Rhesis International Journal of Linguistics, Philology and Literature

The *Bildungsroman* and class consciousness: the role of shame in *Kipps* by H.G. Wells[1]

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Abstract

Kipps (1905) by Herbert George Wells establishes an ambiguous relationship with the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*: by parodying it and by caricaturing its archetypical characters, Wells's work lays bare the values and cultural background on which the nineteenth-century production of the genre was based. In particular, given the focal role of the social compromise between bourgeoisie and aristocracy in this production, Wells's novel has the effect of showing the weakening of the upper class as well as illustrating a transition phase of the middle class which had not yet been legitimised to constitute a new social model.

To this end, this study will follow two trajectories: on the one hand, it will illustrate *Kipps*'s deviation from the classic *Bildungsroman* on the structural and semantic levels, in which the values and ideals underlying the reference genre are reversed. On the other hand, it will examine the role of the emotion of shame in the three main phases of Kipps's *Bildung* and the different traits that it assumes in the gradual emergence of a social reflection and a class consciousness in the protagonist's experience. Being strictly related to the protagonist's social ascent, shame involves both the social and the moral levels. As a social emotion, in this novel it implies social ranks and a real or internalised audience, while as a moral emotion it is crucial to the definition of the protagonist's identity and to the acquisition of self-awareness through the comparison with the others. In terms of the reversal of the socialisation process expected by the traditional *Bildungsroman*, this analysis illustrates how the protagonist's overcoming shame coincides with his distancing from the norm, from the class conventions that the novel emphasises and calls into question.

Key Words – *Kipps*; Herbert George Wells; *Bildungsroman*; shame

[1] This contribution originates from the collaboration with the research group funded by RAS in 2017, "Shame and its masks", composed by research units from the Universities of Sassari and Cagliari and directed by Sotera Fornaro. I thank her for her suggestions in the first phase of development of this work.

Rhesis. International Journal of Linguistics, Philology and Literature (ISSN 2037-4569)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13125/rhesis/5683
Literature, 10.2: 5-18, 2019
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1.

The *Bildungsroman*, between the peak of its popularity in the nineteenth century and its legacies in the first decade of the twentieth century, is a particularly fertile ground for the observation of the dynamics that involve not only the protagonists during their formative process – often coinciding with that of social ascent – but also the dialectic between different social groups. More precisely, the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* witnesses that «attempt at synthesis» or the «problematic compromise» between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy (Moretti 1987: 68) which in the British production acquires specific features compared to the European production. By choosing as protagonists characters definable as «common» (Moretti 1987: 189) or with «faded bourgeoise features» (Moretti 1987: 205), the nineteenth-century British *Bildungsroman* sets the stage for a happy ending that in most cases implies the ascent of the protagonist to the upper class through marriage.

Kipps by Herbert George Wells (1905) falls within the period that Moretti defines as the phase of the crisis of the European *Bildungsroman* (1898 to 1914)[2]. However, unlike the works he takes to be exemplary of this phase, *Kipps* emphasises on the one hand the continuity with the tradition of the English *Bildungsroman*, and on the other the rupture with it, the defiance of readers' expectations on the diegetic and semantic level. Through constant allusions and meta-textual references to the genre – by parodying the classic *Bildungsroman* and by caricaturing its archetypical characters – Wells's work lays bare the values and cultural background on which the nineteenth-century production of the genre was based.

This contribution observes that the social criticism of *Kipps* produces a double effect: it shows the weakening of the upper class, and at the same time it illustrates a transition phase of the middle class, which was gradually overcoming traditional barriers of rank but had not yet been legitimised to constitute a new social model[3].

To this purpose, the analysis will follow two trajectories: on the one hand, it will illustrate *Kipps*'s deviation from the classic *Bildungsroman* on the structural and semantic levels, in which the values and ideals underlying the reference genre are reversed. On the other hand, it will examine the role of the emotion of shame in the three main phases of Kipps's *Bildung*[4] and the different traits that it assumes in the gradual emergence of a social reflection and a class consciousness in the protagonist's experience. These two approaches are complementary since both support *Kipps*'s questioning of the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* and its distancing itself from it on the ideological level: indeed, *Kipps* parodies the genre that has made of the social compromise its pillar, and in so doing it always emphasises the diegetic role of shame, the «social emotion» (Maibom 2010: 567) *par excellence*. Shame, in fact, considered from this perspective, involves social rank and indicates the protagonist's inability to «live up to norms, ideals and standards that are primarily public» (Maibom 2010: 568). It also implies the presence of a real or internalised audience[5], whose judgment matters to the extent that it reflects what social conventions and morality demand. In terms of the reversal of the socialisation process expected by the traditional *Bildungsroman*, the analysis illustrates how the protagonist's overcoming shame coincides with his distancing from the norm, from the class conventions that the novel emphasises and calls into question.

