

# Bonding, Separation and Identity in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*

Šárka Bubíková

University of Pardubice

## Abstract

*In contrast to Merle Hodge's suggestion that the novels of Jamaica Kincaid "are a genre unto themselves" (Hodge 53), the article discusses Annie John as a variation of the Bildungsroman genre. Engaging both the traditional and the more recent scholarship on the genre, the article places the novel in the context of the Bildungsroman and analyzes its typical generic elements (such as conflict with parents, sexual awakening, or leaving home) as well as those elements specific to the process of growing up in the postcolonial situation (such as reinterpretation of history).*

*Keywords: Bildungsroman, Annie John, Jamaica Kincaid, Caribbean childhood, homoeroticism, identity formation, reinterpretation of history*

Jamaica Kincaid's short novel *Annie John* (1983) tells the story of a young girl's growing up in Antigua. The main aspect of Annie John's maturation process is her painful separation from her mother and her gradual realization that her home does not offer her options that she would like to explore. The novel follows its protagonist from the age of ten to her late teens and includes most of the typical milestones of coming-of-age—realization of death in the opening chapter, conflict with parents, in this case with her mother, questioning of authority (both parental and school authority, standing for the authority of the colonial power), sexual awakening, and leaving home at the very end of the narrative.

A novel concentrating on the development of the protagonist from childhood to adolescence and young adulthood is traditionally labeled a Bildungsroman, a literary genre that grew out of classical heroic narrative; its plot is derived from quest and initiation motifs, or, in the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, from the "idea of testing" (16). The Bildungsroman's main theme is the "image of *man in the process of becoming*" (19) and thus the Bildungsroman is "the novel of human *emergence*" (21). While the Bildungsroman originated at a

specific point of history and as such can be viewed as a product of a certain paradigmatic shift, it has proved capable of migrating both in time and space. The Bildungsroman was traditionally understood as a narrative of white male development. However, even though its existence was not fully recognized until the second wave of feminist criticism, the novel of female development<sup>1</sup> is not new, and “does not rise out of a vacuum” (Feng 10); its tradition similarly goes back to the eighteenth century. Eve Tavor Bannet sees the emergence of the female tradition of the Bildungsroman in close connection with the rise of the novel (195–227), and Rita Felski considers the genre’s contemporary popularity as resulting from the opening up of opportunities for women to study and to pursue a career, and also as a parallel to the decline of the traditional male Bildungsroman happening at the same time (131–148).

In the 1980s, the decade that saw the publication of *Annie John*, Barbara Anne White even considers the female Bildungsroman “the most popular form of feminist fiction” (195). We can justly conclude that in the second half of the twentieth century, the female ethnic Bildungsroman became a very popular literary form allowing the exploration of issues of gender and cultural identity, cultural expectations of girlhood and femininity, ethnic and postcolonial identity formation. Thus when Keja Valens claims that *Annie John* only “appear[s] to conform to the conventions of the Bildungsroman” and that it subverts it by bending it “into a narrative of desire between girls,” a narrative that “Caribbeanizes and queers the straight white lines of the Bildungsroman” (123–124), she in fact points to the general characteristics of the more recent development of the genre, its female and ethnic tradition. Because I do not limit my understanding of the genre only to its white, male, eighteenth-century origins but instead see its tradition as rich and diverse—including novels focusing on the coming-of-age of female and, more recently, also ethnic protagonists—I view *Annie John* as in fact conforming to the conventions of the female ethnic Bildungsroman which creatively engages in alterations, subversions and expansion of the white male variant of the genre.

