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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

**Sophie Hatter's unconventional *Bildungsroman* in
Diana Wynne Jones *Howl's Moving Castle***

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA Dissertation

Author: Alba Domínguez Jimenez

Supervisor: Sara Martín Alegre

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

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Statement of Intellectual Honesty

Your name: Alba Domínguez Jimenez

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Alba', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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Abstract

Howl's Moving Castle (1986) is a novel written by Diana Wynne Jones, but its popularity was gained after *Studio Ghibli's* movie in 2004. The novel follows teen Sophie Hatter's journey after being cursed and transformed into a ninety-year-old woman, and how Howl Pendragon tries to break her curse. The focus is put in the *Bildungsroman* genre and its relation to the female character, this dissertation aims to demonstrate how Sophie Hatter follows the widely known genre and also how does she subvert it.

The first part of the dissertation focuses on Sophie following the traditional definition of the *Bildungsroman*, exploring the original journey of the character in a coming-of-age novel, and comparing it with Sophie's journey. Sophie's lack of confidence in herself and the pressure society puts into her are the trigger elements for her to leave and seek her fortune, along with the curse inflicted into her, altering her physical appearance, and allowing her to become independent.

After exploring the most conventional aspects of Sophie as regarding the *Bildungsroman* genre, the second part of the dissertation focuses on the way in which Sophie subverts the traditional vision of it. Her being old since the beginning of the novel breaks the genre completely, creating a newer version of it according to the current times.

Keywords: Diana Wynne Jones, *Howl's Moving Castle*, Sophie Hatter, ageism, *Bildungsroman*, identity.

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0. Introduction

0.1. Diana Wynne Jones and *Howl's Moving Castle*

Written by the British novelist Diana Wynne Jones (b. London, 1934–2011) and published in 1986, *Howl's Moving Castle*, widely known because of the 2004 film adaptation by Hayao Miyazaki, is a novel that, although catalogued as children's literature¹, offers different interpretations and viewpoints depending on the readers' age. Wynne Jones was specialized in children and young adult literature, especially in the fantasy genre, centring most of her writings in wizards and witches, which can be seen in *Howl's Moving Castle*. She is widely known for the *Chrestomanci Series* (1977 – 2006), the *Dalemark Series* (1975 – 1993)² and the *Moving Castle Novels* (1986 – 2008), from which *Howl's Moving Castle* is the first of the trilogy, including *Castle in the Air* published in 1990 and *House of Many Ways* published in 2008. She was heavily influenced by C.S Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* and by J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in her writings. Wynne Jones was the oldest of three sisters, just like Sophie Hatter, and this made her begin her literary career at the young age of thirteen, writing mostly short stories for her sisters. However, she began publishing in 1973.

Sophie Hatter is a hatmaker who lives with her younger sisters – Lettie and Martha – and her stepmother – Fanny. Orphan because of her deceased mother and after her father's death, her stepmother is unable to maintain the family business and is obliged to separate the sisters in order to maintain herself and the business, sending Martha and Lettie away from home and leaving Sophie as the heir of the family business, alone and with the feeling that she cannot expect anything more in her life other than what is expected of the first-born. However, her life makes a turn when the Witch of the Waste –

¹ Though catalogued as children's literature, nowadays it is also considered to be part of the young adult genre.

² The *Chrestomanci Series* were published from 1977 to 2006, including eight novels whereas the *Dalemark Series* were published from 1975 to 1993, including a total of four books.

and main antagonist of the story – curses Sophie out of jealousy for her beauty and transforms her into a ninety-year-old woman. Afraid to be seen by her family in such a state, she runs away from home, and therefore from her responsibilities, forcing herself to find shelter somewhere else.

Sophie encounters the Moving Castle at the beginning of her journey, a mechanical house that moves magically across the country, and finally decides to go in. The Moving Castle gives shelter to the fire demon that propels it – Calcifer – and to a young boy – later seen to be Howl's apprentice Michael³ – apart from the well-known wizard Howl Pendragon – a twenty-seven-year-old man who was born in Wales and travels between the real world and the fantastic world of Ingary⁴. Sophie is offered shelter after agreeing to break the curse binding Calcifer and his master, the wizard Howl, cursed by the Witch of the Waste before the beginning of the novel.

