

University of Iceland
School of Humanities
Department of English

A Journey of Growth

Bernard Cornwell's The Last Kingdom as a Bildungsroman

B.A. Essay

Kristín Jónasdóttir

Kt.: 070483-5809

Supervisor: Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir

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Abstract

This essay explores Bernard Cornwell's historical novel, *The Last Kingdom* (2004) and demonstrates how it can be classified as a Bildungsroman. The novel follows the protagonist Uhtred's journey through life as he slowly progresses in his evolution. *The Last Kingdom* takes place in ninth century Anglo-Saxon England, during the Danish invasion and Cornwell follows the historical facts accurately. In order to show better the protagonist's background, the historical background of Anglo-Saxon England is detailed, along with the division of Anglo-Saxon England into kingdoms, its hierarchy, and its laws. The Danish invasion influences Uhtred's life greatly, and therefore the reasons why the Danes invaded Anglo-Saxon England and the difference between the English and Danish warriors is explored. Religion is highly relevant in the novel as it affects our protagonist's evolution very much. Due to this, the essay provides some background on religion in Anglo-Saxon England and on the pagan religion of the Danes. Uhtred's lifespan demonstrates a variety of features characteristic of a Bildungsroman. At the beginning of the novel Uhtred is young, inexperienced, and arrogantly unwilling to be educated. He only dreams of becoming a warrior fighting in a shield wall. As is customary in most Bildungsromans, there is an incident which forces the protagonist onto his journey. This incident occurs when Uhtred falls into the hands of the Danes. He turns into a Dane through Ragnar's influence and chooses to stay with the Danes because they train him to become a warrior, while the English would rather turn him into a priest. Uhtred has a flashing moment when he hears the English victory cheers at Wessex, which helps him when he is forced to leave the Danes. Uhtred's return to the English side and Alfred's influence on him is explored along with his choice of religion. As most protagonists in Bildungsromans, Uhtred has found his rightful place in society by the end of the novel. He is married, has a son, and is an educated Englishman. He has experienced a real shield wall and can call himself a real warrior and a leader of men.

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Introduction

We all have different ways of leading our lives. Some float through life carelessly while others must constantly struggle, either with poverty, health or just plain bad luck. Then there are those who experience both the easiness and also the struggles. By the end, all lives finish the same; however, there is one thing that everyone has in common. We all start out inexperienced and by the end of our existence we have learned a number of things and grown up. In essence, life can be called a journey of growth. It is popular to render one's journey of growth as the core of a story and therefore this journey has become the subject of many novels. A novel in which the protagonist's story is portrayed through his evolvment into maturity is called a Bildungsroman.

The novel *The Last Kingdom* (2004) by the historical novelist Bernard Cornwell, is a good example of a Bildungsroman. The story takes place in Anglo-Saxon England during the Viking Invasion in the ninth century and depicts the protagonist Uhtred's evolvment. At the beginning of the novel, he is a nine year old English boy, an ealdorman's son, who lives in a great fort called Bebbanburg in Northumbria. The Danes invade his country and after his father's army suffers a great defeat in the battle for York, Uhtred falls into the hands of the Danes. At first he is forced to live as a slave but he rapidly learns the Danish lifestyle and turns completely Danish through the influence of Ragnar, his Danish owner and father figure. He has extreme doubts about Christianity and hates having to become educated. He happily dismisses God and instead takes on the Danes' religion. When he is old enough he takes part in the invasion and fights with the Danes against the English. Uhtred finds his way back to his English roots when Ragnar, now his lord and father, is killed. Through the influence of Alfred, King of Wessex, he switches sides and joins the king's army against the Danes. By the end of the novel, Uhtred is an established and educated English warrior who is married with a child. After a long journey which has changed him, he has found his rightful place in England

Bernard Cornwell is a brilliant historical novelist who applies historical facts as accurately as possible in the novel. Uhtred's character is very authentic because of Cornwell's skill in providing the reader with true background information. In order to show better the forces that influence Uhtred's growth, and thus make the novel classifiable as a Bildungsroman, the historical background first needs to be addressed. Anglo-Saxon England, the division of the country, their customs, laws, and social structure will be covered in

chapter one, as well as the reason for the Danish invasion, its main elements, and the difference between English and Danish warriors. Chapter two deals with religion because Cornwell introduces religion as a large part of Uhtred's life. The English history of Christianity and the Danes' pagan religion, along with Uhtred's religious conflicts are discussed. In chapter three, there will be given more detailed introduction of the term 'Bildungsroman' and Uhtred's journey of growth explained in connection to his English life versus the Danish. This is done by providing examples of how foolish and inexperienced he is at the beginning, how he learns to fight and stand on his own and, by the end, how he has grown up through the influence of Alfred and the people Uhtred loves. *The Last Kingdom* is a Bildungsroman as it outlines Uhtred's growth to maturity and the various obstacles he overcomes in the process; this initially helpless English son of an Ealdorman is moulded by his Danish upbringing and with the influence of King Alfred eventually finds his way back to his roots as a grown up resourceful warrior.

1. Uhtred's Background

1.1 Anglo-Saxon England

Uhtred is born in Anglo-Saxon England in the year 857 when the country was still divided into four kingdoms: Wessex, Mercia, East-Anglia, and Northumbria. Each kingdom was powerful and independent and ruled by a king (Brooks 1). The first kingdom, Wessex, was situated in the South and was ruled by King Æthelbald (Whitelock et al. 45). Later, King Alfred the Great would rule this kingdom. The second kingdom, Mercia, was situated in the middle of the country and was ruled by King Burgred. He later fled to Rome and settled there, because of the Danes' invasion into Mercia. The third kingdom, East-Anglia, was on the borders of Mercia to the east and was held by King Edmund. In 870 he was murdered by the Danes (Whitelock 46, 48). According to Whitelock et al. in their translated version of *The Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, the fourth and last kingdom, Northumbria, was being fought over by two men: King Osbert and the "king with no hereditary right" Ælla (Whitelock 45). Ælla had taken the throne but Osbert had not given up on retrieving it again (45). Uhtred lives in Northumbria and Cornwell acknowledges this dispute in the novel's first chapter and places Uhtred's father, the Ealdorman, in the middle of these two kings' dispute (4-5).