As Martin Japtok has so powerfully demonstrated in his seminal study, the Bildungsroman, although seemingly a genre focused on individuality, “is well suited for the exploration of the meaning of ethnicity because it focuses on the relations of the protagonist with the wider environment” (21) and because “an assertion of individuality makes sense in the face of a denial of individuality, or even humanity, because of one’s group affiliation” (24). Although *Annie John* grows up in an environment where she is no longer exposed to open racism, the colonial past still casts its long shadow over her life—if not in political terms, than undoubtedly in cultural ones. Thus *Annie* needs to negotiate her identity against the norms of the white mainstream (the former colonial power). The novel, similarly to Kincaid’s novel *Lucy* even if less explicitly, “examine[s] the ideological indoctrination of the colonized people with the colonialist culture and educational system which affects the values and way of thinking of the colonized subjects” (Kolář 113).

In *A Small Place* Kincaid expressed her anger both at the colonial power for imposing its culture and educational system on the island and at the Antiguan for not being able to fully achieve their independence, to build their own educational institutions (or even a library) to better their lot (Kincaid, *Small* 9). Some of this anger and ambiguity towards the Antiguan culture is felt in *Annie John*.

As mentioned above, the relationship between Annie and her mother is tense, although the novel opens with lyrical descriptions of the deep mother-daughter bond and the ensuing happiness. The happiest time Annie experiences with her mother is during vacations when she does not have to go to school and, free of any duties, she simply “spen[ds] the day following [her] mother around and observe[s] the way she did everything” (Kincaid, *Annie* 15). She admits: “How important I felt to be with my mother” (15). The intimacy of the mother-daughter relationship is symbolized by the baths they take together. Annie clearly adores her mother; she loves to watch her in conversations with her father because: “When my eyes rested on my mother, I found her beautiful” (18).

But the most precious time for Annie and her mother is their ritualized habit of the occasional thorough cleaning of a large trunk which stores “things that belonged to me, starting from just before I was born” (20). These are very special and very intimate moments shared by the two women. As Annie’s mother airs each item in the trunk, she explains its purpose, places it in Annie’s personal history and retells a story connected with it. In this way, the mother creates Annie’s identity and confirms her personal story and her place in the family history. Contrary to Adlai H. Murdoch’s suggestion that the trunk functions as a metaphor for “the mother’s enclosure, containment, limitation, possession and direction of her daughter’s life and identity” (Murdoch 330), it can more appropriately be seen as combining the function of the chest and of the wardrobe, as identified by Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space*. According to him, chests are connected with secrecy and intimacy, while wardrobes (and the trunk is in fact a wardrobe of Annie John’s baby clothes) function as centers of order preventing the house from falling into disarray (74–82). Thus the trunk can be seen as a metaphor for the orderly and intimate days of Annie John’s early childhood, which was marked with the happiness of the openly expressed mother’s love and with the generally supportive, albeit somewhat distant, relationship with her father.

The fact that Annie requires her mother to go through the trunk’s contents, that she needs the ritual as a reminder of her identity, of who she is, implies that her self is not yet fully autonomous and mature. She needs her mother for her own self-expression because she cannot yet see herself but through her mother’s eyes. As Merle Hodge points out, the novel’s focus is almost exclusively on the protagonist/narrator and “there is no attempt at complete and detailed characterization in the case of the other actors in [Annie’s] life story” (52). For that reason the reader is left with very little textual support for Murdoch’s claim that the mother “possesses” her daughter’s life. In fact, Annie John’s mother is the one who initiates the loosening of the tight bond between them, who tries to set her daughter on a quest for autonomous individuality. There is no suggestion that the mother would discourage her daughter from leaving home and seeking a new life in Europe; it is she who in fact initiates the plan, as Annie complains at the end of the narrative: “Why, I wonder, didn’t I see the hypocrite in my mother when, over the years, she said that she loved me and could hardly live without me, while at the same time proposing and arranging separation after separation including this one?” (Kincaid, *Annie* 133) It is Annie who still, at the novel’s close, understands love in possessive terms, and would like to possess and be possessed by her mother. Thus, if Annie could make a choice, she would remain forever a child living in a well-functioning family immersed in her mother’s love. But Annie, too, must grow up—and that includes developing her own independent self.