More specifically, compared to other contemporaneous *Bildungsromane*, Wells's work establishes an ambiguous relationship with the nineteenth-century production: it parodies its distinguishing *topoi*

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[2] Although the novel was published in 1905, its genesis was in 1898, as testified by Wells's letter to his editor J.B. Pinkers (see Wilson 1969: XV).
[3] See Briggs (1977 [1954]: 143-144): «The industrial system was becoming less competitive and far more impersonal, and social mobility was beginning to depend more on education than on perseverance and initiative in adult life».
[4] The three phases in which the shame has a key role are during Kipps's apprenticeship, engagement and marriage.
[5] See Fussi (2018: 13).

and characters but reuses its realistic writing style and maintains some structural features. Perhaps the most significant example of the tendency to structural similarity occurs in the last pages, when Kipps gets his happy ending thanks to his job, his family, and an unexpected income from a previous investment. The deviation from the traditional novel can be found in the source of the happy ending: it does not come from successful integration into the upper class, as in the classic *Bildungsroman*, where the usual purpose of the protagonist's development and his socialisation process was to achieve a balance, coinciding with the compromise with the laws and conventions of the upper class. To this end, the protagonist usually finds obstacles in his path, but he continually eludes turning points and breaks[6], «an elusion […] of whatever may endanger the Ego's equilibrium, making its compromises impossible» (Moretti 1987: 12). Contrary to tradition, Kipps's *Bildung* questions and relativises conventional schemes by overturning them[7].

This study does not deal with the formal and rhetorical aspects of this reversal: the use of irony and parody has already been investigated in another contribution in which I highlighted the ambivalent relationship that this novel establishes with *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens[8], a work already somewhat distant from the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*. This contribution only highlights one of the operations which suggests and corroborates the transgression of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* model, that is, the displacement of one of the *topoi* functionally related to the happy ending: the fortuitous inheritance, placed at the origin of the formative process instead of at the end in the works of both Wells and Dickens. Furthermore, just as in Dickens's novel, in *Kipps* the romantic relationship with a woman of a higher social class begins its reflection on class consciousness with the discovery of the emotion of shame: in both works love is conceived as the driving force which controls the actions of the protagonist, and it is at the origin of his desire for social ascent. He is aware of his social inferiority with respect to the woman of whom he aspires to be worthy[9]. However, the main deviation from Dickens's work is that Wells links two *topoi* conventionally placed in the happy ending – the engagement with the upper-class woman and the unrelated, fortuitous acquisition of an inheritance – and places them at the beginning instead, establishing a clear causal relationship between fortune and engagement. In the end, Wells's non-traditional collocation of events results in the partial overcoming of shame as well as of the social conventions that gave rise to it.

In *Kipps*, therefore, shame emerges as an emotion of self-awareness, necessary for self-improvement and for the development of the protagonist's identity in comparison with others[10]. It also implies a sense of submission, inferiority and subordination, since the protagonist always sees himself as inferior to the social group that he wants to join or whose recognition and approval he seeks. If the *Bildungsroman* aims to complete the protagonist's *normalisation* – intended as the internalisation of social norms for his full social integration – shame is, consequently, the emotion that best expresses the acceptance (or not) of the group's rules: as Miniati observes (2008: 91) by sharing others' norms, the individual strengthens that community's system of values and he communicates in this way his desire to "stay in the ranks" and to respect a social balance that could be upset by his transgression. For this reason, in *Kipps*, shame is also a key emotion to observe the protagonist's acquisition of class consciousness and of greater awareness on a moral level[11]. As we will see, when Kipps realises that his attempts at self-refinement have resulted in a sterile adhesion to empty conventions, the shame of his new life and of his undeserved wealth replace the shame of

[6] See Moretti (1987: 12).
[7] Among the various approaches conflated by Moretti (1987) in his study on *Bildungsromane*, this contribution is focused exclusively on the sociological and narratological ones.
[8] See Cao (2016: 219-254); Lodge (2005: xix); Wiesenfarth (1999: 73-76).
[9] See Fussi (2018: 12; 144).
[10] See Miniati (2008: 87).
[11] Miniati (2008: 87).

his origins, and his desire for material success is substituted by a desire to regain his lost dignity and self-respect. Therefore, both the transgression of the typical patterns of the *Bildungsroman* and the specific fact of the protagonist's overcoming of shame contribute to the questioning of that process of alignment with the bourgeois standards on which the genre had always been based.

2.

Over the course of three books, *Kipps* recounts the main stages of the formative path of the eponymous character, an orphan who has only known his mother and spent most of his life with his uncles, the owners of a failing toy store. Kipps's adolescence and youth take place between the countryside of New Romney and an emporium in Folkstone, where he is apprenticed as a draper's assistant.

As Higgins (2008: 461) has observed, Wells depicts Kipps's condition throughout the first phase of his development as both inevitable and as a cause of resentment towards the dull routine of commercial life. His experience during his apprenticeship is described as claustrophobic and in terms of entrapment; his life is empty and unsatisfactory, while he remains in a state of «impotent immobility» (Higgins 2008: 461): he wishes to change his path, but at the same time he does not intend either to disappoint his uncles' expectations or to be accused of weakness or failure for the interruption of his apprenticeship. His partially unknown family origins, his mother's belonging to the lower middle class, and his uncles' employment in commerce all impel him toward the family business as the most probable prospect.

It is during the apprenticeship that shame and feelings of inferiority make their first appearance for Kipps and constitute the starting point of his attempt at social elevation. The arrival of a new saleswoman «who could, she said, *speak* French and German» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 42), along with her snobbishness towards Kipps's courtship, make him realise «a clearly felt insufficiency» and «inferiority» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 42) developed since his adolescence. The long-standing debate on 'gentility' and 'origins' constitutes the backdrop to Kipps's formative path: while for centuries lineage had been considered the primary factor for the acquisition of the status of gentleman, since «the man of family and liberal education would have greater opportunity for acquiring gentle manners and practicing gentle behaviour» (Gilmour 2016 [1981]: Introduction), during the Victorian age, the middle classes, too, began to find such a status within reach, undermining the importance of one's birth[12].

