Ender's Game: Use of Anti-Bildungsroman Convention to Explore the Impact of Child Exploitation

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ABSTRACT
This paper provides a detailed reading of the way in which anti-bildungsroman conventions in Orson Scott Card's Ender's Game have been utilized to critique the institutional exploitation of children and the psychological consequences that follow. In contrast to traditional bildungsroman stories, which show the protagonist's self-determined growth, Card subverts the genre by characterizing Andrew "Ender" Wiggins as a child genius whose development is controlled by manipulation, isolation, and militarization.

The main research question of the paper is as follows: What are the anti-bildungsroman conventions that Card uses in Ender's Game to portray the use of children as instruments of the institution and the complex effects such action has on them? The essay will contextualize this question with the three main stages in Ender's story: first, his determined and tormenting early life; second, his enforced development at Battle School; and third, the post-war period wherein he bears the gnawing sense of guilt and suffers a split identity.

This piece points out that Card has managed to achieve this mainly through some narrative techniques such as fragmentation, different viewpoints, and ironic reversals of coming-of-age conventions. The text discusses how Ender's journey is a critique of the institutions and power. Ender's childhood is not a place to have new experiences, but a space of trauma; the Battle School is a setting where children are psychologically trained, isolated from each other and desensitized; and by showing Ender being forever scarred by the abusive processes, the book's ending negates the common image of a bildungsroman's happy conclusion.

The paper contends that Ender's Game stands as both a dystopian piece of fiction and a political treatise. Card emphasizes the ethical dilemmas of the act of childhood as a weapon against humanity, disclosing the far-reaching emotional and psychological effects of using children as pawns for the institutional good. The text, therefore, becomes a mirror that reflects real-life situations involving child combatants and youth exploitation, consequently, the book emphasizes the price of turning children into a resource for utility over innocence.

METHODOLOGY

This paper examines Orson Scott Card's novel Ender's Game through a close reading that situates it within the literary tradition of the bildungsroman, the coming-of-age novel, while exploring its subversion through the concept of the anti-bildungsroman. The crucial aspect of the analysis is Ender's portrayal throughout three narrative periods—childhood, Battle School, and the war aftermath. Specifically, in Act I, he is the victim of institutional exploitation. In this way, the essay discusses the points mentioned above through Nikolajeva's children's literature;

genre studies of the bildungsroman and postmodern adaptations (Armstrong, Pugh et al.); and psychological studies on child soldiers and trauma (UNICEF; D'Alessandro). Consequently, this cross-disciplinary approach offers both literary and contextual analysis by exploring narrative techniques such as fragmentation, multiple perspectives, and irony, in comparison to real-world cases of child militarization and exploitation. Thus, the methodology integrates textual analysis with critical theory and psychological field studies, demonstrating that Card's narrative is not only speculative fiction but also a political commentary on the moral questions involved in the weaponization of childhood.

FINDINGS

From J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* to Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games*, the portrayal of children has evolved from one-dimensional symbols of innocence and dependence to complex, autonomous individuals capable of navigating intense moral, emotional, and psychological dilemmas. This change is closely tied to the modern adaptations of Bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story that focuses on a young protagonist's moral and psychological growth through self-discovery (Merriam-Webster). In 21st-century Young Adult and Children's literature, it's become a popular trend for authors to place child protagonists in increasingly high-stakes environments to trigger their growth (McCulloch). Maria Nikolajeva, a respected scholar in Children's Literature, argues in *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* that contemporary narratives increasingly depict children as "moral agents in their own right". However, she notes that this agency is often the result of the loss of childhood, a central theme in these narratives, as it functions as both a catalyst and justification for the child's accelerated maturity (Nikolajeva).

