Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature
ISSN: 2732-4605
Global Talent Academy

From Pip to Sylvia: Reflection of Bildungsroman through Class, Education, and Moral Growth in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson"

Rabby Imam
Department of English, City University, Bangladesh
Email: zibon.ju@gmail.com

Received: 18/11/2025
Accepted: 27/02/2026
Published: 08/04/2026

Volume: 7 Issue: 2

How to cite this paper: Imam, R. (2026). From Pip to Sylvia: Reflection of Bildungsroman through Class, Education, and Moral Growth in Charles Dickens's Great Expectations and Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson". *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, *7*(2), 9-15
DOI: https://doi.org/10.46809/jcsll.v7i2.438

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of the Bildungsroman—the coming-of-age narrative—as reflected in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) and Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" (1972). Both texts portray young protagonists, Pip and Sylvia, who experience moral and psychological growth within oppressive social systems marked by class inequality. Though situated in vastly different cultural contexts—Victorian England and twentieth-century Harlem—their journeys reveal how class, education, and moral realization shape personal identity. The study adopts a comparative and sociocultural framework, employing Marxist and moral-psychological approaches to analyze how both authors critique social stratification through the education of the self. The paper argues that Dickens and Bambara reinterpret the Bildungsroman not merely as a story of individual growth, but as a moral awakening toward collective social consciousness.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Moral Growth, Class, Education, Social Consciousness, Comparative Literature

1. Introduction: Why Literary Topology Needs Self-Reflection

The Bildungsroman, or the novel of formation, is one of the most enduring genres in literary tradition, tracing the protagonist's psychological, intellectual, and moral growth from the innocence of youth to the complexity of maturity. Originating in late-eighteenth-century Germany with works such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, the genre gradually evolved into a dominant form in European fiction, reflecting the Enlightenment belief in individual progress and the reconciliation of the self with society. At its core, the Bildungsroman portrays the tension between personal aspiration and social expectation, presenting the protagonist's development as both a private and public negotiation of values, norms, and identity.

In *Great Expectations* and "The Lesson," Charles Dickens and Toni Cade Bambara reconfigure this traditional framework, using it as a lens through which to expose and critique the structural inequalities of their respective societies. The Bildungsroman, in their hands, transcends its Eurocentric humanist model to become a mode of social protest and moral inquiry. Dickens's Pip and Bambara's Sylvia each embody youthful consciousnesses molded by their environments—Pip by the rigid class stratification and moral hypocrisies of Victorian England, and Sylvia by the intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender in post–Civil Rights America.

Pip's pursuit of gentility and self-worth unfolds within a social order that equates moral value with material success, revealing how education and aspiration can both liberate and corrupt. His ambition to become a gentleman entangles him in shame, illusion, and self-deception, as he internalizes a value system that conflates wealth with virtue. This misrecognition fractures his moral judgment, obscuring ethical clarity beneath the pressures of social mobility. Conversely, Sylvia's awakening emerges not through the appearance formal schooling but through experiential learning marked by anger, resistance, and critical awareness. Her encounter with economic disparity sharpens, rather than distorts, her understanding of injustice. Where Pip's development is constrained by his complicity in dominant ideologies, Sylvia's growth depends on her refusal to accept them, transforming indignation into a form of political and ethical insight.

Thus, Dickens and Bambara extend the scope of the Bildungsroman beyond the individual's harmonious integration into society. Instead, they foreground the moral dissonance produced by class hierarchies and systemic inequality, using their protagonists' transformations to question the legitimacy of the social orders that shape them. This study builds on that premise by adopting a qualitative and analytical approach grounded in close literary interpretation and comparative analysis, examining how the Bildungsroman is redefined across two distinct socio-historical contexts: Victorian England and post–Civil Rights America. Drawing on a Marxist perspective, informed by Raymond Williams (1977) and György Lukács (1971), the analysis considers how material conditions and class structures shape consciousness, positioning education as an ideological apparatus that can both reinforce and contest social divisions. At the same time, a moral-psychological framework influenced by Lawrence Kohlberg's (1981) theory of moral development is employed to interpret Pip's and Sylvia's trajectories as stages of ethical awakening, moving from egocentric perception toward socially engaged awareness. By synthesizing these approaches, the paper argues that their educational journeys function not merely as narratives of personal growth but as acts of moral resistance, ultimately reimagining social consciousness—rather than social conformity—as the true measure of maturity.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with *Great Expectations* has long foregrounded its moral vision and its complex critique of Victorian notions of progress and social mobility. Early critics such as John Hillis Miller (1958) interpret Pip's development as "a pilgrimage from illusion to disillusionment," emphasizing the protagonist's gradual recognition of the moral vacuity underlying his social ambitions. Similarly, Julian Moynahan (1960) conceives of the novel as "a moral education through suffering," in which Pip's painful encounters with guilt, gratitude, and disillusionment constitute a spiritual apprenticeship toward humility and ethical self-awareness. These readings situate Dickens's narrative within the moral tradition of the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman, where personal growth is measured by the protagonist's reconciliation of self-knowledge with moral integrity.