As seen above, Anglo-Saxon England was not a unified country at this point but split into four kingdoms, which for centuries had been fighting against each other or temporarily unifying into alliances against other kings or invaders such as the Vikings. Everyone would have liked to be the ruler, or at least have an established lord to protect them, because in all Anglo-Saxon England there was a certain hierarchy to which people had to adhere. Runciman talks about three main classes: “the nobility (eorls), peasants (ceorls), and slaves (theows)” (5). He also talks about thegns, and reeves. Thegns were ranked above ceorls (26) and were “mostly responsible for local government in the last century and a half of Anglo-Saxon and Danish rule” (16). Runciman is not clear on where exactly in the hierarchy reeves were ranked but he says they were somewhere central (6) and close to the thegn or slightly above them (26). In *The Last Kingdom*, Cornwell describes the social structure of the Anglo-Saxons slightly differently: At the bottom of the social class are the slaves. They have to work hard for no wages and can be used for anything by their owners because they are merely possessions. Next are free men, or “ceorls” who need to have some sort of an income to avoid becoming slaves. These are not rich people but as said before they maintain some income. Above the “ceorls” are the “thegns,” they are rich but have no nobleman to follow and are therefore not in a good position to climb the social ladder. Next in line are the “reeves” who are appointed to their position by lords and are in charge of law in their lord’s land. Their lord is important to them because if they have a fallout, the reeve can lose his status and become thegn again. Above the reeves are the “Ealdormen,” who are rich in both money and land and maintain a close relationship with their king. They can raise a large army to aid their king’s cause and can have some influence on the king’s decisions. The king’s sons inherit the throne and are therefore considered to be above the Ealdormen, but they are less powerful because they have no lands and raise no armies but are only inheritors of the crown awaiting their time. At the top the king himself sits and rules all of his subordinate people. He must take care of his duties as well as work hard at constantly securing his place from the groping hands of envious power-seekers (Cornwell 265).

Anglo-Saxon England was a land of rules and laws which had to be followed and the King was supposed to enforce the law. He was expected to protect and keep peace as well as act as a judge and legislator (Hudson 19-22). Ealdormen and reeves made judgements in various cases and received profit for doing so. The reeve also oversaw sales and acted as police (Hudson 35-38). Cornwell involves some facts regarding law in *The Last Kingdom*. For example, Uhtred’s parchments of deeds show his ownership of Bebbanburg and his lands (3) and the heredity between a father and his sons (11). Furthermore, Uhtred and Ealdwulf

discuss “wergild,” which is “the blood price of a man’s life” (134). Everyone has wergild, but the amount differs depending on the status of a person; noble men have higher wergild than slaves and sons have higher wergild than daughters and so on, but if a family of a murder victim accepts its wergild, then the killer walks free (Cornwell 134). The English prefer that disputes are settled with payment because then the law is maintaining peace and in that way, working for its people. However, if a family does not accept the wergild, that can be the start of a “bloodfeud” (Jeffrey 655). Cornwell has Uhtred state that the bloodfeud is a part of every society; even the pious West Saxons have them (197). A blood feud starts with a murder, the two families keep revenging their murdered members of family by killing someone from the other family. Blood feuds can last for years and even be the cause of whole families becoming extinct (Cornwell 197). In a sense, they are the symbol of deep love because the family would rather risk being killed, than receive a compensation in exchange for the loss of a loved one.

1.2 The Danish Invasion

The invasion has tremendous effect on Uhtred’s life as because of it, both his father and brother die and he needs to adjust to a new life with the Danes after they capture him. Cunliffe et al. state that the Danes originally went on raids because of “social and political developments in Scandinavia” (62). In the eighth century, Scandinavia was forming their primitive State. Many men were competing for the position of power and this had led to a society of violence and savagery. Ambitious men went on raids to nearby countries to gain wealth, reputation, and followers. They knew that this would aid their cause at home. However, these raids made the Vikings realize that they could gain lands as well (Cunliffe et al. 62). It is possible that they realized they could become powerful in another country, instead of struggling for fame in the old one. In *The Last Kingdom*, Cornwell makes the reason for the Danish invasion explicit. Uhtred’s father says: “They usually come for food and plunder, but in some places they’ve stayed and taken land...their own land is stone and ice, and they have giants threatening them” (10). This is in cohesion with what Ragnar tells Uhtred: “Denmark is a bad land...it’s flat and sandy and you can’t grow a fart on that sort of field, or across the water it’s great steep hills with little patches of meadow where you work like a dog and starve” (54). Here Cornwell suggests that the Danes who participate in the invasion do so because they see the opportunity of taking possession over better land to grow

crops, resulting in a more enjoyable life. The leaders of “the great heathen army” (Whitelock 45) were in fact the three brothers, Ivar the Boneless, Ubba, and Halfdan (Mawer 22), and Cornwell accurately places these three brothers as the invasion’s leaders but though they certainly are ambitious men and much like the politicians Cunliffe et al. mention (62), they first and foremost have realized the power they can seize in taking over Anglo-Saxon England. They have forged a great army and have this ambitious plan of taking over all of the country for their own rule (Cornwell 55).

Cornwell covers the Danish invasion into Anglo-Saxon England in 865 quite accurately in *The Last Kingdom* and makes the Danes and their battles central to Uhtred’s story. He mentions the victory on All Saints’ Day in 866 when the Danes took York (12) which is the correct date and place according to F. Donald Logan in his book *The Vikings in History* (144). The first battle scene in *The Last Kingdom* is the battle at York in 867, when the kings, Ælla and Osberth, with the aid of Ealdorman Uhtred try to recapture the city and drive the Danes out. This battle actually took place, and the English failed miserably (Whitelock 45) just like Cornwell describes (19-27). With this the Danes had taken over Northumbria and Uhtred has fallen into their hands.

