will not be the end of their struggle (266, 269). As Caro explains: "We had been waiting for the end, and it had come [...].

This was the afterwards. We had survived – but *must*, somehow, continue to do so" (269, emphasis added). The two young women feel compelled to survive in order to care for Grandy and Pauly, and the responsibility is what keeps them going (266-69). While Sally dutifully accepts her obligation, Caro is filled with dread. She begins having nightmares and developing a fear of the rising water and how it could take Pauly away from her (269). Even though Caro and Sally display resilience in their endurance of hardship, Pauly seems to struggle less with tolerating adversity and coping with loss. After having spent some time away from their childhood home, Caro anticipates that Pauly would ask her uncomfortable questions: "I waited for him to ask me when we would be going home, but although his questions were endless, they were not about the things which we had left behind. Instead, they were about the names of birds or of flowers, or whether the leafy, cabbage-looking plants which grew between the dunes were edible" (184). Pauly is less attached to the past in general, concerning himself more with his immediate environment and practical issues. He is able to bounce back and move on quickly since his life thus far has been governed by constant change and adjustment. The young boy also has an easier time enduring their limited circumstances, because he cannot remember it being any other way. Not only does he hardly recall their time before the high house; he also does not remember what it was like to have a normal childhood.

What is normal for Pauly is still a constant struggle for Sally and Caro. While Caro and Sally recount things they miss from the time before the house, such as warmth and physical comfort or luxuries like soap and butter, Pauly has little to no connection to the time before the 'end of the world' (193-95). As he explains: "I have some idea of what it must have been like to be inside a bus, a truck, a boat with more than sails. [...] I was only a child and, besides, what difference would it make? Those things are gone, or they are ruined, and we can't rebuild them" (192). This mindset enables the young boy to accept the reality of the present conditions. These things belong to a different time and a different version of himself, both of which are no longer accessible to him. The way in which he speaks of his child-hood in the past tense shows Pauly's perceived maturity, that he no longer thinks of himself as a child. Pauly does not display any more nostalgia or sentimentality over the supposed loss of his childhood than he does about irretrievable objects or unreachable places like his prior home. Caro and Sally are suffering compara-tively more since they fondly remember the "routine absence of hunger and wor-ry" at a time when their lives were less arduous and physically demanding (193-195). This is to say that Pauly's basic level of resilience is portrayed as much higher than that of Sally and Caro. His coming of age takes place during a time of limited choices, and he therefore is more adaptable to the scarcity of their post-flood life. The narrative shows that with each generation, the concept of normalcy becomes more abstract as the weather phenomena grow increasingly more extreme and the world becomes less livable for humans. Alongside this development, a resignation

to accept their continuously more limiting circumstances settles in. While the parents attempted to inform about the climate crisis and planned ahead for their children's survival, Sally and Caro cannot plan further ahead than the next crisis and are occupied by dealing with the symptoms of the fallout while reminiscing about a better but unattainable past. Pauly's comparative lack of suffering suggests that when circumstances become dire, it is easier to resign oneself to the powers that be instead of yearning for the return of a vague idea of better times. Through this intergenerational trajectory, the novel feeds into the doom and gloom narratives of our time by proposing that it is too late to make any meaningful changes, and it is time to accept our fate and surrender to the consequences of the climate crisis. As opposed to Wanda in *The Light Pirate*, Pauly may not flourish in a time of crisis, but he sustainably endures. However, his resilience only prolongs a period of struggle and suffering.

The End (?)

The final section of this paper will compare the endings of *The Light Pirate* and *The High House* with regard to further differences in their depictions of resilience. At the end of the narrative, Pauly's maturity consists less of the accumulation of wisdom and experience and more of his resilient endurance and acceptance of the present circumstances, including the prospect of an early death. As the Bildungsroman hero, his "maturity [is] attained by struggle and effort" (Lukács 133). Here, *The High House* takes a darker turn when reading the novel as a Bildungsroman, considering the likelihood that, as opposed to Wanda, Pauly may not even reach adulthood. With the trajectory of increasingly more extreme weather phenomena from which not even the high house will be able to protect them, to the possibility of the failure of their electric generator, to their already dwindling resources, Pauly's future does not look particularly promising (Greengrass 223). The novel ends on a somber note: On the final page, shortly after the burial of Sally's grandfather, Pauly ponders the grim reality of their situation: One of them will not be buried outside, the high house will become their grave (277). By implying the continued survival of the three central characters, the last few pages adopt an oppressive mood, suggesting that they will not stay alive for long. As Caro points out, "[w]e aren't really saved. We are only the last ones, waiting" (276). The novel's conclusion thus aligns itself with the proposed resignation of the generational trajectory in the narrative.