Annie's journey to maturity begins, it seems, all of a sudden when she turns twelve and her mother refuses to have their dresses made out of the same cloth as they always used to be, explaining: "Oh, no. You are getting too old for that. It's time you had your own clothes. You just cannot go around the rest of your life looking like a little me" (26). And to symbolically wean her extremely dependent daughter, Annie's mother refuses to go again through the things in the old trunk: "Absolutely not! You and I don't have time for that anymore" (27). Annie perceives her mother's rejection as betrayal, because until that moment everything seemed to confirm that Annie *was* to be defined by her mother and to simply *be* a 'copy' of her. Annie even has the same name as her mother, which adds to her difficulty in self-identification. Murdoch rightly concludes: "Annie's ability to recognize herself as a subject is circumscribed severely; in seeking the truth of herself through the image of the (m)other, with whom she identifies, she is alienated both from herself and from the world around her" (331).

Annie is told that she is becoming a young lady and that she needs to adopt new ways of conduct, which she rebelliously rejects. From that moment on, Annie John's relationship with her mother grows increasingly tense and more ambivalent, as Annie seems to hold her growing up against her mother in a very child-like manner. She is jealous of the fact that her parents love one another and she cannot cope with their sexuality. Annie withdraws into her world of daydreaming and of intense emotional peer relationships. "To an American, conditioned against blatant displays of intimacy, the behavior of Annie and her friends [...] might imply a degree of abnormality, almost a borderline lesbianism" (LeSeur 176). LeSeur further explains that "women in the West Indies seem to be uninhibited with their friendships with each other yet somewhat reserved when it comes to handling their children" (177). As much as this is culturally true, in the novel the intensity and intimacy of the girls' mutual friendships seem to make up not only for the gradual weakening of the mother-daughter bond but also for the lack of male presence in their lives. In Annie's life, apart from her father, hardly any other men appear. Her school is girls-only and generally the world she lives in seems to be separated along gender lines.

However, Keja Valens sees Annie John's relationships as clearly homoerotic and thus considers the novel a story of lesbian coming-of-age. In fact, Annie never looks for a heterosexual relationship; she does not dream of marriage and a standard family life. On the contrary, in her dreams she always lives with the girl she is currently in love with. During her early school days, she feels secure and appreciated in her class and declares: "I looked at these girls surrounding me, my heart filled with just-sprung-up love, and I wished then and there to spend the rest of my life only with them" (Kincaid, *Annie* 45). Annie first develops a close relationship with her classmate Gwen, then, as a symbol of her rebellion against propriety and lady-like behavior, she starts to see a girl she nicknames the Red Girl. Annie's mother disapproves of the Red Girl as "dirty" (57) but Annie sees her as "beautiful":

Her face was big and round and red, like a moon—a red moon. She had big, broad, flat feet, and they were naked to the bare ground; her dress was dirty, the skirt and blouse tearing away from each other at one side; the red hair [...] was matted and tangled; her hands were big and fat, and her fingernails held at least ten anthills of dirt

under them. And on top of that, she had such an unbelievable, wonderful smell, as if she had never taken a bath in her whole life. (57)

Although the narrator/protagonist openly states that she loves other girls and her classmates are said to understand everything (46), there is no explicit treatment of the issue that goes beyond infatuations with girls. Interestingly enough, *Annie John* does not contain the so-called coming-out, a typical element of the gay variant of the Bildungsroman. Gregory Woods even sees the “coming-out novel” as “the gay equivalent of the Bildungsroman” and he claims that it “almost inevitably, almost invariably” contains “an account of the move away from the family—a move which, if not literal and physical, is at least psychological and in that respect irreversible” (Woods 346). *Annie John* never openly names the protagonist’s sexual preference and thus leaves her homoerotic or possibly lesbian orientation only implied. However, just as “one of the stock images in gay literature is that of a young man striving to leave his (small-town) family for a bigger world, never to return” (175), as Roman Trušník states, *Annie John* can be seen as a female variation of the same stock image: Annie leaves her (small island) family for the opportunities of the bigger world of Great Britain, and no possibility of return is suggested at the novel’s close, when in fact Annie mentions her “never-see-this-again feelings” (146).