As a dystopian novel with a focus on war and survival, Orson Scott Card's Ender's Game subverts the typical coming-of-age narrative structure through the use of anti-bildungsroman conventions. The novel follows Andrew 'Ender' Wiggins, a child prodigy who is exploited to serve a larger institutional agenda. Card deconstructs traditional Bildungsroman by using fragmentation, a postmodern technique, to challenge the typical linear model of identity formation, reflecting Ender's disillusionment with institutional powers (Muradova). Through the use of fractured multiple narrative voices, the author exposes the extent of Ender's manipulated development, revealing the unnaturalness of militarized growth (Muradova). By undermining the typical Bildungsroman structure through the use of anti-Bildungsroman conventions, the novel serves as political commentary as Card critiques the ethics of using children as soldiers.

As a pivotal military science fiction novel, Ender's Game has been extensively analyzed by scholars for its exploration of complex philosophical themes like war theory and utilitarianism. For instance, Shaw justifies wartime decisions made for the "greater good" with a utilitarian framework, offering insight into the mindset of institutional powers in Card's novel as these justifications echo the way institutions rationalize their exploitation of children as both militarily necessary and morally acceptable (Shaw). However, little research examines the novel's institutional exploitation of child soldiers and the resulting psychological and emotional impact on their development, especially under the scope of an anti-bildungsroman where the narrative form acts as social commentary on the effects of institutional psychological conditioning on child soldiers. This poses the question: How does Orson Scott Card use the

conventions of the anti-bildungsroman genre in *Ender's Game* to portray the exploitation of children by institutional powers and the resulting emotional and psychological consequences?

This is worthy of investigation because the novel's portrayal of Ender mirrors the experiences of real-life child soldiers. UNICEF reports that more than 105,000 children were used in armed conflict worldwide between 2005 and 2022, statistics that reveal the widespread nature of this issue (UNICEF). Furthermore, Harvard researchers delve deeper into the psychological impact this had on child soldiers, showing the devastating effect of systematic abuse and exploitation on young children (D'Alessandro).

Through a close analysis of Ender's development over the novel's narrative stages—early life, battle school, and aftermath—alongside secondary academic sources on children in literature and ethics of child soldiers, this essay will examine how Card's unconventional adaption of Bildungsroman and Ender's evolving characterization critiques the human cost of using child soldiers, particularly their emotional and psychological impact on children.

The novel's opening departs from the traditional bildungsroman as Card establishes Ender's existence as pre-planned, rather than a protagonist with autonomy (Nikolajeva). In most coming-of-age narratives, childhood serves as the period of self-discovery (Biscontini). Still, Card collapses the possibility of Ender possessing a healthy childhood by presenting a protagonist whose fate is predetermined.

Initially, Card emphasizes Ender's lack of agency through the clever utilization of narrative exposition. By shifting between Ender's limited perspective and the detached dialogue of the government officials, the revelation of Ender's engineered birth as a "Third" - an aberration within Card's dystopian two-child policy society - highlights the lack of influence Ender has over his own life. From the start, Ender is framed as a state-sanctioned experiment, and we - the readers- are privy to this only through the external dialogue of the officials. Card reveals that Ender's birth was planned by the government to blend his older siblings, creating the ideal soldier, "[Peter] was the best we'd seen in a long time. We asked your parents to choose a daughter next… but [Valentine] was too mild. And so, we requisitioned [Ender]" (Card 19).

Card utilizes the anti-bildungsroman convention of fragmentation (Muradova), interchangeably switching between two perspectives, institutions, and Ender. By preventing readers from gaining insight into the inner human thoughts of these officials, unlike how we are privy to Ender's personal thoughts, Card creates a cold ambiance, highlighting the government's determination to use Ender as a tool. The only insight we gain into the official's thoughts comes through cold, colloquial statements, using bureaucratic terms like 'requisition' to humanize Ender while portraying the officials' detachment and lack of care. The use of impersonal phrases highlights the officials' callousness, as they see Ender not as a child but as a tool. Ender is thereby thrown in an echo chamber of abuse and belittlement, as the institution challenges his identity as a "Third". It is through this that Ender's trauma slowly manifests. Moreover, Ender's acknowledgment of his lack of autonomy emphasizes the idea of child exploitation: Ender's existence was constructed to fulfill the state's needs (Ever). Rather than having his own goals and emotions, Ender is a government project. "It was not his fault; he was a Third. It was the government's idea" (Card 4). Throughout the book, Ender's identity and guilt as a Third is placed in the forefront of his development, actively shaping his compliant