After the encounter with the new saleswoman, Kipps begins to perceive manners and social conventions as no more than empty labels that inadequately veil his "commonness", a term connoted in a derogatory sense, including an acceptation of "ordinary" as well as of "vulgar" and "unworthy": «it was all very well to carry gloves, open doors, never say 'Miss' to a girl, and walk 'outside', but were there not other things, conceivably even deeper things, before the complete thing was attained? For example certain matters of knowledge» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 42).

His clumsy attempts at self-improvement in terms of education from this moment on wink at that ideal of «self-culture»[13] considered the cornerstone of the process of social elevation of the middle class in the Victorian age. In order to fill the void of his commercial routine and to bridge his gaps in education, Kipps enrols in a woodcarving course, which, however, only accentuates that sense of inferiority of blood and of manners after the encounter with the other members of the class. Among these are Chester Coote, «refined and gentlemanly» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 45), the young lawyer Walshingham, and his sister Helen, Kipps's teacher, who immediately exerts her charm on Kipps.

[12] See Briggs (1977 [1954]: 143): «'The true gentleman' was not the creature of inherited privilege but the person who was polite, civil, tolerant, and forebearing. He might be of any rank or class, peasant or noble. Any other definition of a gentleman was grounded in snobbery».
[13] Smiles (1875: 94).

These figures both become emblems of those «etiquette norms» (Maibom 2010: 568) before which the protagonist discovers his inadequacy, as well as the social models to emulate, and he aspires to be accepted by them as soon as they meet:

> All these personages impressed Kipps with a sense of inferiority that in the case of Miss Walshingham became positively abysmal. […] They went home, he imagined, to homes where the piano was played with distinction and freedom, and books littered the tables and foreign languages were habitually used. They had complicated meals, no doubt. They 'knew etiquette', and how to avoid all the errors for which Kipps bought penny manuals – *What to Avoid, Common Errors in Speaking*, and the like. He knew nothing about it all, nothing whatever; he was a creature of the outer darkness blinking in an unsuspected light. (Wells 1993 [1905]: 45-46)

Kipps's love for Helen takes on the features of worship, a condition of subordination which implies blindness and an absence of judgment: «[he] abased his soul before the very shadow of Miss Walshingham. […] he perceived that he was in a state of adoration for Miss Walshingham that it seemed almost a blasphemous familiarity to speak of as being in love» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 46-47). Shame for his limits and for his social inferiority is at the origin of Kipps's desire to become worthy of Helen's company, to share the lifestyle and interests of the other members of the woodcarving course, and to have access to their circle of acquaintances. The first manifestation of this awareness is his attempt to mask his commonness, «concealing his bottomless baseness [and] hold[ing] his tongue» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 46).

His fear of being unmasked[14], which emerges in the first book, mirrors the condition of the entire middle class, and in Kipps's case it is expressed by the need to create «a wise plot of small fictions» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 97) on his origins, as the narrator will observe a few pages later:

> He said he lived with his uncle and aunt, but he did not say that they kept a toy-shop, and to tell anyone that his uncle had been a butler – a servant! – would have seemed the maddest of indiscretions. Almost all the assistants in the Emporium were equally reticent and vague, so great is their horror of 'Lowness' of any sort. To ask about this 'Waddy or Kipps' would upset all these little fictions. (Wells 1993 [1905]: 86)

Kipps is aware of his status as an orphan bastard whose lack of paternal recognition probably stems from the class difference between his father and his mother, and so even as a child, he had learned the art of dissimulation about his origins, taking advantage of disguises and gaps deliberately left blank by his family. At the same time, one of the main consequences of his discovery of shame is his denial of the world he does belong to, represented mainly by the friends of Folkstone, and the guilt that results from this repudiation[15]. In the first book, during the period of his apprenticeship at the emporium, his old friends remain his main point of reference, so he does not immediately feel the consequences when he begins this gradual separation. However, he he has already begun to forget his origins, betraying his promise of loyalty to his childhood sweetheart Ann, who in the meantime becomes a maid in an upper-class house in Folkstone.

Kipps's development and the gradual emergence of social criticism in his formative path, therefore, bring to the fore the dialectic between two social groups, the lower middle class and the upper class, represented spatially by Kipps's native town and by Folkstone, where he first encounters that high society which motivates his desire for improvement and upward mobility.

[14] See Fussi (2018: 8), and Carnevale (2012: 67-69).

[15] See Wells (1993 [1905]: 46): «Carshot and Buggins weren't in it with them». This fault, only implicitly mentioned until this moment, is developed in the second book of the novel as an effect of Kipps's engagement with Helen and his access to the upper class.

The fortuitous arrival of the inheritance partially mitigates the socio-economic differences between Kipps and the class represented by Helen Walshingham and Chester Coote: his grandfather, repenting of having prevented the marriage between Kipps's father and mother due to their class difference, had willed his possessions to his only nephew before he died[16]. In the classic *Bildungsroman,* this kind of unexpected inheritance usually confirms the origins of the hero or favours his deserved legitimation into a new social class after his maturation process, but here, instead, it implies for Kipps an entry point into the upper bourgeoisie rather than a finish line. Consequently, he is exposed to a higher risk of being unmasked, a risk constantly feared by his tutors in manners, Helen and Chester Coote. Strictly linked to the displacement of this *topos* is, in fact, the anticipation of what is usually considered the happy ending *par excellence*, that is, the engagement with the woman of whom the protagonist had wished to become worthy at the beginning of his path. Therefore, this reversal, the collocation of the engagement as the starting point of the process of refinement, rather than as a consequence of it, has the double effect on the one hand of emphasising the purely instrumental function of their (future) marriage, highlighting the power of money in Kipps's social relations after this moment, and on the other of sharpening the protagonist's sense of inferiority, since his money cannot appease his sense of inadequacy in terms of etiquette and education.