The conflict with a parent often functions in the Bildungsroman as a vehicle for uncovering and pointing out various issues. One of them is, naturally, the struggle for individuation, for establishing the individual self. While Annie at the novel’s opening lives in an almost ideal pre-Lapsarian harmony with her mother, it is only a temporal identification that must be cast away in order for Annie to grow up<sup>2</sup>. When she begins to realize that she and her mother are in fact two separate beings, she focuses on their difference instead of on their similarity. Suddenly, she sees in her mother features she has not noticed before. Murdoch summarizes:

[It] gives rise to a new perception of the mother as being both racially and culturally different. The mother’s creole Dominican past becomes opposed to Annie’s Antiguan cultural formation, so that the mother’s cultural separateness and ‘foreignness’ are interpreted as a form of racial difference. This idea of racial difference as a subset of ‘foreignness’ thus initially terminates the primary stage in which Annie seeks her identity through the (m)other. (325)

But compared to other ethnic female Bildungsromane, there is very little discussion or even explicit concern for ethnicity and racial identification. While Annie struggles with the separation from her mother and with the loss of their original emotional closeness—which is a necessary prerequisite for developing her own personal identity—her alienation from her mother, according to LeSeur, “becomes a metaphor for a young woman’s alienation from an island culture that has been completely dominated by the imperialist power of England” (181). However, this metaphor is somewhat ambivalent, because although Annie might in fact be alienated from her original culture by the imposition of Victorian ideology, she does not seek her ethnic roots in order to find herself and her position in the world, but instead runs away to England, which can offer her an education and a career. For Annie, this is a far preferable alternative to the gender role assigned to her at home—there she

would be a wife and a mother. So paradoxically, while the Antiguan home culture is still embedded in the imposed Victorian gender role division, the society of the former colonial power itself has already entered a process of re-defining these roles resulting in a much greater freedom of life choices for women. While Annie is still sent to piano and courtesy lessons in order to become “a lady,” in post-war Britain these skills would already be a somewhat outdated class marker and a sign of gender appropriateness.

Interestingly enough, in her rebellion against her prescribed path, Annie follows in the footsteps of her mother. Annie’s mother also rebelled against her parents and resolved her conflict with her father by packing her trunk and leaving her home in the Dominican Republic forever. Réjouis thus concludes that the story Annie hears during her childhood many times forms an important narrative center:

The mother’s story is the hagiography of which the trunk is a relic, a relic that now binds a family together. [...] The mother is a saint, someone who has suffered and therefore should be better loved and obeyed, because, rather than compromise her principles, she has renounced her home and native island [...] Her saintly status is further established because her decision to leave home was followed by her miraculous survival (along with her trunk) of a hurricane in which others perished. This hagiography gives the mother infinite power and authority. (217)

Being a young West Indian girl makes Annie struggle with the discrepancy between her British-based education and the “native” attitude to history. Annie has a very ambivalent relationship to British culture. She comments with contempt on many aspects of British culture she experiences first hand. “For instance, the headmistress, Miss Moore. I knew right away that she had come to Antigua from England, for she looked like a prune left out of its jar a long time and she sounded as if she had borrowed her voice from an owl”(36). She agrees with her mother that the English people “smell as if they had been bottled up in a fish” because “they didn’t wash often enough, or wash properly when they finally did” (36). However, it is Europe where Annie places her dreams of fulfillment. She dreams of living in Belgium, a place she “had picked when [she] read [...] that Charlotte Brontë, the author of my favorite novel, *Jane Eyre*, had spent a year or so there” (92). Finally, Annie leaves Antigua for England.