By contrast, the last chapter of *The Light Pirate* opens with Wanda as an old woman, which lends the novel a sense of narrative closure. The classic Bildungsroman tends to conclude with the protagonist finding their place in society, or, as Franco Moretti puts it, the "definitive stabilization of the individual and of [their] relationship with the world" (27). In this aspect, the ending of *The Light Pirate* can be considered a classic Bildungsroman ending, especially since Wanda has found a physical place to settle. However, as Moretti criticizes, the idea of happiness and

reconciliation envisioned by the Bildungsroman is rather static (8-9). *The Light Pirate* subverts this notion of finality through the implication of a persistence of the community, which can be read as a synecdoche for humanity, while also insinuating that a continued struggle against adversity lies ahead. At the end of Wanda's personal journey, when she has established the settlement, she hands over her powers to a young fisherwoman in the next generation (Brooks-Dalton 304). This gesture symbolizes the hope for the continuation of her resilient characteristics and the flourishing of the settlement in adverse conditions. Wanda's partner remarks that the young woman reminds them of Wanda, which alludes to her being a strong and resilient person who has also had to face many obstacles throughout her life (303). As the young woman touches the glowing water, "an introduction is made," suggesting that this is the beginning of a new personal journey, albeit not an easy one (304). This is highlighted by the description of how "[t]he water-bound lights spin and brighten, asking the young woman if she is willing to do this work" (304). Overlooking her settlement, Wanda anticipates that "this place will go on changing long after she is gone," thereby insinuating an ongoing transformation of the landscape beyond the scale of her individual lifetime (301). With its emphasis on the persistence of the community, this ending situates the individual within a larger generational structure. *The Light Pirate* thereby produces a version of resilience which is not entirely reliant on the individual's ability to bounce back from experiences of adversity. Instead, the novel imagines a sustainable ongoing persistence of the communal society achieved through the transference of Wanda's power. The novel imagines a hopeful vision of the future through its depiction of individual and communal resilience. By following and deviating from the traditional Bildungsroman, *The Light Pirate* dissolves the nature-culture binary of the genre and presents the reconfiguration of the relation between nature and culture as the key to achieving climate resilience.

Conclusion

Despite being one of the oldest subgenres of realism, the Bildungsroman thus remains a vital and powerful form for contemporary and futuristic stories about coming of age in times of climate crises. This is because, historically, the Bildungsroman is the genre most associated with the process of introduction to a cultural order. To confront the climate crisis and work towards changing the status quo of the previous cultural order, it is necessary to critically engage with this process and point to its flaws. What is especially useful about the Bildungsroman genre in this context is that previous iterations of it have functioned to naturalize the cultural order which has produced the climate crisis. In this way, the genre is implicated in the climate crisis. Therefore, the Bildungsroman is uniquely positioned to criticize the representation of the process of a movement from nature

to culture and to confront the literary history of the genre itself. Moreover, the tensions created between the inner aspirations of the protagonist and the outer limitations imposed by the climate crisis form an ideal situation for exploring the resilience and agency of children and young adults. For these novels, such resiliency and agency still depend on an introduction into culture but a culture which has been redefined as not standing in opposition to nature. The result is a process of acculturation redefined by the orientation of subjects away from capitalist notions of individual success and towards ecological responsibility.

In *The Light Pirate*, resilience manifests itself in and through an individual trait Wanda is endowed with since birth, a "dynamic developmental process" that takes place during her childhood and adolescence as well as "an outcome of successful adaptation to adversity" which she faces throughout her life (Zatura et al. 4). Her magical abilities draw attention to her capacity for resilience instead of undermining it. The luminous consciousness which visualizes resilience in the novel has a more logical explanation as well as one that moves into the realm of the supernatural. Similarly, Wanda's capacity to overcome adversity can be considered ordinary but also extraordinary under the circumstances. *The Light Pirate* depicts how the narrative maturation of the main character can extend beyond the story of the individual by situating the protagonist within nature and community. As a Bildungsroman of the times to come, this novel follows the developmental stages of the protagonist which occur alongside environmental changes. Through this, the novel models an evolving resilience needed to overcome adversity in a changing environment and to adapt to as well as embrace this environmental transformation.

Although *The High House* includes the abovenamed connotations of resilient adaptation, the novel argues, above all, that endurance will be the only option to persist in the climate-changed future. This future, however, is not portrayed as desirable or livable. As the older characters Sally and Caro have trouble adjusting to their limited lifestyles during a climate catastrophe, Pauly seems to have an easier time living in these conditions. While the young boy appears to be naturally more resilient than his older sister, this is not emphasized as an outstanding quality but as arising from a sheer lack of comparison. The novel therefore does not suggest that Pauly is only more resilient because he is a child but that he can withstand adversity because he does not know a life without it. Placing him as the last link in a generational chain puts forth a defeatist notion of surrendering to the climate crisis and thus aligns the novel with the Bildungsroman tradition of "enriching resignation" (Lukács 133). With Pauly as a protagonist, *The High House* reveals a fundamental truth of the climate crisis: The environment cannot return to its previous state, wherefore reminiscing about a better past obstructs the way forward.