The first consequence is made very clear by the change in Helen and her mother's behaviour between the conclusion of the first book – in which they are embarrassed to know and greet a cloth-shop clerk[17] – and the following chapters, immediately after the acquisition of the inheritance, in which the women's objective of quickly reaching the engagement to save the family from financial collapse leads to Kipps's rapid acceptance into the family[18].

The reversal of the conventional *Bildungsroman* structure stresses the parodic effect of what should be the crowning moment of Kipps's dream and anticipates the unmasking of the machinations behind his lucky break, of which Kipps will become aware only after meeting the socialist intellectual Masterman. At the same time, for Kipps, the rapidity of his social ascent only amplifies the sense of shame due to his perceived inferiority and the constant judgment of his new audience, mainly embodied by Chester Coote, the chaperon called upon to educate him and elevate him in manners, and by Helen Walshingham. Kipps's formative path from this moment on is definable in terms of his internalisation of their gaze[19]. A further connotation acquired by shame phenomenology in this novel is, in fact, «the idea of being observed or watched by others» (Maibom 2010: 569), from which follows the obsessive fear of being unmasked and the desire to remain unnoticed:

> He felt that so far he had held up his end of the conversation in a very creditable manner, but that extreme discretion was advisable. Kipps remained on the defensive, but behind his defences, his heart sank. It was all very well to pretend, but presently it was bound to come out. He didn't know anything of all this …. (Wells 1993 [1905]: 112)

The sense of claustrophobia of life in the commercial field from which Kipps had tried to escape with his desire for social and cultural improvement is gradually replaced by another form of claustrophobia, without the protagonist being initially aware of it, and it is represented by the

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[16] See Wells (1993 [1905]: 116). In comparison with the first unpublished version of the novel, *The Wealth of Mr Waddy*, it is significant that Wells decided to replace the motif of the fortune received thanks to an elderly benefactor's gratitude with the legacy of Kipps's paternal grandfather. In the first version, indeed, Kipps was rewarded with a legacy for helping Waddy during an accident on his wheelchair. In this way, Wells not only deprives Kipps of any practical reward for having won Waddy's gratitude with a noble act, but also and most importantly, in terms of social criticism, he stresses the motif of origin and class differences which marks the protagonist since his birth.

[17] See Wells (1993 [1905]: 81): «'Really, Mumsie, you cannot expect me to cut my own students dead', she was, in fact, saying».

[18] See Wells (1993 [1905]: 138): «In a little while his clipped defective accent had become less perceptible to their ears».

[19] See Fussi (2018: 13).

"panopticon" personified in his figures of reference[20]. His subordinate position below his mentor is well expressed by the numerous references to Coote's superiority, to the higher way of life he represents:

> Coote grew visibly in Kipps' eyes as he said these things; he became, not only the exponent of 'Vagner or Vargner', the man whose sister had painted a picture to be exhibited at the Royal Academy, the type of the hidden thing called culture, but a delegate, as it were, or at least an intermediary from that great world 'up there', where there were men-servants, where there were titles, where people dressed for dinner, drank wine at meals, wine costing very often as much as three and sixpence the bottle, and followed through a maze of etiquette, the most stupendous practices... […] You figure him as looking little and cheap, and feeling smaller and cheaper amidst his new surroundings. […] Coote spoke of people who had got on, and of people who hadn't; of people who seemed to be in everything, and people who seemed to be out of everything. (Wells 1993 [1905]: 114)

Aspiring to Coote's position means that Kipps must accept the norms and the label that Coote imposes. It is Helen, then, who corroborates this process of objectification of the protagonist and whose role is on several occasions defined in terms of domination and possession[21]. As Kipps internalises Helen's gaze, he gradually begins to feel that his old companions are distant and inadequate, in particular his former colleagues at the emporium and his friend Chitterlow, the theatrical author who deserves but does not receive Kipps's gratitude for having discovered the inherited fortune. The path of Kipps's refinement, therefore, results solely in an improvement of manners, in adaptation to social etiquette, and gradually leads him to feel ashamed of his original world. In this way, Kipps's process of social elevation becomes more a process of loss than of acquisition, since Kipps forgets all those values, such as loyalty, «decency […], social responsibility, the true respectability of innate worth as opposed to the sham respectability of fashionable clothes» (Gilmour 2016 [1981]: Introduction).

"High" and "low" – metaphorical cross-references to Kipps's social and educational path – are the recurring motifs in Coote and Helen's reflections as internalised by Kipps, as well as the ideas of "inside" and "outside", of access and exclusion:

> […] and against these Society has invented a terrible protection for its Cootery – the Cut. The cut is no joke for anyone. It is excommunication. You may be cut by an individual, you may be cut by a set, or you may be – and this is so tragic that beautiful romances have been written about it – 'Cut by the Country.' (Wells 1993 [1905]: 178)

The relationship between Kipps and Coote is defined in the same terms («he was, in fact, to chaperone Kipps into the higher sort of English life», Wells 1993 [1905]: 119), and the same coordinates are those adopted to describe Kipps's fantasies about new potential acquaintances («Suppose some day one met Royalty. [...] He soared to that!», Wells 1993 [1905]: 120). It is no coincidence that, in spatial terms, the moment of the engagement with Helen is the only one which takes place at the top of the hill from which they can see the town and the countryside, symbolically opposed to the kitchens in the basements where his childhood sweetheart Ann works[22].