personality. Graff calls Ender "a badge of public shame" (Card 18). This brand Ender with guilt, as to his family, he is a symbol of failure: his parents view him as a liability to social assimilation, and Ender's brother despises him for him embodying his failed potential - Ender's identity is defined by others' resentment and expectations, leading to early social trauma and pressures. As Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association reports, "[constant] belittling, threatening, or ignoring children can be as damaging to their mental health as physical or sexual abuse", mainly when people derive their "personal self-esteem, self-worth, and the very nature of [their] personhood through those who nature [them]" (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association). From this we clearly see the impact such actions may have on Ender's psyche, as Card uses the anti-bildungsroman convention of fragmentation to portray Ender's abuse, laying the foundation for his psychological trauma.

The hostility expressed by Ender's brother clearly portrays this notion, as he threatens, "I could kill you like this... just press and press until you're dead" (Card 9). Peter, Ender's brother, resents Ender creating a toxic household environment, causing Ender to live in constant fear of violence. The initial forced indoctrination of Ender's personality as an outcast, a "Third", illustrates how Card uses the book's anti-bildungsroman storyline structure to portray the exploitation of children (Ever). Ender is portrayed as an anomaly compared to others around him. Furthermore, as a key feature of anti-bildungsroman, instead of challenging such themes, creating his own identity, Ender regresses into isolation, becoming a machine for the government to exploit.

Ender's psychological trauma develops due to the constant exploitation of his personality. As heavily emphasized by UNICEF, a significant amount of premature childhood trauma and long-term psychological damage is caused by continual exposure to violence when children are recruited into armed forces (UNICEF), perfectly reflecting Ender's early life experiences. Just as D'Alessandro underscores how the premature loss of childhood and autonomy through forced militarization can cause devastating mental harm, specifically in terms of trauma, identity formation, and long-term emotional damage (D'Alessandro), Card uses the anti-bildungsroman nature of Ender's lack of autonomy and individuality to beautifully portray the exploitation of children under institutional powers, conveying the development of Ender's psychological trauma.

As Sarah Day observes in her 2012 essay "Liars and Cheats: Crossing the Lines of Childhood, Adulthood, and Morality in Ender's Game", the novel "illuminates the manner in which Ender's childhood... is constructed by the adults who seek to control children's attitudes and behaviors," highlighting how Ender's development is a product of manipulation rather than a natural progression of personal growth (Day). As such, Card shifts his focus from Ender's development as a commander to the enduring consequences of institutional exploitation, revealing how the weaponization of his childhood has left him permanently fractured. This conclusion epitomizes anti-Bildungsroman as Card critiques the long-term consequences of institutional control by showing Ender's struggle to grapple with guilt, trauma, and a lost identity following the end of the war (Day).

Using the anti-bildungsroman conventions of forced character growth (Koval), Card highlights the loss of moral agency and forced identity formation that define Ender's unnatural development as he becomes disillusioned with the authority figures who mentored his life. At