The whole book follows Sophie's journey in the Moving Castle as well as her self-discovery journey. It also follows how Sophie and Howl's relationship evolves from initial indifference to kindness towards each other. It also explores Sophie's strength from a different point of view, as she develops her skills in magic, discovering that she has magic of her own and learning how to control and successfully use it, to the point that she breaks both her curse and Howl's.

Wynne Jones's novel, as I have noted, gained popularity after the release of Studio Ghibli's animated movie, directed by Miyazaki, which made it famous worldwide. Miyazaki created a version of the novel that also followed Sophie's journey, yet, abandoning the original plot, the Japanese director redirected the main focus onto an anti-

³ Fifteen-year-old orphan boy that lives in the Moving Castle and who Howl decided to take care of after finding him in one of the few doors of the Castle.

⁴ The novel is set in the fantastic country of Ingary, which has its own temporality and includes all type of fantastic elements such as magic and witches and wizards. However, it also mixes with the real world, a contemporary Wales from which Howl is native to. Howl can travel from one place to another thanks to the Moving Castle magic doors.

war discourse rather than a self-improvement storyline, according to the original story. Putting the change in the plot aside, both versions of the story provide the audience – or reader – with a realist view of our reality especially in Sophie’s case, who in both versions goes through a successful self-improvement journey.

0.2 *Howl’s Moving Castle* and the Subgenre of the *Bildungsroman*

Howl’s Moving Castle is part of a specific genre that has become very important in literary terms, that of “coming-of-age novels [which] depicts [the] protagonists’ formative processes in which readers encounter detailed experimentations with identities and the acceptance and rejection of various role models” (Quintana-Vallejo, 21). Sophie Hatter believes she is doomed to failure because of her familial situation, as she is the oldest of three sisters and thinks that as the heir of the family business, she cannot have a destiny of her own. Her personality is shaped by her surroundings and the pressure of being the eldest sister; the ensuing expectations are a heavy burden she is not able to carry on her own. Sophie does not believe that she can break the mould she always thought was made for her and her situation.

Her transformation into a ninety-year-old woman is what triggers her evolution. “The defining elements of the *Bildungsroman*, conventionally understood,” Frow et al. comment, “are these: a young man from the provinces seeks fortune in the city and undergoes a process of education in the ways of the world such that he eventually becomes reconciled with it” (1905). In this case, a young woman, Sophie, performs as an ‘unconventional’ *Bildungsroman* character because she does not escape to seek her fortune but her independence, which is more important to her. Her appearance is not conventional, as she is no longer a young woman due to the curse inflicted into her either. During her journey, she rediscovers herself as a person who can achieve anything; she

gains the self-confidence that she enormously lacked due to the pressure inflicted into her.

Coined in the 19th century, the *Bildungsroman* is a subgenre associated to the first novel that presented its best-known characteristics: Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* (1795 – 1796), a novel that revolves around Wilhelm Meister's journey of self-discovery after leaving the bourgeois society he was born in. This subgenre follows the main character's journey⁵ during a lifetime span, usually youth, including all the experiences that make the character grow and have agency. As Duncan notes, "Goethe makes his hero [Wilhelm Meister] universal by giving him traits conventionally associated with women: unformed, susceptible, *varium et mutabile*, aesthetically attuned to environment and climate, drifting with events rather than driving them" (14). Far from being addressed to men, this subgenre explores the self in a way that was directly associated to women, as it explores the more sentimental part of the self, and how experiences can shape more psychologically than physically. The *Bildungsroman* rediscovers the self in a realist and plausible way, which also characterizes Wynne Jones.

There are not many academics that associate Diana Wynne Jones and Sophie to the *Bildungsroman*. Some scholars, however, connect the subgenre with Howl and how his experiences have shaped him.⁶ Almost none of the studies available refer to Sophie⁷ and her evolution, her magical ageing and her development into a young woman that gains the agency she lacked at the beginning. Sophie's story clearly follows the narrative

⁵ Nowadays there are several coming-of-age novels (or *Bildungsroman*), one of the clearest examples are Dumbledore and Harry Potter from *The Harry Potter Series* (1997 – 2007) in which we follow Harry's story from his childhood to his late teen years.

⁶ Academics such as Xinnia Ejaz or David Rudd discuss Howl's evolution through the novel, mentioning Sophie as a side-character.