While critical of British history and of some aspects of British culture, Annie nevertheless (and perhaps somewhat paradoxically) sees Europe as her promised land. She finds role models in canonical English literary texts, she prefers English to her mother’s creolized language, and she connects her future with England rather than Antigua. Although Valens warns that this aspect of the novel must not be read as privileging Europe nor as suggesting that the protagonist “accedes to the colonial supposition that ‘culture’ and progress belong to the ‘mother’ country” (143), Annie John is nevertheless attracted to Europe because of liking English novels (culture) and because of wanting to improve her economic prospects in life (progress).

In *Annie John*, reinterpretation of history is certainly an important motif and an element of Annie’s growing up that she must face and learn to cope with. Naturally Annie reflects on history during her school years, when her postcolonial situation makes her aware of both sides of history. Christopher Columbus functions in the book as a very

useful example of the reinterpretation of history. Out of all her history-book pictures of Christopher Columbus, Annie particularly likes the one depicting Columbus fettered in chains when he was sent back to Spain. To the great shock of her teacher, Annie uses a quote from her grandmother's letter describing her grandfather's condition and writes it under the Columbus's illustration: "The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go" (78). Annie enjoys seeing the symbol of the European expansion to the Caribbean powerless: "How I loved this picture – to see the usually triumphant Columbus, brought so low, seated at the bottom of a boat just watching things go by" (77–8). Columbus stands here metonymically for the whole history of colonial presence and the slave history of the Caribbean—even if, compared to other historical figures such as Christopher Codrington, his was not the most damaging impact on the island's peoples and culture.

Yet as much as Annie John is aware of the painful parts of her island's history and is upset by some of the facts of the European discovery of America and the European presence in the Caribbean, she is certainly not a role model for ethnic (or cultural) tolerance. In fact, she has many harsh comments on the English and even does not hesitate to bully another girl particularly for being English: "Ruth I liked, because she was such a dunce and came from England and had yellow hair. When I first met her, I used to walk her home and sing bad songs to her just to see her turn pink, as if I had spilled hot water over her" (73). Kincaid here presents the unfortunate long-lasting effects of colonialism and white dominance, effects known in various forms from other cultures subjected to a domineering other—the internalization of the power dynamics and of the idea of racial hierarchy. Although Annie no longer sees her own race as inferior (as the colonial power had seen it), she is still using the former oppressors' means of racial hatred and dominance and inverts it.

Thus, although Annie seems to have a sense of historical wrongdoings, she is ready to use the power of her talents and intelligence in an almost parallel way to the criticized colonial power. She understands the unease felt by one of her classmates during history lessons: "Perhaps she wanted to be in England, where no one would remind her constantly of the terrible things her ancestors had done; perhaps she felt even worse when her father was a missionary in Africa" (76). Annie is sure that her people would never do such terrible things: "But we, the descendants of the slaves, knew quite well what had really happened, and I was sure that if the tables had been turned we would have acted differently" (76). She imagines this alternative history with a beautiful degree of naïveté, creating a tourist alternative to colonization:

I was sure that if our ancestors had gone from Africa to Europe and come upon the people living there, they would have taken a proper interest in the Europeans on first seeing them, and said, 'How nice,' and then gone home to tell their friends about it.  
(76)

At the same time, though, she dreams of destroying ships of tourists and enjoys the image: "At night, we would sit on the sand and watch ships filled with people on a cruise steam by. We sent confusing signals to the ships, causing them to crash on some nearby rocks. How we laughed as their cries of joy turned to cries of sorrow" (71).