When the Danish invade Mercia, Uhtred goes with them and plays an important role in the Danes’ invasion. Cornwell uses old place-names and therefore has the Danes settling in at Snotengaham, which today would be called Nottingham (iii). There they meet King Burghred of Mercia’s army and King Æthelred’s army from Wessex in 868 (72). *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes how both armies “came upon the enemy” and “besieged them” but no battle occurred and the Mercians settled for peace (Whitelock 46). Cornwell has followed this passage from the *Chronicle* but as it does not describe in detail what exactly took place, he has added his own factors: having the Mercian priests attempt to force the Danes out by praying to God (73), letting Uhtred spy in the English camp for ladders (77-81), and inducing Ivar’s cunning response, to the Mercians’ plan of starving the Danes out, of filling a carriage with food in order to trick the English into believing the Danes have plenty of it (85). Cornwell calls it “feathering” when he, as a historical novelist, needs to add a descriptions of his own to a scene that really took place in history. This “feathering” (Cornwell, Historical Note, 333) adds to the story and makes it more interesting. Uhtred’s part in this section of the invasion is a token of his evolvment into a Dane. He chooses to help them by searching for the ladders instead of destroying the Danes’ plans.

When the Danes invade East-Anglia, Uhtred is involved the same as in Mercia but now he is a warrior fighting with the Danes. Cornwell makes the Danes split their forces this

time, Ubba attacks by sea to draw the East-Anglian army to the coast, while Ivar marches with his army into Mercia (101). There is no mentioning of this in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which only says that the Danes stayed at Thetford over the winter in 870 (Whitelock 46). But Cornwell accurately states King Edmund's trials of fighting the Danes and losing his life as well as lands to them (Cornwell 111-123). An important act in Uhtred's life occurs in this part of the invasion. He kills a man for the first time and feels good about it (Cornwell 103).

The last kingdom standing, Wessex, was the Danes' next target. Cornwell accurately places the Danes at Readingum where they make a fort (154) and mentions names of Danish earls and kings correctly (150), as they are stated to have taken part in the invasion in *The Anglo Saxon Chronicle* (Whitelock 47). Just like Cornwell writes (167, 170) the Danes suffered defeat at the hands of King Æthelred but managed to kill him later in battle (Whitelock 47). His successor, Alfred, is said to have fought the Danish army further and then made peace (Whitelock 47), but Cornwell makes Alfred's first act, as king, into a talk with the Danes (171) and negotiating peace, which included paying Halfdan six thousand pieces of silver and allowing the Danes to remain in Readingum until that payment had been met (174). This is fictional; there are at least no recordings of this in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, only that the West Saxons made peace with the army in 871 and then that the Danes went from Reading to London in 872 (Whitelock 47). Of course the peace did not last, this could only be a temporary solution and Alfred's dealings with Earl Guthrum's attack into Wessex is also included in *The Last Kingdom* but that part will not be covered here.

1.3 English and Danish Warriors

While Uhtred is living in Bebbanburg, he is taught to think of the Danes as something from the devil (Cornwell 6), as packs of dogs and "savages, pagans, and terrible" (Cornwell 8). This is not surprising when the Danish lifestyle in *The Last Kingdom* is considered. They are a pest to the English, constantly killing and stealing. The Danes are said to face battle with joy (Cornwell 66) as opposed to Uhtred's father who would prefer not to partake in battle and especially not fight in a shield wall (Cornwell 16). Ravn's report on the difference between Danish warriors and English warriors shows how the Danes are superior fighters when compared with the English because they have chosen their lifestyle of slaying and robbing:

I think only one [English] man in three is a warrior, and sometimes not even that many, but in our army, Uhtred, every man is a fighter. If you do not want to be a warrior you stay at home in Denmark. You till the soil, herd the sheep, fish the sea, but you do not take the ships and become a fighter. But here in England? Every man is forced to the fight, yet only one in three or maybe only one in four has the belly for it. The rest are farmers who just want to run. We are wolves fighting sheep. (Cornwell 64)

This is exactly what happens in the fight over York. The bravest men plunge themselves to the front and the less daring men dally to the back of the army and then have to face the Danes' attack, which ends in a complete butchery (Cornwell 26).

The savagery of the Vikings is well known. Their raids tell stories of murder, rape, and theft (Gibson 119). Cornwell's Danes live up to that image. The way they enjoy killing King Osbert and experiment in crucifying the priest (32) is a repellent description of their lack of respect for life. However, Ragnar says there is a reason for their savagery during raiding. Their main aim, by horrifyingly killing men, women, and even children, raping, and stealing is to make sure every Englishman fears them. One person is spared to tell the awful tale of the Danes to neighbours, who obediently surrender to the Danes or else suffer the same fate (Cornwell 102). This is a military strategy because the Danes are outnumbered in England; they have come to the conclusion it is best to strike as much terror into the English people as possible to make them obedient and afraid to fight back. The result is that their hostile takeover runs more smoothly.

In addition to wanting to become warriors, the Danes are also better equipped in all aspects. As mentioned above, the English are mostly inexperienced farmers answering the call of their lord to join in battle. When the King calls, the Ealdormen assemble their men, only caring for the number of men they can raise and not whether these men are good enough warriors or whether they have sufficient weaponry for war. Only about half of the English army are equipped with good weapons for battle (Cornwell 306). On the other hand, the Danes are skilled warriors who are always ready for war. Historically, each warrior possessed weapons of war, such as swords, battle-axes, spears, bows and arrows, shields, and all were dressed to the occasion in helmets and coats-of-mail. What gave them even more advantage were their ships. The richer Danish earls owned so called "Longships" (Gibson 15-22, 53) and in these the Danes could attack from sea. Cornwell mentions all of the above weapons throughout his novel as well as giving a detailed description of the painting of shields (38),

the making of swords (140), the hilts of swords (52), and gives the reader an idea of how the Danes felt about their ships: “The Danes love their ships. A ship, they say, is like a woman or a sword, sharp and beautiful, worth dying for, and certainly worth fighting for” (112). The Danes are men who are fierce murderers with nothing to lose and the certainty of entering Valhalla when they meet with death.