Subsequent scholarship has deepened this moral framework by embedding it within the socioeconomic realities of the Victorian period. John Bowen (2012), for instance, contextualizes *Great Expectations* in relation to the forces of industrial capitalism and the shifting ideologies of class aspiration. Pip's yearning to transcend his working-class origins, Bowen argues, exposes not only the seductive power of gentility but also the moral corruption inherent in a society that equates worth with wealth and education with social privilege. Through Pip's disillusionment, Dickens reveals the paradox of Victorian progress: that the pursuit of respectability often entails the loss of authenticity and compassion.

Conversely, Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" has generated significant critical attention for its incisive treatment of education, race, and economic consciousness within African American literature. Mary Helen Washington (1987) identifies Miss Moore's lesson as a form of "political education," designed to awaken Sylvia and her peers to the systemic inequities shaping their lives. Through the children's exposure to material wealth and consumer culture, Bambara dramatizes the early stages of class consciousness as both revelation and resistance. Trudier Harris (1990) extends this reading, arguing that Bambara transforms everyday urban and domestic spaces into sites of pedagogical and ideological awakening. The narrative thus aligns with Black feminist and Marxist paradigms, where education functions not merely as intellectual uplift but as an instrument of empowerment, capable of dismantling both racial and economic hierarchies.

Despite this rich critical discourse surrounding each text, comparative analyses of Dickens and Bambara remain surprisingly scarce. While Dickens's nineteenth-century realism and Bambara's twentieth-century social fiction arise from vastly different historical and cultural milieus, both authors converge in their interrogation of education as a moral and social equalizer. Pip's moral education, forged through guilt and self-reflection, contrasts with Sylvia's collective awakening to structural inequality, yet both trajectories reveal how learning—whether through formal schooling or lived experience—becomes a site of ethical transformation.

This paper, therefore, seeks to bridge that scholarly gap by juxtaposing Pip's inward journey of conscience with Sylvia's outward journey toward social awareness. In doing so, it argues that the Bildungsroman, far from being a static or Eurocentric form, continues to evolve as a flexible narrative mode capable of reflecting diverse cultural and political realities. Through Dickens and Bambara, the genre is redefined as a mode of social critique, one that foregrounds class, race, and moral responsibility as central to the very process of becoming.

3. Class and Social Aspiration: The Foundations of the Bildungsroman

Both Pip and Sylvia begin their narratives within working-class environments characterized by deprivation, exclusion, and the internalization of social inferiority. Pip's childhood in the desolate Kent marshes, under the stern guardianship of his sister

and the benevolent guidance of Joe Gargery, situates him within what critics have termed the "iron framework of Victorian poverty." His physical surroundings—bleak, confined, and symbolically stagnant—mirror the social rigidity of nineteenth-century England, where class mobility was largely illusory despite the rhetoric of progress. Similarly, Sylvia's Harlem neighborhood embodies the economic and racial marginalization of post–Civil Rights America, where systemic inequities persist beneath the veneer of social advancement. In both contexts, class identity operates as the formative ground of moral consciousness, shaping how each protagonist perceives self-worth, justice, and belonging.