The same social dialectic acquires new coordinates on the semantic level in relation to the main character's *Bildung*. Adjectives like "high" and "low" and adverbs of place like "inside" and

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[20] As observed by the narrator, «he felt like a very young rabbit in a trap» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 194).
[21] See Wells (1993 [1905]: 143): «look of proprietorship»; Wells (1993 [1905]: 144): «she was laughing, inundated by the sense of bountiful power, of possession and success».
[22] The narrator's insistence on the servants' collocation in belowground spaces is particularly noticeable in the third book of the novel.

"outside" are socially connotated and serve as signposts along the usual path of the protagonist, whose process of socialisation is following a pre-determined trajectory, corresponding to the internalisation of the norm. In the repeated flashforward characterising the narration of this detached and ironic narrator towards the naive protagonist, the spatial and metaphorical references intensify precisely on the occasion of the engagement between Kipps and Helen on the hill, the apex of Kipps's story («He turned about, and, with something very like a scared expression on his face, led the way into the obscurity of their descent...», Wells 1993 [1905]: 145). In line with Wells's transgression of the *topoi* of the *Bildungsroman*, Kipps's social exploration of his new world marks the beginning of his decline rather than his successful integration and stabilisation in the new social class. The possibility of cultural elevation through the new circle of acquaintances soon turns out to be illusory. After the engagement, Kipps realises that the path of refinement undertaken alongside Helen corresponds only to a sterile adhesion to empty conventions, whose facade conceals an «insatiable accumulation of the signs of higher and higher status» (Robbins 2007: 129). The shame for the emptiness of his new life gradually replaces the shame for his origin, mirroring the condition of a social class marked by unproductiveness and the possession of an undeserved wealth[23].

3.

The transgression of the conventional *Bildungsroman*'s process of socialisation and containment of the contradictions within Kipps finds expression in his oscillating desires after the engagement. The formative process alongside Coote and Helen should have had, in fact, the goal of making Kipps «like everyone else and thus to go unnoticed» (Moretti 1987: 12), to eliminate all those signals that could have "marked" him, not only for his social origin, but also for that youthful restlessness that had accompanied him since his adolescence. However, contrary to the classic *Bildungsroman*, where the «elusion […] of whatever may endanger the Ego's equilibrium, making its compromises impossible» (Moretti 1987: 12) is constant, in *Kipps*, after the engagement which should guarantee him stabilisation in Helen's social class, there emerges a «dilemma conterminous with modern bourgeois civilization: the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of *socialization*» (Moretti 1987: 15). The dilemma is expressed by Kipps's indecision between rekindling his relationship with his childhood sweetheart Ann – whom he meets again after many years upon his return to New Romney to communicate his engagement to his uncles – and continuing of his engagement with Helen. This sentimental conflict concretises the author's critique of the social values underlying the conventional *Bildung*: if the possibility of transgressing social expectations and following Kipps's desire to return to his childhood sweetheart corresponds to the possibility of self-determination, following the path of refinement alongside Helen responds instead to the «equally imperious demands of socialization» (Moretti 1987: 15).

Once again, it is on the spatial level that the contrast between the two extremes of the dialectic are expressed. With respect to the claustrophobic connotations assumed by the protagonist's path of refinement and adjustment in the new social class – which defines through well-demarcated borders his possibility of inclusion or exclusion in the upper class – the return to the world of his origin is also expressed from a spatial perspective in terms of dynamism and an opening that evokes a lost freedom. In contrast to the closed world of living rooms and villas where the relationship with Helen is maintained – with the sole exception of their engagement episode at the top of the hill – the encounters with Ann and with Sid, her brother and Kipps's childhood friend, occur against a backdrop of lush countryside landscapes, where the openness of the terrain is mirrored in increased social freedoms[24].

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[23] See Robbins (2007: 131-132).

[24] The footrace through the countryside takes place at the beginning of their relationship in the first book of the novel.

> In New Romney social distinctions that are primary realities in Folkestone are absolutely non-existent, and it seemed quite permissible for him to walk with Ann, for all that she was no more than a servant. They talked with remarkable ease to one another, they slipped into a vein of intimate reminiscence in the easiest manner. (Wells 1993 [1905]: 182)

Indeed, it is the encounter with Sid that generates the first turning point and marks a first distancing from Helen and from the world she represents: his socialist perspective on the social class which Kipps is entering, on the use of their wealth and the economic disparities between the working class and the upper class, has the effect of displacing the object of Kipps's shame from the sense of his inferiority to the shame for a 'received' and not 'deserved' fortune. As noticed by Hardy (2008: 160), Sid, «who rises by skill and inventiveness, without favour or fortune», represents «an alternative, meritocratic social mobility and self-improvement». Kipps begins to question his own initial perception of the superiority of the upper class: Helen and Coote's world becomes the emblem of personal and selfish interests in opposition to the meritocratic ideals of which Sid is the spokesperson.