2. The Religious Background

2.1 The Anglo-Saxon Religion

Religion plays a large role in Anglo-Saxon history and therefore Cornwell has made it highly relevant in Uhtred’s story. In the fifth century the English worshipped pagan gods such as Frey, Njord and Woden (Chaney 7, 88). The Kings believed they were descendants of Woden who was the “divine ancestor of almost every Anglo-Saxon royal house” (Chaney 7). It was even believed that if the King was a true worshipper of the gods, then the earth would give better crops, trees would give more fruit, the sea give plenty of fish and the young would be stronger. This belief was associated with the god Frey (Chaney 86-87). The first product of the crops was then offered to the god as a thank you for the gift of plenty (Chaney 106). Human sacrifices were also made in honour of Woden and for the hopes of bringing victory in battles and wars (Chaney 116-117).

The conversion from paganism to Christianity is believed to have begun in the year 597, when the Roman monk, Augustine, was sent to England by the holy Pope Gregory on a mission to preach Christianity and convert all pagan kings and their people (Bede 66). Augustine met with the King of Kent, Ethelbert, who was pagan but had a Christian wife, Bertha. The King eventually converted, and with that began the conversion of the English Kings with Augustine leading and King Ethelbert backing him up (Campbell 45).

The new faith made its mark on the country and affected the Anglo-Saxon way of life. Christianity brought occupations such as bishops, monks, nuns, priests and clerks. Bishops, as well as popes, inspired the Kings to fear the almighty God and to contribute to the church’s welfare. Kings expected their people to be responsive towards the new faith and to be pious (Bede 112-114). By the ninth century there were well over 200 monastic communities in all England (Campbell 73) and the conversion brought new innovations such as the book, which was both used as a communication method and as a beautiful decoration devoted to religion

(Campbell 70). In the monasteries monks and clerks were taught Latin and the written word. As they progressed in these skills, numerous tales of saints, popes, or other Christian folk performing miracles were spread. These were stories of bishops curing dumb men (Bede 266-268), the blind getting their vision through miraculous acts (Bede 217-218), and even prayers magnificent enough to put out fires (Bede 109-111). The credulous common man began to believe in these miracles and this, along with the pressure of lords and Kings, resulted in a pious nation who put their whole trust in faith and God, entrusting him through prayers with everything (St. Rosemary Educational Institution). This piousness is clearly depicted in *The Last Kingdom* and much of Uhtred's inner struggle revolves around his longing to be pagan.

2.2 The Danes' Religion

The Danes were called pagans because they worshipped the same pagan gods as the English had before they converted to Christianity. They made sacrifices to many gods. Odin was the greatest of all the gods, he was married to Frigg and together they parented all the other gods. Odin was the most powerful god of all: a shape-shifter and performer of miracles, he could put out fires, calm the sea, and turn winds. He had a ship, Skidbladnir, which he used for crossing the sea, and an eight legged horse, Sleipnir which he used when travelling the sky (Gibson 45-46). Thor was the most popular god. He was married to Sif (Page 7) and was the strongest of the pagan gods. He possessed a stone hammer, Mjølfnir, a belt that doubled his strength, and iron gloves which he needed to be able to hold the hammer. He was the god who made thunder and lightning as he travelled the sky in his chariot (Gibson 46). Frey was the god of rain and sunshine and was therefore important to those who harvested. He was also the god of "love and marriage" and controlled "men's fortunes in property" (Gibson 46). There were numerous other gods the Danes made sacrifices to because they were the gods of something important. Examples of these gods are: Idunn, who had apples of eternal youth (Page 8); Niord, who was the god of "seafaring, fishing and riches" (Page 9); and then there were Freyia and Freyr who were the gods of fertility (Page 9).

The Danes believed the gods lived in Asgard and that when a warrior died in a brave fight he would enter Asgard and be permitted into Valhalla, "the hall of the dead," which had 640 doors, rafters made of shining spears, and tiles of gold. Dead warriors would fight all day and feast in Valhalla during the night (Godwin 45). The earth was called Midgard and it was connected to Asgard by a rainbow bridge called Bifröst. Midgard was supposed to be

surrounded by an ocean filled with monsters. The frost giants, which Ealdorman Uhtred mentions (Cornwell 10), were said to live beyond the ocean in a land called Utgard. Underneath it all lay Niflheim which would be the same as hell in Christianity, except Niflheim was “a land of mists, ice and snow”. Vikings who died in their beds were destined to enter Niflheim in their afterlife and some dying men were reduced to begging their friends or family members to kill them so they could be spared the tediousness of entering Niflheim (Godwin 45).

Cornwell is knowledgeable about the belief in the old Nordic gods and applies it in his novel. The Danes all wear Thor’s hammer around their necks (39), he mentions that the gods live in Asgard (46), talks about Niflheim (117) and has Ravn describe how Odin had made the world (59). The Danes worship various gods and Cornwell mentions some of them, such as Odin, Thor, Loki, and Vikr (46). Cornwell also describes the Yule sacrifice to the gods, where Ragnar has his men dig a deep pit and in it he sacrifices his best horse, a ram, a dog, a goose, a bull, a boar, and an English man. This was all done for Odin (59-60).

2.3 Uhtred’s Religious Conflicts

Young Uhtred struggles with Christianity and instead toys with the idea of becoming a pagan. However, the extremely religious and pious Beocca and Gytha, Uhtred’s stepmother, try their best to make Uhtred remain a Christian. Beocca is a clerical priest and Uhtred’s teacher who emphasises to Uhtred the importance of being literate. He is a true believer in God and is interested in teaching and preserving the history of the saints. He preaches the word of God, prays and crosses himself throughout the whole novel and is the person most interested in Uhtred’s growth and religious belief. In a sense, Beocca serves as the teacher of Christian religion while underlining the importance of education, especially Uhtred’s education. Gytha is a more sensitive character than Beocca. She is always weeping and mentioning God in all her talk, asking for his help, praying and urging others to follow her lead, as well as constantly crossing herself. If she had her way, Uhtred would have become a priest instead of a warrior because she thought that would be best for him (Cornwell 6, 12, 14). Gytha’s role in the story is not large, but because she is Uhtred’s only mother figure, and preaches God’s word fiercely, she adds to Uhtred’s religious conflict. He knows he should be a true Christian but cannot help but like the idea of the Nordic gods.