While cli-fi novels that foreground children's resilience risk romanticizing young people as symbols of hope in the climate crisis, novels like those discussed in this article show how children's resilience enables them to adapt to ongoing changes and redefine their relationship with the natural environment. Stressing agency and competence of the young protagonists in unprecedented circumstances, these narratives portray environmental changes and having to adjust to them as an ongoing process, with *The Light Pirate* depicting a utopian co-evolution of humans and nature, while *The High House* implies an ongoing struggle in the face of climate disaster. While there remains more to be explored in this connection between the Bildungsroman and cli-fi, as well as depictions of children's resilience in these and other works in this genre, this study has revealed how adapting elements of the Bildungsroman tradition in cli-fi can model resilience as embracing environmental transformation. What both novels fundamentally understand is this: Since the environment cannot and will not return to what it once was, our lives will have to change, and we will have to adjust to a new reality either way, so we should do everything we can to change and rethink societal structures so that we can live in the utopia of *The Light Pirate*, instead of the dystopia of *The High House*. The fact that the resilient protagonists are children proposes that it is not too late to make this change.

Works Cited

Anderson, Ben. "What Kind of Thing is Resilience?" *Politics*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2015, pp. 60-66. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12079.

Austin, Linda M. "Children of Childhood: Nostalgia and the Romantic Legacy." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2003, pp. 75–98. https://doi.org/10.2307/25601604.

Baader, Meike Sophia. "Longing for Innocence and Purity: Nature and Child-Centered Education." *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, edited by M. Peters, Springer, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_9-1.

Baldick, Chris. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2nd ed, edited by Chris Baldick, Oxford UP, 2001.

"Bildungsroman." *Britannica*, March 7th, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/art/bildungsroman. Accessed: March 26th, 2024.

Brooks-Dalton, Lily. *The Light Pirate.* Grand Central Publishing, 2022.

Caracciolo, Marco. "Child Minds at the End of the World." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2022, pp. 145–61.

Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept.* Bloomsbury, 2015.

Works Cited

"Climate Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Change." *The European Commission*, 2024. https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/research-area/environment/climate-change-science/climate-resilience-and-adaptation-climate-change_en. Accessed: April 8th, 2024.

Evans, Brad and Julian Reid. *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously.* Polity Press, 2014.

Evans, Rebecca. "Fantastic Futures? Cli-fi, Climate Justice, and Queer Futurity." *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 2-3, 2017, pp. 94-110. //www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/resilience.4.2-3.0094.

Feder, Helena. *Ecocriticism and the Idea of Culture: Biology and the Bildungsroman.* Ashgate Publishing, 2014.

Goldstone, Bette P. "Views of Childhood in Children's Literature Over Time." *Language Arts*, vol. 63, no. 8, 1986, pp. 791–98. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41405515.

Greengrass, Jessie. *The High House.* Swift, 2021.

Johns-Putra, Adeline. "Transtextual Realism for the Climatological Collective." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate*, edited by Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach, Cambridge UP, 2022, pp. 283-95.

Jeffers, Thomas L. *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana.* Palgrave, 2005.

Latour, Bruno. *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, translated by Catherine Porter, Polity, 2017.

Leary, John Patrick. *Keywords: The New Language for Capitalism.* Haymarket Books, 2018.

Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of The Novel.* Translated by Anna Bostock, The Merlin Press, 1971.

Masten, Ann S. "Ordinary Magic: Resilience Processes in Development." American Psychologist, vol. 56, no. 3, 2001, pp. 227–38. doi:10.1037/0003-066x.56.3.227.

Mayer, Sylvia. "Explorations of the Controversially Real: Risk, the Climate Change Novel, and the Narrative of Anticipation." *The Anticipation of Catastrophe: Environmental Risk in North American Literature and Culture*, edited by Sylvia Mayer and Alexa Weik von Mossner, Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014, pp. 21–37.

Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture.* Verso, 2000.

O'Brien, Susie. "Resilience Stories: Narratives of Adaptation, Refusal, and Compromise." *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 2-3, 2017, pp. 43-65.

Quinn, Edward. *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms*, 2nd ed., Facts on File, 1999.

Works Cited

Vitorino, Artur José Renda, Pedro Serafim Anes Pires, and Renato Griecco Brogiato. "Rousseau and His Child-Centered, Anticultural Education." *Revista De Educação PUC-Campinas*, vol. 25, 2020, pp. 1-11. doi:10.24220/2318-0870v25e2020a4645.

Zatura, Alex J., John Stuart Hall and Kate E. Murray. "A New Definition of Health for People and Communities." *Handbook of Adult Resilience*, edited by John W. Reich, Alex J. Zatura, and John Stuart Hall, Guilford Press, 2010, pp. 3-29.

Biography

Karoline Huber completed her master's degree at the University of Stuttgart, Germany. Her MA thesis was concerned with narratological innovation in a range of British, North American, and Australian climate fiction. She is currently working as a PhD candidate for the English department at the Ruhr–University of Bochum. Her dissertation investigates generational tensions in the Anglophone climate fiction Bildungsroman.