The love triangle, which expresses Kipps's dilemma and contradictions, is a further hint at the overthrow of the *topoi* of *Bildungsroman*, in which the position of the hero between the "novel of marriage" and the "novel of adultery" is usually clear (Moretti 1987: 7-8). The constant re-use on the formal level of representative *topoi* of the first typology and the insertion of a motif such as that of betrayal with a woman from a lower social class, in fact, underline Wells's intent to violate genre conventions. While in the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* happiness is the supreme value to aspire to – necessarily realised by the sacrifice and devaluation of freedom – the choices made by Kipps in the second book of the novel signal the failure of compromise between these two values and anticipate the impossibility of the expected further ideological and social reconciliation. This dilemma is often apparent in the narrator's comments as he reveals Kipps's doubts about the possibility of achieving happiness in the upper class: «[…] with an extra-ordinary streakiness he wanted quite badly to go, and then as badly not to go, over to New Romney again» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 185) and then:

> He did not clearly know anything. It is the last achievement of the intelligence to get all of one's life into one coherent scheme, and Kipps was only in a measure more aware of himself as a whole than is a tree. His existence was an affair of dissolving and recurring moods. When he thought of Helen or Ann, or any of his friends, he thought sometimes of this aspect and sometimes of that – and often one aspect was finally incongruous with another. He loved Helen, he revered Helen. He was also beginning to hate her with some intensity. When he thought of that expedition to Lympne, profound, vague, beautiful emotions flooded his being; when he thought of paying calls with her perforce, or of her latest comment on his bearing, he found himself rebelliously composing fierce and pungent insults, couched in the vernacular. (Wells 1993 [1905]: 190-191)

The first sign of Kipps's shame for his engagement with Helen and of his doubts about their marriage and his consequent acceptance into the upper class is a lapse which can be included in the phenomenology of shame because it is the first hint at Kipps's desire to hide his engagement: although Kipps goes to New Romney to communicate his marriage to his uncles, he returns to Folkstone without informing them about the news. The importance of this lapse is emphasised a few chapters later when after learning about his uncles' visit to Folkstone, during which they would inevitably find out about his engagement, he decides to avoid them by spending a few days in London.

The contradictions inherent in Kipps's situation intensify between the moment of the first encounter with Ann in New Romney and the second one in Folkstone, in the house of Helen's friend where Ann works as a maid. An engagement with Ann (and the simultaneous necessity of breaking his agreement with Helen) would represent for Kipps a regression, the renunciation of a social contract, and consequently the exclusion from the life associated with Helen. It would, therefore,

mean the acceptance of a fluid, incomplete social and individual identity, since his formation would not result in the traditionally expected social integration. At the end of his *Bildung*, Kipps, rather than overcoming the contradiction between the desire for self-determination and that of fitting into a societal standard, would embody the contradiction itself, becoming emblem of it. The return to Ann on the social level would ultimately correspond to the failure of the goal to «live up to standards, norms, and ideals» (Maibom 2010: 569) and would mean fully realising the shame that was at the origin of his path of self-improvement.

Kipps's impasse between the two social and emotional poles is fully expressed by the episode in London, the city that also represents Kipps's definitive destination after his marriage with Helen. Upon his arrival in the city, the episode concerning the choice of the place to have lunch is the first sign of his in-between position. On the one hand, Kipps wants to eat at a place that befits his economic situation, but on the other, he desires to maintain his mask of gentility: it is impossible to compromise between his two worlds. His search for a solution, however, is delayed by Sid's arrival, who, welcoming Kipps into his house and presenting him to his family, introduces him to Masterman, a socialist intellectual whose acquaintance marks the beginning of Kipps's acquisition of class consciousness. It is Masterman's intervention which leads the protagonist to a breaking point: he discloses the social mechanisms behind Kipps's rapid social ascent and engagement with Helen – a contract «"to the advantage of both"» (Moretti 1987: 22) – and the relationship between money, power and work. Thanks to Masterman, Kipps becomes aware of his own individual responsibility for collective well-being and the social, intellectual and economic sterility of that upper bourgeoisie which, even after losing money and property, does not want to renounce its privileges:

> 'I'm talking of happiness,' […] you want a world in order before money or property or any of those things have any real value, and this world, I tell you, is hopelessly out of joint. […] a community cannot be happy in one part and unhappy in another […] Consequently people think there is a class or order somewhere just above them or just below them, or a country or place somewhere that is really safe and happy... […] All the way up and all the way down the scale there's the same discontent. No one is quite sure where they stand, and every one's fretting. The herd's uneasy and feverish. All the old tradition goes or has gone, and there's no one to make a new tradition. Where are your nobles now? Where are your gentlemen? They vanished directly the peasant found out he wasn't happy and ceased to be a peasant. There's big men and little men mixed up together, and that's all. None of us know where we are. (Wells 1993 [1905]: 207)

Masterman's words illustrate the reasons why social compromise no longer has any reason to exist, since ongoing economic and social changes are undermining the same social classes represented by the etiquette that Helen and Coote always uphold. In this sense, the same metropolitan setting in which Kipps's awakening takes place is indicative of these changes: traditionally considered «the theater of fluctuating and changing identities» (Moretti 1987: 203), London is also in socio-economic terms in contrast with the immobility and stagnation of the provincial environment, since it is the place where the economy is bolstering the bourgeois class that is weakening the old regime.

Masterman's speech has the effect of freeing Kipps from the control of those norms and conventions that have become manifestations of a status that no longer exists («there is no place or level of honour or end living in the world, so what's the good of climbing?», Wells 1993 [1905]: 208): the main consequence of Masterman's discourse in a first moment is, therefore, Kipps's liberation from the fear of being unmasked and from the shame of his origins.