only twelve, Ender breaks down after discovering he had ended the war through genocide: "I didn't want to kill anybody! … but you made me do it, you tricked me into it!" (Card 229). The author emphasizes the unnatural nature of Ender's development through the anti-bildungsroman convention of premature and accelerated growth (Koval). Ender is only six when he is thrown into training, and twelve when he wins the war, a period before puberty had even started, and children are still figuring out their own identities. Thus, his age becomes a crucial detail in understanding the unnaturalness of his accelerated development and the degree of exploitation he has endured. From ages six to twelve, institutional powers take advantage of his malleability to mold him into a soldier capable of mass murder. Through the anti-bildungsroman convention, exploitation of vulnerability, Card emphasizes how institutional authorities deprived Ender of his moral agency, tricking him into committing genocide by disguising real battles as simulations (UNICEF). Card's depiction of loss of autonomy through manipulation, typically seen in anti-bildungsroman narratives, emphasizes the manipulation Ender is subjected to (Shaw). Ender is turned into a killer without his knowledge or consent: his breakdown reveals the psychological aftermath of forced growth as he struggles between his innate compassion and the violent identity imposed on him (Armstrong). While Ender has completed the typical 'hero's journey' narrative of defeating the antagonist, the novel's anti-bildungsroman features result in him ending up as a child burdened with guilt, betrayal, and the knowledge that his innocence was weaponized against him (Armstrong). Thus, Card uses Ender's anti-bildungsroman narrative to represent the human cost of exploitation: a child molded into a weapon at the expense of his identity.

Ender's post-war identity crisis exemplifies Card's rejection of traditional bildungsroman resolution to show how institutional control erases authentic identity formation and sense of self (Day). At the end of the war, when Ender has fulfilled his role as commander, he asks, "What am I now?" (Card 233). This ironic twist juxtaposes with other coming-of-age stories, where protagonists start by questioning their purpose to find their identity at the end of the book. Card subverts this pattern by placing the question at the end of the novel, reversing the typical Bildungsroman resolution, to emphasize the consequences of external control and forced maturation on children (Armstrong). One could argue that, because Ender's identity had been dictated by institutional powers from the start, he never formed a personal identity outside of fighting, leading to a sense of emptiness once his purpose had been complete (Erikson). The inability to create an individual identity could lead to trauma as academic sources reveal that disruption in identity processes among adolescents is strongly correlated with increased depressive and anxiety symptoms, especially in those exposed to early adversity, as identity confusion and lack of purpose leave adolescents vulnerable to long-term psychological distress (Samaey et al.). Card reflects this same consequence in Ender–his post-victory emptiness reflecting not triumph but trauma–highlighting the dangers of treating children as instruments for institutional agendas rather than as individuals capable of forming their own identities. Thus, Card uses such anti-bildungsroman to ultimately critique how institutional powers exploit Ender's childhood, leaving lasting emotional and psychological damage.

This mental damage is seen throughout the end of the novel, where Ender is unable to escape his guilt, as Card describes, "And always Ender carried with him a dry white cocoon, looking for a place where the hive-queen could awaken and thrive in peace. He looked a long time" (Card 250). Card explores the lasting consequences of institutional manipulation through anti-bildungsroman conventions of lifelong trauma (Tangney et al.). Ender must carry his guilt

through moral responsibility. Although manipulated into committing genocide, his moral character compels him to atone by protecting the last of the Buggers. Even after the war, Ender is unable to freely choose his own identity as he is bound by obligation to atone, a response shaped by trauma. Psychological research shows that guilt is a potent mediator in trauma response: individuals who perceive themselves as responsible for harm commonly develop heightened PTSD symptomatology and persistent self-blame (Pugh, Taylor & Berry). In *Ender's Game*, Card draws on this psychological reaction as Ender's sense of responsibility for mass destruction becomes the root of his postwar desolation, underlining how institutional manipulation can weaponize guilt to extend the control over a child's psyche even after their "usefulness" is complete. The phrase "He looked a long time" emphasizes the permanence of this burden, showing that Ender will never be able to escape from the psychological damage inflicted by institutional control. Card uses Ender's burden to critique how institutions exploit children, showing that even survival and "success" in war leave permanent psychological scars. The author reveals how institutional control reshapes identity around guilt and obligation, rather than fostering self-determined growth.

CONCLUSION

In *Ender's Game*, Orson Scott Card uses anti-Bildungsroman conventions to explore the impact of institutional exploitation on children, exemplified by Ender, who is marked as a tool to further military advancement.

The novel traces his development from his engineered birth and psychologically abusive early life, through the coercive and isolating environment of Battle School, to the aftermath of war and the moral burden of committing genocide. Card uses such factors to reveal how psychological manipulation, isolation, and exposure to escalating moral and physical challenges can force a child to mature far beyond their years.