In *Great Expectations*, Pip's yearning to transcend his class arises not from innate ambition but from a moment of social humiliation. Estella's derisive observation—"He calls the knaves jacks, this boy!" (Dickens, 2008, p. 55) —becomes a pivotal catalyst in Pip's psychological development, awakening a painful awareness of class difference. This episode crystallizes the novel's central irony: that moral self-perception is corrupted by the social gaze. Pip's aspiration to become a gentleman thus reflects not a pursuit of virtue, but a desire to conform to external ideals of respectability, which Dickens exposes as hollow and morally corrosive. As Pip moves from the marshes to London, he enters a sphere where wealth and education, rather than refining character, amplify hypocrisy and alienation. Through this trajectory, Dickens transforms the Bildungsroman into a vehicle for moral critique, illustrating how capitalist and classist ideologies pervert the very process of education and self-improvement. Education, for Pip, becomes an emblem of estrangement—severing him from his origins, from Joe's simple decency, and ultimately from his authentic moral center.

In contrast, Bambara's "The Lesson" relocates the process of Bildung from the individual to the collective, reframing education as a shared act of social awakening. Sylvia's encounter with Miss Moore and the excursion to FAO Schwarz constitute her first experiential confrontation with economic disparity. The sight of toys priced at sums equivalent to a family's sustenance destabilizes her assumptions about fairness and opportunity. When Miss Moore challenges her students—"What kind of society is it in which some people can spend on a toy what it costs to feed a family?" (Bambara, 1972, p. 6)—the question functions as both moral provocation and ideological lesson. Unlike Pip, whose education is mediated through shame and self-denial, Sylvia's awakening is born of critical observation and resistance. She does not aspire to emulate the privileged but begins to recognize the structures that sustain inequality.

Bambara thus redefines the Bildungsroman by rejecting its traditional model of upward mobility and replacing it with one rooted in political consciousness. Sylvia's education does not culminate in assimilation or reconciliation with society but in the recognition of systemic injustice and the possibility of transformation. Whereas Pip's moral education leads him inward—toward guilt, repentance, and personal redemption—Sylvia's learning is outward-facing, oriented toward collective empowerment and social critique.

Through Pip and Sylvia, Dickens and Bambara reveal two distinct yet convergent visions of growth: one that exposes the moral bankruptcy of class aspiration, and another that reimagines education as a radical act of awareness. In both narratives, moral growth emerges not from success or attainment, but from confrontation—whether with one's own illusions or with the inequities of the world.

4. Education as a Tool to Awareness and Alienation

Education in both *Great Expectations* and "The Lesson" functions as a double-edged force—one that initiates moral and intellectual transformation yet simultaneously generates alienation and disillusionment. In both narratives, learning becomes the medium through which the protagonists confront the moral contradictions of their societies. However, while Dickens portrays formal education as structurally inadequate and morally deficient, Bambara envisions informal, community-based education as a site of critical awakening and social empowerment.

In *Great Expectations*, Dickens presents education within a system governed by class hierarchies and material aspiration. Pip's initial schooling under Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt and later tutelage from Matthew Pocket offer little in the way of moral or spiritual development; they merely reinforce social conventions and linguistic propriety. Dickens subtly critiques the Victorian belief in education as a vehicle for self-improvement, exposing how it often serves as a tool for perpetuating class distinction rather than dismantling it. For Pip, true education does not stem from institutional learning but from lived experience—the moral lessons he absorbs from figures such as Joe Gargery and Abel Magwitch. Joe's quiet integrity teaches him compassion and humility, while Magwitch's selfless devotion dismantles his assumptions about gentility and virtue. Pip's eventual reflection that the course of unthankful years had borne their fruit signifies his moral rebirth: a recognition that moral worth cannot be conferred by education, wealth, or social standing but must be earned through empathy, gratitude, and self-awareness.

This process of experiential learning underscores Dickens's redefinition of Bildung as an ethical, not intellectual, journey. Education in Pip's world alienates before it enlightens—it detaches him from his moral roots, estranges him from Joe's sincerity, and immerses him in the moral corruption of London. Only through suffering and remorse does Pip come to understand that the truest form of learning arises not from books or tutors but from the redemptive power of human connection.

Conversely, Bambara in "The Lesson" envisions education as a radical and collective act of consciousness-raising. Miss Moore, the educated African American woman who assumes the role of informal teacher, embodies the transformative potential of community education. Her pedagogical approach defies traditional classroom instruction; instead of rote learning or academic discipline, she engages her students in critical observation and dialogue about the world around them. The visit to

FAO Schwarz becomes an exercise in economic and moral literacy, compelling the children—especially Sylvia—to confront the stark disparities between their lived realities and the wealth of others.