The episode at the Royal Grand Hotel dinner in London is emblematic of the partial overcoming of shame in parallel with the acquisition of a class conscience, precisely because it depicts the protagonist's direct struggle against his feeling of shame and in particular with his obsessive

consciousness of others' gaze on him[25]. It is on this occasion that the internalisation of his audience's gaze – which characterises the third part of the novel – becomes explicit: the desire to get rid of his shame coincides for Kipps with the desire to free himself from the feeling of being always observed and judged by his fellow diners at the hotel[26], a liberation permitted by the memory of Masterman's words during dinner.

> in his inexperienced hand was an instrument of chase rather than capture. His ears became violently red, and then he looked up to discover the lady in pink glancing at him, and then smiling, as she spoke to the man beside her. […] The entire dinner-party on his right, the party of the ladies in advanced evening dress, looked at him...He felt that everyone was watching him and making fun of him, […] Suddenly and extraordinarily he found himself a Socialist. He did not care how close it was to the lean years when all these things would end. […]. Echoes of Masterman's burning rhetoric began to reverberate in his mind. […] Nice lot they were. He was glad he wasn't one of them anyhow. […] The mental change Kipps underwent was, in its way, what psychologists call a conversion. In a few moments all Kipps' ideals were changed. He who had been 'practically a gentleman', the sedulous pupil of Coote, the punctilious raiser of hats, was instantly a rebel, an outcast, the hater of everything 'stuck up', the foe of Society and the social order of to-day. (Wells 1993 [1905]: 239)

However, Kipps's rebellion «against bourgeois values is not ideological in motivation, but personal, emotional and opportunistic» (Lodge 2005: xxvi), as confirmed by his regret in the following days for having left the condition of anonymity and of "normality". Kipps's incapacity to definitively break social conventions is due above all to the absence of a new tradition, of new social models as Masterman has already remarked: if Coote and Helen have until that moment represented for him a guide, along with his obsessively-consulted courtesy books, abandoning their world would mean not only being excluded from the social system («one [law] broken, you are an outcast», Wells 1993 [1905]: 120), but also proceeding along an unblazed path, not legitimised by any social model. Between the episode of the dinner in London and the meeting with Ann at Folkstone, Kipps oscillates again between the desire for self-determination – corresponding to the desire to marry Ann – and the need for socialisation. His condition is a mixture of «shame and perplexity» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 230), a position of indecision between his desire for freedom and adherence to the norm.

Not even the choice to abandon Helen and ask for Ann's hand in marriage immediately constitutes for him the definitive happy ending or a definitive overcoming of shame as it initially seems. Breaking the rules of the *Bildungsroman*, Wells shows the readers what happens after the marriage, illuminating the social difficulties experienced by this hybrid couple. The engagement with Ann constitutes, in fact, the moment of maximum expression of that breakage that Masterman's speech had represented for Kipps, since it is located exactly at the opposite of the upward and forward progression characterising the traditional *Bildungsroman*: both in chronological and social terms the union with Ann represents a regression, a return to the original condition.

The new social condition that their marriage represents is once again expressed in spatial terms: the key event to which the third book of the novel, "The Kippses", is dedicated is the choice and realization of the ideal home for the couple, which acquires metaphorical value, since the house is one of the main signs of status and means of expression of the couple's identity[27]. Once again, Kipps's

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[25] On this episode, see also Short (2019: 12-128; 190-191).

[26] See Wells (1993 [1905]: 241): «Kipps was a horrible, tormented battleground of scruples, doubts, shames, and self-assertions during that three days of silent, desperate grappling with the big hotel.».

[27] See Thompson (1988: ch. 5): «At the same time, homes were very much part of the outside world as affirmations of status. A prime purpose of the home might be to make family life as private as lace curtains or a privet hedge could make it; but an equally important purpose was for its size, appearance, style, and location to be plainly visible as a statement of the owner's precise place in the social hierarchy.».

contradictions both in reference to the type of house he wants to build and in reference to the behaviour that Ann should observe with their neighbours are a manifestation of the in-between position that their social class embodies[28]. Their status has become emblematic of that "out of joint" world to which Masterman had referred, in which the coordinates of high and low have lost their function: for this reason, buying an existing house for them would mean losing the freedom of self-determination that they had, at least apparently, conquered by breaking social rules; it would signify adapting to pre-established conventions.

Kipps and Ann's different visions for the house embody this contradiction: Ann is the spokesperson for «Sid's social democracy» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 254), since she intends either to limit the size of the house and number of floors to make the work of the servants easier, or to exclude their presence in the house and manage it personally, while Kipps does not want to renounce the position acquired with his inherited fortune. In a short time, the couple is embroiled in the same disagreement that had tormented Kipps during his engagement with Helen. The freedom from convention that both initially intend to pursue (the architect they hire says: «if you don't mind being unconventional», Wells 1993 [1905]: 258) gradually turns into the impossibility of social recognition outside established social models («'You ain't comfortable, my gel, in this world, not if you don't live up to your position,' […] 'A 'ouse of this sort is what a retired tradesman might 'ave […]», Wells 1993 [1905]: 265).

4.