Uhtred, the sceptic in religion, likes the way the Danes practice their religion and, having stayed long enough with them, happily abandons Christianity. His religious background mainly consists of priests constantly telling him what to do, demanding that he learns or prays (Cornwell 39), and spending every Sunday and saint's day sitting in church listening to sermons (Cornwell 46). This is not Uhtred's ideal way of spending his time, a boy who is only nine years old has no interest in hanging around in a church listening to the word of God. This is why he comes to like the Danish way of practicing religion. Uhtred feels the Danes take their religion much more lightly than the English (Cornwell 56). For starters, they do not have priests (Cornwell 39), they do not gather in churches, and they do not have any "relics or sacred books" (Cornwell 46). With this, Cornwell demonstrates that the Danes are not educated men and that they have no interest in writings. But Uhtred notices that despite the lack of priests and gatherings in churches, the Danes have other ways of showing their religious beliefs. The women pray a lot and the men sacrifice animals once in a while and throw a feast in honour of the gods (Cornwell 56). It seems that the religion is mostly in the hands of adults, which means Uhtred escapes all his previous religious responsibilities. He is not forced to partake in the religious matters, only watches and learns. He does not miss the priests, churches, or the books (Cornwell 46) and is free to make his own choices regarding religion.

In the beginning, Uhtred's time with the Danes is marked with his confusion over which religion he should favour. He wears Thor's hammer (Cornwell 39) and believes in the magic of the pagan gods (Cornwell 61) but still fears the Christian God's wrath. Ragnar reassures Uhtred that their gods are fighting a great battle and that his former God is losing to the pagan gods and therefore he is losing power:

The Christian God is losing, otherwise why would we be here? Why would we be winning? The gods reward us if we give them respect, but the Christian god doesn't help his people, does he? They weep rivers for him, they pray to him, they give him their silver, and we come along and slaughter them! Their god is pathetic. If he had any real power then we wouldn't be here, would we?
(Cornwell 70)

This is a turning point for Uhtred, and he starts thinking about how stupid it is to worship a God who does not help his believers (Cornwell 69-70). He begins to associate religion with military success and decides it is better to worship the gods who are supporting their men and

making them the victors of battles in the invasion. The Danes are those victors, for most of Uhtred's time with them, and therefore he decides to be pagan; besides, he had always favoured the pagan stories over the lousy Christian ones. Religion plays an important role in Uhtred's growth, for if he had been a true Christian who had no interest in paganism, his life with the Danes would have turned out much differently. He would not adopt their religion as easily as he does, and there is no doubt that he would try to escape with Beocca at the first opportunity, content with the prospect of becoming a priest.

3. Bildungsroman

The German term "Bildungsroman" originally came from Karl Morgenstein, who introduced it in the early 19th century. It is a form of storytelling in which the protagonist undergoes a moral development, resulting in his maturity (Casano). Ann Casano mentions five common characteristics of a Bildungsroman:

1. The protagonist is foolish and inexperienced at the beginning of the narrative.
2. There is an incident that forces the protagonist into his journey.
3. The journey is not easy, the hero is tested and will have to fight hard to survive.
4. The hero has a "flashing moment" which changes him as a person and he learns how to be a grown man.
5. The hero finds his place in society, equipped with the maturity and knowledge to have a chance in life. (Casano)

Uhtred's story in *The Last Kingdom* falls quite accurately within these descriptions of a Bildungsroman as will be established in the following chapters.

3.1 Uhtred the Young

At the beginning of *The Last Kingdom*, Uhtred is an inexperienced nine year old Anglo-Saxon boy, living with his father, stepmother, older brother, and uncle in a great fortress called Bebbanburg in Northumbria. He is the second son of a respected and powerful Ealdorman who holds the fate of Northumbria's kings in his hands. As mentioned above, Osbert the king and Ælla are fighting for the throne and Uhtred's father is in the middle trying to decide which leader to support. He can easily gather a large army to aid the leader

he chooses and is therefore a man in a difficult yet important position (Cornwell 4-5). Uhtred is called Osbert in the beginning because he is only the second son in his family and it is always the first one who inherits the father's name. His older brother, Uhtred, is seventeen years old and according to Uhtred/Osbert, he is the spitting image of their father; "tall and well built, with our family's fair hair and my father's morose face" (Cornwell 4). As the law in these times stated it is his older brother who is meant to inherit all of their father's property. He will own the lands, keep them safe and become an Ealdorman after the death of their father and for these reasons Gytha wants Uhtred/Osbert to become a priest (Cornwell 6). In Gytha's mind, that means Uhtred/Osbert will be safe and well taken care of, with a steady income and a soul guaranteed into heaven as he will be spreading God's word to the people. The importance of the older brother over the younger is clearly implied here.

The relationship between the Ealdorman and his sons differs but on the whole is the same. The older brother has reached the age of seventeen and is therefore already grown up. The Ealdorman expects great things from his older son and trusts him to spy on the Viking invaders and return safe home again (Cornwell 8). On the other hand, Uhtred/Osbert is still only a child and can easily contract an illness of some sort and be taken away from his family. His father does not strive to become close to Uhtred/Osbert because he has already experienced the loss of three children he had with Gytha, as well as the loss of two wives (Cornwell 6). He knows what it is to lose loved ones and feel the unavoidable grief that follows and it seems that he keeps his children outside the borderline of his emotions to protect himself. This can be seen from his reaction when he discovers the death of his older son: "He did not cry, he did not grimace, he did not scowl, he just looked at his eldest son's head and then he looked at me [Uhtred/Osbert]. 'From this day on,' he said, 'your name is Uhtred'" (Cornwell 11). Another reason for why the Ealdorman does not want to associate with Uhtred more than is necessary is because Uhtred resembles his mother and reminds him of her. The Ealdorman had loved her very much but she died while giving birth to Uhtred and this makes things even more difficult for their relationship (Cornwell 135).