Miss Moore's lesson extends beyond arithmetic and vocabulary to encompass questions of justice, inequality, and self-worth. When she challenges the children to consider, "What kind of society is it in which some people can spend on a toy what it costs to feed a family?" (Bambara, 1972, p. 6), she reframes education as a mode of resistance, equipping her students with the tools to interrogate systemic oppression. Unlike Pip's formal education, which leads to isolation and self-deception, Sylvia's instruction leads to awareness and potential solidarity. The knowledge she gains does not estrange her from her roots but deepens her understanding of them, transforming alienation into critical consciousness.

Bambara thereby revises the traditional Bildungsroman trajectory—from individual social ascent to collective social responsibility. Sylvia's moral education does not culminate in personal advancement but in an awakening to the broader social structures that govern her existence. Through her perspective, Bambara replaces the Eurocentric ideal of Bildung as personal refinement with a politically charged model of learning grounded in awareness, empathy, and community engagement.

In both Dickens and Bambara, then, education emerges as the central metaphor for moral evolution and societal critique. Yet where Dickens mourns the alienation produced by an education divorced from moral substance, Bambara celebrates the emancipatory potential of learning rooted in social justice. Despite differences in cultural context and historical period, both authors arrive at a common insight: true education must extend beyond intellectual development to foster ethical awareness—the capacity to recognize one's place within a wider social and moral framework.

5. Moral Growth and the Awakening of Conscience

Both Pip and Sylvia undergo moral evolution that is precipitated by disillusionment—an awakening that dismantles their naive perceptions of success, virtue, and social order. For both characters, moral growth arises not from achievement but from confrontation: with illusion, with inequality, and ultimately, with the self. Yet, while Dickens conceives of this transformation as a turn inward toward humility and repentance, Bambara envisions it as an outward surge of resistance and political awareness.

In *Great Expectations*, Pip's revelation that Magwitch—an escaped convict rather than a noble patron—is his true benefactor constitutes the emotional and ethical climax of his development. This moment shatters the illusion of gentility that has governed his aspirations and exposes the moral bankruptcy of a society that equates virtue with class status. Pip's declaration, "I only saw in him a man who meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me with great constancy through a series of years." (Dickens, 2008, p. 408) marks his spiritual reorientation from pride to gratitude. In recognizing Magwitch's humanity, Pip transcends the superficial moral codes of Victorian respectability and attains genuine ethical insight. Dickens thus redefines moral success not as social ascension or refinement, but as reconciliation—with others, with one's past, and with one's moral conscience. The qualities of compassion, humility, and gratitude—embodied by Joe and later mirrored in Pip's repentance—contrast sharply with the self-interest and hypocrisy of the upper class he once idolized. Through this reversal, Dickens transforms the Bildungsroman into a critique of bourgeois morality, asserting that true gentility lies not in manners or education but in empathy and moral integrity.

Sylvia's evolution in Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson," though equally transformative, unfolds through a different moral and ideological register. Unlike Pip's moral education, which culminates in remorse and redemption, Sylvia's awakening is characterized by critical defiance and social consciousness. Her realization emerges not from personal guilt but from a dawning awareness of structural injustice. The excursion to FAO Schwarz exposes her to the absurd disparities of wealth and privilege, prompting not submission but reflection and resistance. When Sylvia withdraws from the group at the story's close, asserting, "But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin" (Bambara, 1972, p. 7), her words resonate as both rebellion and resolution. This declaration encapsulates her transformation from passive participant to active thinker—her refusal to remain complicit in a system that marginalizes her.

Bambara's vision of Bildung thus diverges radically from Dickens's moral paradigm. Sylvia's moral evolution is not rooted in repentance or conformity to established values but in the cultivation of critical consciousness—an awareness that compels her to challenge social inequities rather than internalize them. Whereas Pip's growth culminates in self-knowledge and humility, Sylvia's maturity emerges as resistance, agency, and political self-determination. Bambara reimagines the Bildungsroman as a site of empowerment rather than reconciliation, rejecting the passive moral submission characteristic of its European antecedents. Her protagonist's defiance signifies not moral failure but the beginning of moral engagement—a recognition that ethical awareness in an unjust society must manifest through questioning, disruption, and the pursuit of equality.