Thus, unfortunately, there is not much in Annie's behavior and attitude to other people to support her illusions of herself as behaving much better should the course of history have run differently. She is, in fact, a very manipulative and power seeking girl, self-centered and ready to abuse those who love her. LeSeur puts it rather mildly when she states: "Kincaid presents a very strong character whom the reader finds intriguing; yet Annie's strength seems to have turned her into a cold human being" (178). Annie truly acts as a spoiled only child, intelligent and clever, but incapable of empathy and emotionally (on occasion even mentally) unstable. Upon leaving Antigua, Annie still distances herself from her mother as she had done during her teens, "as if the ground had opened between us, making a deep and wide split" (Kincaid, *Annie* 103), and she does not respond to her mother's affirmation: "It doesn't matter what you do or where you go, I'll always be your mother and this will always be your home" (147). When exchanging smiles with her mother, Annie admits "the opposite of that was in my heart" (147).

*Annie John* thus can be seen as an open-ended Bildungsroman, one where the protagonist's maturation is not complete at the end of the narrative and the reader is left to imagine what the next chapter in her life could bring. Annie's coming-of-age is unfinished, her leaving Antigua does not resolve the conflicts and pains of growing up. Quite the contrary: rather than gradually coming to terms with her family of origin, her ethnic background and her gender (and possibly her lesbianism), Annie runs away from it to start anew somewhere else. But all these issues will have to be addressed eventually in order for Annie to truly enter adulthood. She has not yet completed the process of negotiating her ethnic, cultural and even personal identity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a list of female Bildungsromane in English see Laura Sue Fuderer, *The Female Bildungsroman in English: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism*. New York: MLA, 1990, 34–43.

<sup>2</sup> In her article on *Annie John*, Roni Natov applies Lacanian theory and interprets the close relationship in terms of the pre-Oedipal stage. See Roni Natov, "Mothers and Daughters: Jamaica Kincaid's Pre-Oedipal Narrative." *Children's Literature* 18 (1990): 1–16.

## Bibliography

- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. New York: Orion Press, 1964.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)". *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.
- Bannet, Eve Tavor. "Rewriting the Social Text: The Bildungsroman in Eighteenth-Century England." *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*. Ed. James N. Hardin. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991. 195–227.
- Felski, Rita. "The Novel of Self-Discovery: A Necessary Fiction?" *Southern Review* 19 (1986): 131–148.

- Feng, Pin-chia. *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999.
- Hodge, Merle. "Caribbean Writers and Caribbean Language: A Study of Jamaica Kincaid's Annie John." *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars*. Eds. Adele S. Newson and Linda Strong-Leek. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. 47–53.
- Japtok, Martin. *Growing up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *A Small Place*. New York: Penguin, 1988.
- . *Annie John*. 1983. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
- Kolář, Stanislav. "The (Post)Colonial Search for the Identity of Caribbean American (Grand) daughters." *Litteraria Pragensia* 20.39 (2010): 99–114.
- LeSeur, Geta. *Ten Is the Age of Darkness. The Black Bildungsroman*. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1995.
- Murdoch, Adlai H. "Severing the (M)other Connection: The Representation of Cultural Identity in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*." *Callaloo* 13.2 (Spring 1990): 325–340.
- Réjouis, Rose-Myriam. "Caribbean Writers and Language: The Autobiographical Poetics of Jamaica Kincaid and Patrick Chamoiseau." *Massachusetts Review* 49.1-2 (2003): 213–232.
- Trušník, Roman. "Journeys Back to the Family in James Barr's *Quatrefoil* and Jim Grimsley's *Comfort & Joy*." *America in Motion*. Eds. Marcel Arbeit and Roman Trušník. Olomouc: Palacký University, 2010. 175–186.
- Valens, Keja. "Obvious and Ordinary: Desire between Girls in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*." *Frontier* 25.2 (2004): 123–124.
- White, Barbara Anne. *Growing up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985.
- Woods, Gregory. *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

*Address:*  
*University of Pardubice*  
*Faculty of Arts and Philosophy*  
*Department of English and American Studies*  
*Studentská 84*  
*532 10 Pardubice*  
*Czech Republic*  
*sarka.bubikova@upce.cz*