Uhtred and his father do not have an intimate father-son relationship but Uhtred wants to be like his father. The Ealdorman is a serious sceptic regarding religion. He has converted to Christianity but cannot seem to let go of the heathen religion. He only practices Christianity when he is frightened, as can be seen early on when he crosses himself because he is scared (Cornwell 5). He still uses his wolf banner even though it symbolizes his family's descent from the ancient god Woden (Cornwell 9). He shows irritation towards his wife's piety and is not a man who believes in praying but acting (Cornwell 7). Uhtred looks

up to his father and asks him many questions as children do but the Ealdorman is always irritated by him (Cornwell 10). Uhtred imitates his father by developing the same religious scepticism; he likes the idea of being a descendant from a pagan god, and is fascinated by the pagan stories he hears from Eoldwulf the blacksmith about the fierce and marvellous pagan gods. Uhtred is intrigued by the bravery of the pagan gods in contrast to the weak Christians (Cornwell 9). If his father had not converted to Christianity, then Uhtred would have been content with his pagan religion. Even though Uhtred has serious doubts about Christianity, he cannot renounce it because the religion has become established in the country. Furthermore, Gytha and Beocca are constantly trying to push him towards Christianity and his father, regardless of his own doubts, also emphasizes to Uhtred that now they have a new God and he is better off being a Christian than a pagan (Cornwell 16). Despite this, Uhtred has no interest in becoming a priest and only wishes to become a great warrior like his father. He wants to be brave and fight in a shield wall. He thinks that war is “glorious and wonderful” (Cornwell 22) and does not see any reason for becoming literate or learned, because he feels that as a noble gentleman he can always hire someone to read for him (Cornwell 19). His opinions of war and education show how immature he still is.

3.2 The Incidental Change

The incident which forces Uhtred into change is at the battle of York where he falls into the hands of the Danes. His father says to him, before going into that battle, that he wants the head of the man who had killed his older son (Cornwell 16) and Uhtred promises him he will get it (Cornwell 17). Later, when Uhtred is all alone and in the middle of the slaughtering of his English folks, he spots Ragnar, his brother’s murderer. He, a ten year old boy, blindly attacks Ragnar, intending to fiercely kill him (Cornwell 27). This Uhtred does to honour his promise to his father, he knows his father will die and plans to take matters into his own hands and prove how brave he really is. Ironically his foolish bravery is what saves his life, because Ragnar likes his spirit (Cornwell 35) and decides to let Uhtred live. As a result he takes him back to the Danish camp and make him his slave. As the story progresses, Uhtred’s status changes from being a mere slave in the Danish camp, into being the son of a respected Danish lord and later a warrior. Uhtred’s life could well have ended at the battle of York, but it was his courage that led to his “incidental change” of attacking Ragnar, and therefore

winding up with the Danes where he becomes Danish and changes his religion. It is a life-changing event in his life where his Anglo-Saxon life ends, and a new journey begins.

3.3 Uhtred's Journey and Danish Moulding

Uhtred's journey is long and difficult, but not unhappy because he comes to love the Danes. At the beginning of his new life with the Danes, Uhtred is scared and powerless because he does not understand the Danes' language or way of life. As he takes part in the work and the rituals of Danish life, he quickly learns about his surroundings. He works hard helping around the camp, never has to bathe, plays with other children, and describes himself as: "rarely unhappy" (Cornwell 38). He knows he is the rightful heir to Bebbanburg and because he is just a powerless little boy who cannot do anything about that, wishes he can become a "sceadugangan" (Cornwell 59). A sceadugangan is a mysterious creature who can change its shape and move unseen in the darkness, neither alive nor dead. Uhtred says he wishes he could become this creature to scare the Danes and help him retrieve Bebbanburg (Cornwell 59). Slowly he changes his views on this. He starts liking his new home and becomes accustomed to and loyal to his Danish friends.

Ragnar is the person responsible for making Uhtred loyal to the Danes but Uhtred constantly struggles with his identity. Uhtred's childhood with the Anglo-Saxons is portrayed in a rather negative way. He is clearly unhappy with Christianity and having to practice it so intensely; for example, he does not see any reason for being baptised again after his brother's death (Cornwell 11) and is only irritated because the baptism makes him cold. Furthermore, he dislikes education (Cornwell 13) and the relationship he has with his father is not good (Cornwell 10). Ragnar, on the other hand, is kind to him right from the beginning. Uhtred is just a slave but Ragnar makes sure he is well fed and cuffs him "cheerfully round the head" (Cornwell 31). They spend a lot of time together and Ragnar patiently answers all of Uhtred's childish questions (Cornwell 54). Ragnar is a respected earl but he has not gained his respect through the fear of his people because he is first and foremost popular (Cornwell 40). Everyone likes Ragnar, he is a jovial and warm person and those loyal to him are rewarded (Cornwell 53). Ragnar treats Uhtred as one of his own sons and Uhtred finds in him the kind father figure he had longed for (Cornwell 44, 65), saying that he never misses his real father (Cornwell 38). Their special bond is seen when Rorik dies and Ragnar, still grieving

profoundly for his dead son, tells Uhtred that he is now his second son, Uhtred Ragnarsson (Cornwell 185).

Ragnar's pull has Uhtred constantly struggling on the inside trying to decide between being English or Danish. Through the years with Ragnar, Uhtred is happy, he is trained to become a warrior (96), is trusted (75) and treated like one of the Danes. He loves Ragnar and decides it is better to be a Dane because of him and because the Danes are the ones winning the battles against the English. He also believes that Ragnar will help him get Bebbanburg back (72). In his real family Uhtred would never find as much love as in Ragnar. His brother and father are both dead. His uncle, Ælfric, has taken over Uhtred's rightful place (42) and sent a man to kill him (108), and Gytha has married this uncle (42). Uhtred has other uncles in Mercia whom he goes to, but he only discovers that they both dislike him. One tries to steal his silver (203) and the other deliberately has him fight in a shield wall hoping he will be killed (205). Uhtred has nowhere as much love and support as he has in Ragnar and his family. In addition, Beocca and Alfred's plan for Uhtred to become "master of reading and writing" (Cornwell 94) further strengthens his will to stay with the Danes. He literally begs Ragnar not to turn him over to Alfred, and wonders why he ever had wanted to return to the English (Cornwell 95). The Danes have no lessons other than training their fighting skills and that fits perfectly with Uhtred's plans of becoming a warrior.