Through these parallel yet divergent trajectories, Dickens and Bambara present two evolving models of moral education. For Dickens, disillusionment restores the moral order through empathy and repentance; for Bambara, disillusionment ignites transformation through resistance and awareness. Both writers, however, converge on the understanding that moral growth arises only when illusion is stripped away—when the individual confronts the false values of society and begins to see the world with moral clarity. In this sense, Pip and Sylvia represent not only two distinct phases of the Bildungsroman's evolution but also two enduring responses to the same moral question: how one learns to be good in a corrupt world.

6. Society and the Self: From Individual to Collective Consciousness

While Charles Dickens envisions the Bildungsroman as a journey toward the reconciliation of the self with moral truth, Toni Cade Bambara reconfigures it as a journey toward the recognition of collective struggle and social responsibility. In *Great Expectations*, Pip's maturity culminates in the renunciation of pride and the embrace of moral humility; his education leads inward, toward repentance and ethical self-awareness. By contrast, in "The Lesson," Sylvia's awakening propels her outward—toward a consciousness of structural injustice and her potential role as an agent of change. Thus, Dickens's moral universe is rooted in personal virtue and individual redemption, whereas Bambara's moral vision locates virtue within communal awareness and the pursuit of social justice.

Dickens's conception of Bildung adheres to the classical model of moral reconciliation, where spiritual growth emerges from the confrontation between self-deception and moral truth. Pip's journey from illusion to insight embodies the Victorian ideal of moral progress—one achieved through introspection, remorse, and the recovery of authentic human connection. His ultimate recognition that moral worth lies not in class or wealth but in compassion and gratitude exemplifies a humanist vision of moral education grounded in empathy and humility. In this sense, Dickens situates the Bildungsroman within a Christian-humanist ethical framework, where salvation is achieved through moral awareness and forgiveness.

Bambara, writing from a distinctly modern and African American perspective, radicalizes the Bildungsroman, transforming it from a narrative of personal growth into one of social awakening. For Sylvia, enlightenment does not arise from self-reconciliation but from recognizing her embeddedness within systems of race, class, and economic oppression. Her realization at the end of "The Lesson"—asserted through the defiant declaration, "But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin" (Bambara, 1972, p. 7) signals not closure but beginning. Bambara rejects the traditional teleology of moral harmony; Sylvia's Bildung is unfinished, dynamic, and political. Her awakening is not moral submission but moral activation—a readiness to resist, to think critically, and to envision a just alternative to the status quo.

Despite these ideological and structural differences, both Dickens and Bambara converge on the principle that moral education demands the confrontation of illusion. Pip's illusion of gentility—his belief that class elevation equates to moral refinement—crumbles when he discovers that his social aspirations are built upon deceit and exploitation. Similarly, Sylvia's illusion of equality—her childlike assumption that opportunities are universally accessible—dissolves upon witnessing the obscene material excess of consumer capitalism. In both cases, learning begins where illusion ends.

Education, therefore, emerges as a dialectical process—an awakening through contradiction, where moral or social awareness is forged in the tension between appearance and reality. For Dickens, this dialectic manifests as the conflict between material ambition and ethical truth; for Bambara, between systemic oppression and the struggle for justice. Both authors suggest that knowledge, whether moral or political, is not passively acquired but actively wrestled from disillusionment.

In reimagining the Bildungsroman along these lines, Dickens and Bambara chart two complementary dimensions of human formation: the inward turn toward conscience and the outward turn toward community. Pip's humility and Sylvia's defiance represent distinct yet interdependent moral responses to inequality. Together, they demonstrate that the path to maturity—whether defined by moral virtue or social consciousness—requires a reckoning with illusion and an awakening to truth.

7. Narrative Voice and the Language of Growth

Language in both *Great Expectations* and "The Lesson" functions as a crucial marker of class, identity, and moral consciousness, serving not only as a medium of narration but also as a reflection of social position and self-perception. Both Dickens and Bambara employ linguistic form as a moral and ideological tool—language becomes the site where questions of power, education, and authenticity intersect. Through their distinctive narrative voices, each author situates moral development within the act of speaking, listening, and understanding.

