

# Persepolis: a bildungsroman



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Persepolis is a bildungsroman that tells the story of Marji, a young Iranian girl growing up during a time of revolution, turmoil, and war. Her path of growth and development changes direction at a single moment, and she begins to grow up into a young adult with her own views and opinions. Marjane Satrapi reveals the moral development of Marji in her bildungsroman Persepolis through the theme of coming of age.

In the beginning of the novel, Marji was innocent and naïve about everything going on in Iran. All she understood was there was turmoil in her country; however, she did not fully grasp the severity of the situation. Marji was in her own bubble with her unrealistic ideas of the world. For example, Marji does not understand how bad torture is and what it was really used for, and she makes a fun game out of torture: “ Those stories had given me new ideas for games. I have imagination too...the moustache-on-fire torture consists of pulling on the two sides of the upper lip” (Satrapi 53). This shows how Marji really knows little about what is going on because if she did, she would know that torture is not really a funny thing to joke about or a fun game to play. However, this quote does give insight into the benefit of a child narrator. It shows how a child narrator is able to reveal creativity and offer a new perspective through imagination. By doing this, Satrapi helps the reader understand what it was like for her at that time when she was experiencing it.

Marji’s innocence is preserved up until the pivotal moment in her adolescence. The pivotal moment was when her city was bombed, which marked the beginning of the war. Coincidentally, just in the panel before the bombing, Marji yelled at God and told him to get out of her life. Furthermore,

on the same page, Marji's Uncle Anoosh who was important to her, was executed. This moment clearly changes Marji and marks a shift in her views of the world. As they are bombed, Marji chronicles this by saying: " And so I was lost, without any bearings...What could be worse than that?" (Satrapi 71). By using a rhetorical question, Satrapi almost directly addresses the reader. This makes the reader stop and wonder about how Marji is feeling and put themselves in her shoes. From this moment on, Marji adopts a rebellious way of life. This moment shaped the story and added to the theme coming of age because it helped Marji develop further as a character and as a person. It helped her to grow up a little bit and find herself and what she believes.

That pivotal moment not only contributed to the theme of coming of age, but it also helped to develop the story because of the impact that it had on the protagonist. She starts to act out and stand up for what she believes in. This is most obvious by her adoption of and love for Western culture, which is forbidden. She loves listening to Kim Wilde and wearing Nike sneakers, which get her into trouble: " They were guardians of the revolution, the women's branch. This group had been added in 1982, to arrest women who were improperly veiled. (Like me, for example)" (Satrapi 132). Even though she knew she could get in trouble, Marji still went out in public improperly veiled, wearing tight jeans, Nike sneakers, a denim jacket, and a Michael Jackson button. Satrapi uses these allusions in these panels in order to connect with readers around the world to help them understand that Marji is no different than teenagers in the United States, for example. This example also serves to show how Marji is acting out and rebelling against what is expected of her.

Another example of Marji acting out arises when she smoked her first cigarette. She understood how people in her country were rebelling, and she wanted to rebel too: “As for me, I sealed my act of rebellion against my mother’s dictatorship by smoking a cigarette I’d stolen from my uncle two weeks earlier. Now I was a grown-up” (Satrapi 117). This quote serves to indirectly characterize Marji as rebellious through her actions. She knowingly defied her mother’s will. Furthermore, her reason for doing so was distinct and deliberate and showed that she knew what was going on and wanted to take a stand in her own symbolic way. She understood that people were being arrested and executed for their defiance, so she defied too. This shows her transition into young adulthood because she was forming her own opinions and making her own decisions based on her own personal set of morals, rather than based on what she had been told. For Marji, this moment was significant for her coming of age as she declared that she was now a grown-up; however, her transition into adulthood as Marji claims it to be really started when she kicked God out of her life with the beginning of the war. Satrapi shows Marji’s coming of age through her decision making and shift to a rebellious nature.

Marjane Satrapi masterfully weaves a story of bildungsroman together through the especially prominent theme of coming of age. She clearly demonstrates in Persepolis how a single moment can alter someone’s life and who they choose to be. Through the theme of coming of age, Satrapi not only tells a story but creates a lifelike and passionate character out of Marji.