Being a warrior and fighting in a shield wall are Uhtred's biggest dreams. That is what life with the Danes mostly revolves around: training, fighting, and bringing back stolen goods. Uhtred's training, which consists of rehearsing and hunting, starts when he is only twelve years old (Cornwell 96-97). Before that Ragnar has already made him accustomed to killing. He lets Uhtred kill a cow for the winter (Cornwell 45) and Uhtred, like all the other Danish children, watches the sacrifice to the gods (Cornwell 60). Ragnar also brings him to every battle in England. At first, he goes with Ragnar to be Ravn's eyes but later it becomes a part of his training and Uhtred watches and learns the Danish way. This makes him involved in the Danish invasion. Uhtred loses all respect for the lives of others, because he is always witnessing killings and he murders his first man in the same year as he starts his training. He realizes what the Danes do: they start their killers early, before their conscience is grown, in order to make them lethal (Cornwell 102-103). At fourteen he gets his very own sword, Serpent Breath, and learns how to use it (Cornwell 149). At fifteen he makes his own shield and is given Wasp Sting, which is a short saw to be used in a shield wall. He carries these weapons everywhere to make himself used to the weight of them, always preparing himself for the shield wall he longs to experience; although he does fear it, he has to try it to be able

to call himself a “real warrior” (Cornwell 191). Uhtred’s first experience in a shield wall is a success (Cornwell 205-206) due to the quality of his training and preparation. If he had been in that shield wall after being brought up at his father’s house, there is little doubt that he would have been killed. All this plays a part in Uhtred’s Danish moulding. His carelessly cheerful, pagan childhood and Ragnar’s kindness towards him being the essence of his change into a Dane. His realization that the Danes are good people, who allow him to be who he is and train him to become a warrior of his childhood dream.

3.4 Uhtred’s Flashing Moment

Because the Danes are always victorious in battles against the English, Uhtred believes it is best to be a Dane until he hears the English victory cheers in Wessex (Cornwell 169-170). That time is the first time he realizes the Danes are not invincible and he remembers his native roots. This incident therefore plants doubts in his head about his choice of lifestyle, but he does not leave the Danes because of Ragnar. He ignores his feelings of wanting to become English again, or until Ragnar is killed. Uhtred would never have left the Danes and gone back to the English if Ragnar had not been killed. As mentioned above, Ragnar is like a father to Uhtred. He is kind to him, trains him, and plans to aid his retrieval of Bebbanburg. However, Uhtred is forced to leave and join the other side when Kjartan kills Ragnar, because with no lord to look after him, he has no protection (Cornwell 246). He tries to tell himself that he is after all an English Ealdorman and knows he should join the English forces, but he does make it clear he is still Ragnar’s man and wants life to go on as it has before (Cornwell 199). Wanting life to remain the same is the normal wishful thinking of a young man grieving for his father. It is perfectly normal that he hangs on to the life he is accustomed to and content with. The feeling he remembers when he hears the victory cheers of the English helps him move forward and Ragnar’s death forces him to seek out an English life. He therefore journeys to Mercia to seek out his uncles for protection, winding up under Alfred King of Wessex’ command.

3.5 Alfred the Great and His Influence on Uhtred

Alfred King of Wessex did in fact really exist and was known to be a great king who led the resistance of the Danes and, with the help of his son and grandchildren, managed to drive the

Danes out of Wessex and Mercia (Campbell 133-134). Cornwell portrays Alfred as a weakling in the beginning of the novel and gradually makes him become the great king he is supposed to have been. Uhtred's and Alfred's relationship in *The Last Kingdom* is complicated because Uhtred's opinion on Alfred is affected by his Danish upbringing. Uhtred believes that kings should be strong and masculine because that is what Ragnar taught him (Cornwell 56). Uhtred views Alfred as a pitiful, unworthy man after seeing Alfred crying over his sins. However, Uhtred realizes later in the novel how cunning and intelligent Alfred really is and thinks of Alfred as a "priestly-black spider spinning sticky webs" (Cornwell 265-266). The spider comparison is rather accurate because the King has conceived of a plan to turn Uhtred back into an English man, before Uhtred even realizes it.

Alfred's cunning interference with Uhtred's life results in Uhtred becoming English, literate, and grown up. Alfred is an educated man who has discovered the advantage of writing everything he learns about his enemy down (Cornwell 216). Therefore he knows about Kjartan and the murdering of Ragnar. He manages to have Uhtred join his army by reminding him of Kjartan's intentions of killing him (Cornwell 217) and by promising not to turn him into a priest (Cornwell 221). As Uhtred joins Alfred's army, the first step of him becoming English again is taken because there Uhtred meets Leofric, a non-pious experienced warrior. Leofric plays a large role in Uhtred's change because if it were not for him and the special bond between them (Cornwell 243), Uhtred would have gone back to the Danes with Ragnar the Young (Cornwell 243). This special bond is forged by their fighting side by side, and Uhtred has not done that with Ragnar the Young. Leofric is a good friend to Uhtred and inspires Uhtred to become commander of the English fleet (Cornwell 247). This leads to Uhtred learning how to read and write because Alfred does not promote illiterate warriors (Cornwell 247). It is therefore through Alfred's regulation that Uhtred becomes literate as Uhtred does not want his stubbornness to stand in the way of his plans. The ultimate act of Alfred's interference is when he manages to trick Uhtred into marrying Mildrith. Their marriage ties Uhtred to Alfred by law because of the debt of her lands (Cornwell 257) and as Uhtred falls helplessly in love with Mildrith and their son, he is completely returned to his native roots, now literate and more grown up than before. Although Alfred's plans of changing Uhtred does succeed, it is not only because of Alfred himself that Uhtred switches sides but the people close to his heart, Leofric and Mildrith. However, if it were not for Alfred, Uhtred never would have met these people and then perhaps he would have found his way back to the Danes some other way. Therefore Alfred plays an important role in Uhtred's growth.