In *Great Expectations*, Dickens's use of retrospective first-person narration allows Pip to revisit his youthful illusions through the lens of mature moral reflection. The adult narrator's voice, tinged with irony and regret, transforms the narrative into an act of ethical self-examination. This dual temporal perspective—Pip as the naive boy and Pip as the remorseful narrator—embodies the cyclical structure of the Bildungsroman, where moral growth is articulated through memory and reinterpretation. Language, here, becomes both the vehicle and the evidence of Bildung: Pip's capacity to tell his own story is itself a measure of his moral progress. Dickens's prose oscillates between the elevated diction of aspiration and the plainspoken humility of repentance, mirroring Pip's evolving relationship with class and self-worth. The very refinement of his language—once a symbol of social ambition—ultimately becomes a medium for moral honesty.

By contrast, Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" deploys African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to capture the immediacy of Sylvia's consciousness and to democratize the narrative voice. Bambara's linguistic choices refuse the hierarchies of standard English and literary decorum that historically excluded Black voices from moral and intellectual legitimacy. Sylvia's narration—vivid, rhythmic, and unapologetically colloquial—embodies a form of linguistic resistance, asserting that authentic moral insight can emerge from the margins of language and society. The vernacular does not signify ignorance but emotional precision and cultural rootedness; it enables Bambara to render social critique with immediacy and power. The cadences of Sylvia's speech reveal both her defiance and her dawning awareness, illustrating how language itself becomes a site of consciousness-raising.

In this way, Bambara's narrative voice functions pedagogically as well as politically. By giving linguistic authority to a working-class Black child, Bambara subverts the elitism of linguistic "correctness" and redefines intellectual legitimacy. Miss Moore's lesson may prompt Sylvia's awakening, but it is Sylvia's own language—her idiomatic expression of anger, confusion,

and determination—that transforms moral reflection into agency. The story thus aligns with broader Black feminist and postcolonial linguistic politics, where reclaiming the vernacular becomes an act of self-definition and empowerment.

Through this linguistic contrast, both Dickens and Bambara foreground the moral agency of marginalized voices, though their methods differ. Pip's retrospective, morally tempered voice articulates growth through remorse and retrospection; Sylvia's raw, present-tense narration conveys awakening through immediacy and resistance. The former reflects the internalization and eventual transcendence of social codes; the latter, the rejection and rearticulation of those codes. Together, they represent two ends of a moral spectrum: Pip's reflective humility and Sylvia's assertive consciousness.

Ultimately, language in both texts becomes more than a stylistic device—it is the moral medium of the Bildungsroman. Dickens uses narrative retrospection to reveal the moral evolution of a conscience tempered by experience, while Bambara employs vernacular immediacy to capture the moral birth of social awareness. Both writers, in their distinct linguistic idioms, affirm that the journey toward ethical and intellectual maturity begins in the struggle to find one's voice—and, through that voice, to tell one's truth.

8. Findings and Discussion

The comparative analysis of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" reveals that both texts broaden and redefine the traditional parameters of the Bildungsroman, transforming it from a narrative of personal moral formation into a vehicle for social critique and ethical inquiry. While Dickens's novel envisions moral growth as an inward process of self-recognition and humility, Bambara reconfigures it as an outward movement toward collective awareness and social justice. In both cases, the protagonists' journeys illustrate that the attainment of moral maturity depends not on conformity to social ideals, but on the courage to confront and transcend them.

Three interrelated findings emerge from this comparative reading:

8.1. Class Consciousness as Moral Catalyst

Both Pip and Sylvia undergo moral awakenings through their encounters with social inequality, which serve as mirrors reflecting the moral fissures of their respective societies. Pip's shame in the presence of Estella and later remorse upon discovering Magwitch's generosity expose the hollowness of Victorian ideals of gentility and merit. Similarly, Sylvia's confrontation with the consumerist excess of FAO Schwarz forces her to recognize the economic and racial inequities that structure her world. In both narratives, class consciousness operates as the catalyst for ethical reflection, dismantling the myth of meritocracy that sustains class and racial hierarchies. The protagonists' realizations echo a shared moral truth: genuine human worth cannot be measured by wealth, status, or linguistic refinement, but by integrity, empathy, and justice.

8.2. Education Beyond Institutions

Both Dickens and Bambara redefine education as a process that transcends formal institutions. Pip's moral development unfolds not in the schoolroom but through his lived encounters—with Joe's quiet decency, Magwitch's sacrifice, and his own moral failures. Similarly, Sylvia's most profound lesson emerges outside the boundaries of formal schooling, guided instead by Miss Moore's experiential pedagogy. In both works, education becomes an act of moral seeing—an awakening of awareness rather than an accumulation of knowledge. Dickens critiques Victorian schooling as a mechanism that reproduces class distinctions, while Bambara challenges the idea that academic learning alone can liberate the oppressed. Instead, both writers suggest that true education is rooted in empathy, reflection, and the willingness to question inherited values.