Card subverts traditional Bildungsroman conventions by presenting a protagonist whose growth is externally dictated, fragmented, and accelerated, emphasizing how institutional powers manipulate and weaponize childhood. Unlike conventional Bildungsroman stories of self-discovery and belonging (Armstrong), Ender's coming-of-age story examines the cost of survival and the effects of institutional control.

Through Ender's development, Card demonstrates the profound psychological consequences of institutional exploitation. His early life demonstrates how societal pressure in the form of preordained identities and familial hostility cultivates compliance and, consequently, deep-rooted trauma. Battle School intensifies the psychological manipulation present in Ender's life through isolation, engineered trials, and exposure to normalized violence, forcing him to internalize aggression and suppress compassion. Finally, the aftermath of the war exposes the long-term effects of institutional control: Ender's identity is fractured, his moral agency compromised, and his pursuit of atonement illustrates the enduring burden of choices made under coercion. The novel critiques systems that rationalize such exploitation, showing that accelerated maturity strips young children of their innocence, identity, and the possibility of a normal childhood. By centering his narrative on a child prodigy pushed to extremes, Card questions the ethical trade-off between the results and the means used to accomplish them, urging readers to question the human cost of utilitarian agendas that sacrifice children.

To build on this analysis, future research could further examine the depiction of institutional exploitation in other contexts through the use of anti-bildungsroman conventions across different works of contemporary Young Adult literature. Through comparative analysis, scholars could investigate how varying cultural, political, or educational contexts shape child protagonists' psychological development. Researchers could draw parallels between Card's portrayal of institutional exploitation in *Ender's Game* with real-world issues, such as the psychological effects of child soldiers, extreme educational pressures, and forced youth militarization, to offer further insight into the ethical and developmental consequences of imposing adult responsibilities on children. Such studies would offer a broader understanding of how literature reflects and critiques the moral and psychological implications of institutional control over vulnerable children.

DISCUSSION

This essay demonstrates that Orson Scott Card's Ender's Game employs anti-bildungsroman conventions most artfully to not only question but also condemn the institutional exploitation of children. The main idea is that assumptions made in one text can have implications in multiple texts. Card's use of the coming-of-age genre in reverse perspective demonstrates that literature can expose humanitarian issues, specifically works of art that question systems of power, favoring the collective over the individual. The direction of Ender, a character in a game, also reflects the broader questions in today's literature for children and young adults: to what extent young characters are portrayed as independent and simultaneously used as tools for the benefit of adults.

The main limitation on this research is that its central concern is with a single text. More widely, a comparative literary framework on the discussion of other dystopian narratives such as Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games and Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go could be the best way to prove whether Card's critique is tagging along with the literary trend of seeing children differently during extreme times. On the other hand, in addition to the essay's incorporation of psychological studies on child soldiers, it is also noticeable that the supplement which the survivor testimonies and the ethnographic studies would have made in the discussion of trauma and identity formation is missing when the description of the child soldier's relation with art is concerned, since fictional representation is the only means of doing so according to the author.

This analysis can also be connected with the central questions involving pedagogy and cultural reception. Even though Ender's Game has continued to be a widely taught novel in secondary schools, its discussion of the militarization critique that it offers, as well as the upsetting similarities between the book and real-life cases of child soldiers, are very much neglected thanks to the fact that the focus is on Ender's tactical genius instead. Future projects could analyze whether the interpretations of the novel as an institution are re-enforced or contradicted by the crass classroom framing and how the anti-bildungsroman viewpoint would make the pedagogical readings of the novel different.

Card's narrative concludes that literature has the responsibility not just to entertain but to provide readers with tools to confront the social and psychological costs of exploiting the weak. By discussing Ender's Game both in the context of literature and within the socio-political

context, we have come to realize its shoulder-deep interest in the agency, morality, and also the outcome of institutional strength.

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