3.6 Uhtred All Grown Up

By the end of *The Last Kingdom*, Uhtred is no longer a confused boy but a grown up man who has come to a decision regarding faith. His time with the Danes has made him completely pagan. It is difficult for Uhtred to believe in the Christian God because he witnesses some of the Christian “miracles” and knows what really happens. For example, when Uhtred listens to a priest tell the tale of the nuns in Northumbria and the miraculous curtain which allegedly appeared through their prayers to protect them, Uhtred knows better. He was there and knows what really happened: “we arrived, they screamed, the young ones were raped and then they died” (126); some of them even married and had children with the Danes. He cannot be fooled by the priest’s sermons like the common people because he knows they are lies made up to enforce the people’s piousness. Instead he puts his whole trust in the spinners of pagan belief. He learnt from Ravn about the three spinners who decide his fate (Cornwell 166) and believes his whole life is in their hands and that he simply must see what happens with his life. This is what he does when he goes to retrieve his wife.

Uhtred’s growth can be seen in the way he preserves his pride by searching for his wife and son, even if that could lead to his death in a battle. He knows that pride is what makes a man and that men die but not their reputation (Cornwell 294). When Odda takes Mildrith, his wife, Uhtred views it as an attack on his pride as a grown man. He is willing to defend his pride no matter what the cost but he is also in love with his wife, they are happy together (Cornwell 270) and he does not want her to be harmed. He believes it is the spinners’ choice to place him at the hill of Cynuit in order for him to become a man.

In the last chapter of *The Last Kingdom*, Uhtred’ growth is further emphasized as he gets to experience a real shield wall, thus becoming a real warrior. Before facing that shield wall he realizes his men are looking to him as a leader. He is still young, only twenty years old, but he has dressed himself as a warrior going to battle and looks frightening according to Father Willibald. He appears confident when facing the battle ahead, is full of knowledge regarding the Danish battle ways, and therefore his men trust him (Cornwell 297). His whole appearance is very grown up because his experiences in life have made him mature for his age. Another example of his growth is the way he worries about facing the shield wall. In his younger days he yearned for the day when he would become a great warrior in a big shield wall but now, when he is finally about to fight the Danes, he cannot sleep because he is

worried he will fail and Ragnar will see it (Cornwell 305). His Danish upbringing comes in handy in this battle. Firstly, he remembers the sceadugangan and creeps upon the enemy like a real shadow walker (Cornwell 312). Secondly, he knows their language and can therefore blend in at the Danish camp and, lastly, he uses his knowledge of Ubba's fear of the gods to take out the great Danish leader. By the end of the novel, Uhtred is a great warrior, a lord, and a leader. It is as his whole life has led up to that one battle, the battle which stands for his manhood.

Conclusion

Uhtred's journey through life and his evolvment into adulthood is the evidence for *The Last Kingdom* being a Bildungsroman; he begins as a powerless little Anglo-Saxon English boy, is prepared for real life as a warrior, while living with the Danes, and then is able to prove himself as a mature lord and warrior under Alfred's rule. Uhtred's character is born in England in the year 856 when the country was still divided into four kingdoms, Wessex, Mercia, East-Anglia, and Northumbria. When the Danish invade England, it is because of a power struggle in their own country. The Danes realize the quality of England's lands and try to seize all four parts of it. They succeed in taking over Mercia, East-Anglia, and Northumbria, but their attempt to take over Wessex is a failure. Since the Danes are a threat to England and its people, Uhtred is taught to think of Danes as something evil. However, Uhtred realizes the Danes are actually nice people and much better warriors than the English who are mostly farmers forced into the fight for their country by their English lords. The Danes are savages when it comes to battles, but that is only because they are trained warriors trying to achieve the ambitious work of conquering England and making a better life for themselves.

Religion plays a large role in Anglo-Saxon England's history and is therefore highly relevant to Uhtred's story. The English were originally pagans, but converted to Christianity in 597. The conversion made the English people pious and believers in extreme miracles caused by the goodness of God. The Danes however were still pagans. They worshipped many Nordic gods depending on their choice. They made sacrifices to these gods by killing animals and people. The warriors believed that if they fall in battle they will enter Asgard where they get to feast in Valhalla. Uhtred struggles with Christianity and toys with the idea

of becoming a pagan. He is torn at first because of Gytha and Beocca who preach Christianity to him, but after a while with the Danes, he converts to paganism for two reasons. Firstly, he has always liked the idea of being a descendant of a god and secondly, he believes God does not help his believers while the pagan gods do.

As has been shown, Uhtred's story fits into the form of a Bildungsroman as he is young and inexperienced at the beginning of *The Last Kingdom* and has no interest in learning how to read and write, but only dreams of becoming a great warrior. There is an incident which forces him onto his journey; when he falls into the hands of the Danes at the battle for York and his journey is long and difficult, but not entirely unhappy. While staying with the Danes, he becomes loyal to them through Ragnar's influence and he chooses to stay with them because they train him to become a warrior. The English would rather turn him into a priest. His biggest dream is to become a great warrior and fight in a shield wall. Uhtred's flashing moment comes when he hears the English victory cheers at Wessex. At first he ignores his feelings of truly being English but when Ragnar dies, Uhtred has no choice but to join the English side. Alfred, King of Wessex, accepts Uhtred and secures him in his army by promising him he will become a warrior instead of a priest. Uhtred remains a pagan, despite Alfred's and Beocca's best effort. He has decided the three spinners are the ones in charge of people's lives. By the end of the novel, he is married, has a son, and is content to call himself an educated Englishman. He has experienced a real shield wall and can therefore call himself a real warrior and a leader of men. Uhtred is a grown man who has found his place in society. His long journey has been filled with sadness and joy, weakness and strength, acceptance of challenges and achievement of goals. It is a journey much akin to real life journeys, in which people search far and wide for their place in the kingdom we call society. In a way, all our lives are Bildungsromans, stories waiting to be written.

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