8.3. Transformation Through Reflection

The evolution of both Pip and Sylvia illustrates the Bildungsroman's transformation from a narrative of private maturity to one of social engagement. Pip's moral redemption, achieved through repentance and recognition of his moral blindness, embodies the classical arc of self-purification; Sylvia's awakening, marked by her defiant resolve to confront inequality, signifies a modern, activist turn in the genre. Together, they chart a continuum of moral consciousness—from inward humility to outward resistance. In this way, both authors transform the Bildungsroman into a dialectical model of moral formation, in which individual awareness is inseparable from social responsibility.

Ultimately, the comparative study demonstrates that moral growth in both narratives requires the dismantling of illusion—whether that illusion takes the form of gentility and self-advancement in Dickens's England or the false promise of equality in Bambara's America. The protagonists' journeys illuminate the enduring pedagogical power of literature itself: its ability to expose injustice, provoke reflection, and nurture the moral imagination. Through Pip's humility and Sylvia's defiance, Dickens and Bambara reaffirm that the true purpose of Bildung is not the perfection of the self but the awakening of conscience—an awakening that bridges personal integrity and collective justice.

9. Conclusion

Charles Dickens and Toni Cade Bambara, though separated by more than a century and rooted in vastly different cultural and historical milieus, converge in their conviction that education serves as the most profound form of moral liberation. In both *Great Expectations* and "The Lesson," education transcends the boundaries of formal instruction to become a transformative moral experience—one that dismantles illusions of privilege and exposes the ethical dimensions of class and inequality. Dickens redefines the Bildungsroman within the industrial and moral turbulence of Victorian England, transforming it from a mere story of personal advancement into a critique of social mobility built on exploitation and materialism. Pip's moral

evolution—from the shame of his origins to the realization of humility, gratitude, and empathy—reflects Dickens's belief that true gentility lies in moral integrity, not social rank.

Bambara, writing from the perspective of twentieth-century African American experience, reimagines the Bildungsroman as an instrument of collective awakening and resistance. Through Sylvia's confrontation with economic disparity under Miss Moore's guidance, "The Lesson" transforms education into a vehicle of social and racial consciousness. Bambara's reinterpretation of the form replaces Dickens's individual moral epiphany with communal awareness, asserting that enlightenment arises not from isolation but from shared struggle against systemic oppression. Sylvia's defiant reflection at the story's close embodies the spirit of self-determination and critical agency that defines Bambara's moral vision.

A comparative reading of these two works thus reveals the Bildungsroman as a living, evolving genre—one that continually reshapes itself to reflect the moral crises of its time. For Dickens, the central moral question concerns the reconciliation of personal conscience with the corrupting ambitions of industrial capitalism; for Bambara, it lies in awakening the oppressed consciousness to the realities of racial and economic inequality. Yet both authors preserve the genre's enduring humanistic essence: the awakening of the self through awareness, empathy, and ethical responsibility. In uniting Pip's humility with Sylvia's resistance, Dickens and Bambara affirm that moral growth cannot exist apart from social understanding. The Bildungsroman, therefore, remains not merely a narrative of personal formation but a literary testament to the transformative power of education, justice, and moral truth in an unequal world.

References

Bambara, T. C. (1972). *The lesson*. In *Gorilla, my love*. Random House.
Bowen, J. (2012). Great expectations and the education of desire. *Victorian Studies, 54*(1), 47–63.
Dickens, C. (2008). *Great expectations*. Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1861).
Harris, T. (1990). *Fiction and folklore: The novels of Toni Morrison*. University of Tennessee Press.
Lukács, G. (1971). *The theory of the novel*. MIT Press.
Miller, J. H. (1958). Charles Dickens: The world of his novels. Harvard University Press.
Moynahan, J. (1960). The hero's guilt: The case of Great Expectations. Essays in Criticism, 10(1), 60–79.
Washington, M. H. (1987). Teaching Black women's short fiction. The Journal of Negro Education, 56(3), 421–432.
Williams, R. (1977). Marxism and literature. Oxford University Press.