In the third part of the novel, too, shame is the main emotion for conveying a social reflection: the impossibility of social acceptance for the hybrid couple appears again in Kipps's fear of being unmasked, «to be looked down upon» (Wells [1905] 1993: 267), and in Ann's fear that the others can say that she has «dragged [Kipps] down» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 267). Once again the *Bildungsroman* scheme is transgressed by the fact that not even reaching the goal of the marriage allows Kipps to immediately realise a compromise between "individuality" (and therefore his idea of self-determination) and "normality" (the need for socialisation). On the contrary, marriage only exacerbates and leads these contradictions to the extreme: unlike Masterman, who chooses exclusion from society in defence of his individualism, for Kipps integration is still strictly necessary to define his identity. Kipps's inability to definitively break free from conventions is confirmed by the episode in which Coote «Cuts» him, relegating Kipps to «a universe of dead cats and dust-heaps, rind and ashes — *cut*!» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 272), an event which the protagonist interprets as «social penalties that Juggernaut of a novel had brought home to his mind» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 274). Alluding with metatextual parodic references to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, Kipps finds in his own exclusion exactly what that «Juggernaut of a novel» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 274) read in the previous days had anticipated:

> the novel […] had crushed all his poor edifice of ideals, his dreams of a sensible, unassuming existence, of snugness, of not caring what people said, and all the rest of it, to dust; it had reinstated, squarely and strongly again, the only proper conception of English social life.[…] he married beneath him – some low thing or other. And sank... (Wells 1993 [1905]: 272)

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[28] See Thompson (1988: ch. 5): «The enormous country houses with hundreds of rooms and the singleroom cellar dwellings lay at the extremes of this structure. The very wealthy could manipulate their environment to suit their personal needs and tastes; the very poor could only accept whatever environment happened to be available and somehow make their life fit into it. Between these two poles lay a complicated territory of different housing types and living conditions, a series of stepping stones that became more elaborate in reflecting the increasingly fine and intricate social distinctions within Victorian society. Social mobility was a matter of individuals or families stepping from one stone to another; social change a matter of altering, enlarging, and regrouping the stones».

The image of Kipps who «stood among his foundations like a lonely figure among ruins; [...] among the ruins of his future» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 274) is emblematic of his unfinished, inconclusive *Bildung*: Kipps is unable to achieve his self-determination, but neither is he able to free himself from pre-established models in the absence of a "new tradition" representative of his status:

> if he had got a tutor – that had been in his mind originally – a special sort of tutor, to show him everything right. A tutor for gentlemen of neglected education. […] Eleven bedrooms! What had possessed him? No one would ever come to see them; no one would ever have anything to do with them. Even his aunt cut him! His uncle treated him with a half-contemptuous sufferance. (Wells 1993 [1905]: 274)

The house is a symbol of particular interest in the investigation of the role of shame and of Kipps's unfinished *Bildung* also because it embodies in the same moment the public and private nature of shame: with reference to the protagonist's «desire to escape others' observation» (Miniati 2008: 89)[29], deriving from his «shame of being unveiled», the house is a constant object of others' observation and judgment, one of the most evident signs of status; at the same time, in contrast to its role of protection from the contamination of the external world[30] – particularly insisted-upon in the Victorian narrative to which Wells refers – for the Kippses it also becomes the place where the weight of the public image invades (at least temporarily) the private sphere. Ann herself becomes for Kipps the «source of all his shames» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 278) for not being able to adapt to the rules that every respectable hostess should know concerning neighbours and their visits[31].

The impossibility of the compromise for the Kippses is confirmed by the set of fortuitous events in the concluding pages, which once again have the effect of undermining the traditional scheme of the *Bildungsroman* by conveying Wells's social criticism on the semantic level: the loss of their riches due to the lawyer Walshingham's ventures is the only way out of the impasse for the Kippses. If up to that moment, as a gentleman, Kipps had seen it as dishonourable to get a job, losing money means being relieved from the weight of etiquette and feeling free to devote himself to an activity as he had desired for a long time: «I thought even before this Smash Up, 'ow I'd like to 'ave something to do, instead of always 'aving 'olidays always like we 'ave been 'aving. […] I'd thought I'd like to keep a shop for a lark, on'y then I thought it silly. Besides, it 'ud 'ave been beneath me» (Wells 1993 [1905]: 288).

In contrast to what is seen in the classic *Bildungsroman*, Kipps achieves happiness only after returning to his social class, the lower middle class. Thus he frees himself from the cage of upper class convention, which also frees him from the shame of his origin and the shame of an unproductive and idle life.

The closing episode of the novel is also readable in these terms. After reaching self-realisation through his work and his family, Kipps discovers that he has suddenly acquired a new fortune. This time it is deserved and not only received, thanks to the investment made long ago in Chitterlow's comedy, which has finally become successful.

This new, deserved fortune is precisely in line with the meritocratic message of Masterman. In contrast to the upper class, which is unproductive and clings to the unearned wealth of others, Kipps's success lies in his hard work and his generosity: the part of his money that «he retains is the part that he had freely give away» (Robbins 2007: 136). It is only thus that he can overcome the shame that

[29] Translations from Italian are mine.
[30] See Higgins (2008: 465).
[31] See Thompson (1988: ch. 5): «The Victorian middle classes were the most home-centred group in British history; but they were easily surpassed as the most house-conscious group by the landed aristocracy, for whom the country house was not only the essential emblem of status but also the grand theatre in which rituals of display and hospitality were enacted».

had dogged his previous social ascent, that based on undeserved riches and subject to the gaze of a defensive fallen aristocracy.

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