⁷ Academics such as Carolyn Wilcox and Apolline Lucyk refer directly to Sophie and her journey in their articles.

genre of the *Bildungsroman* even though from a significantly different perspective as she ages suddenly instead of progressively. The development in her case, even though her physical appearance changes, is one of a psychological maturation.

This dissertation discusses this evolution arguing that Wynne Jones's novel is best understood as a *Bildungsroman* for children. I have divided my argumentation into two parts. In the first one I examine the more conventional aspects of Sophie's journey, her direct relation to the characteristics of the original *Bildungsroman* and how Wynne Jones follows the pattern. In the second part, I deal with the unconventional aspects of Sophie's story as a *Bildungsroman*, including her singular process of ageing, and how she breaks the conventions and becomes a character of her own.

1. The Conventional Aspects of Sophie Hatter as the Protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*

Before talking about Sophie's story as part of the *Bildungsroman* subgenre, it is important to clarify what I mean by 'conventional aspects'. Sophie Hatter, as I am arguing, undergoes an important transformation throughout the novel; leaving her change in appearance aside, she rediscovers herself as the novel progresses. As Quintana-Vallejo explains:

The traditional *Bildungsroman* is a genre of the novel that, unlike other forms of narrative, focuses predominantly on a formative process. The internal forces of self-determination and the need to ponder on and experiment with one's identity are the key drivers of the plot and the main objectives of the protagonists (37).

Sophie Hatter begins the novel as an eighteen-year-old girl that does not believe in herself, as she has always been living under a pressure that should not be put on a girls' shoulders at such a young age. The oldest of the Hatter sisters feels worthless, unable to seek her fortune and has no sense of belonging, as she states several times throughout the novel: "Sophie admitted to herself that her life was rather dull" (15), or "What made me think

that I wanted life to be interesting?”, she wonders. “I’d be far too scared. It comes of being the eldest of three” (18).

The curse the Witch of the Waste inflicts into Sophie makes her confront the world as it is when she escapes her house as a response of her physical change. Thus, her journey begins, a journey that fits the *Bildungsroman* though her gender is different from that of the habitual protagonist:

to qualify as the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist had to confront a world of recalcitrant matter [...] the work of rehabilitating himself has become the very form of work and his labouring body, the matter, that this protagonist must overcome if he is to feel part of the present moment. (Armstrong, 2092 - 2093)

Through her physical change, Sophie begins her journey of self-discovery, she leaves aside one of her principal and most important issues, her appearance. She does not feel as pretty as her sisters and the curse enables her to start her journey away from convention and accept the reality inside her, so she can become a whole new person. As Schrage-Früh and O’Neill note, “contemporary versions of the *Bildungsroman* portray the variety, richness, and complexity of the subjective experience of ageing” (11), and Sophie’s is a rare case. After being cursed, every problem she has had before, disappears along with her young appearance. In Sophie’s progress, she is seen to enjoy life as it is, thanks to her new look, far from the expectations that people have on her because of her situation as the oldest of three.

The linear process of the original *Bildungsroman* can be applied to Sophie. On the one hand, the *Bildungsroman*’s linearity is almost universal, consisting of loss, which leads to a journey of discovery, followed by personal growth and maturity. On the other hand, Sophie’s journey begins with her evident loss of youth, which I deal with in more detail in the second part of the dissertation. ‘Loss’ could also refer here to the lack of self-confidence she has since the very beginning of the novel. Once she is cursed and accepts this change embedded in her, her true process begins. After meeting Howl, Sophie grows

internally, trying to understand herself at the same time she tries to understand the wizard. At the end of the novel, Sophie ends up being a completely different character, with agency and self-confidence, and it is only then that she returns to her younger self.

Since the beginning, Sophie has problems with herself. She has grown to accept a future that is already written for her, she is not able to create a new one on her own because she does not believe she can re-write it. Her position as the first-born and therefore heir of the family business is the only future she can conceive. She never discusses her step-mother's decisions when at the beginning of the novel she says: "Now, Sophie dear, it seems only right and just that you should inherit the hat shop when I retire, being the eldest as you are" (8). This comes with the *Bildungsroman* indeed, the fact that the main character is doomed to a certain future⁸, often thinking of themselves as a worthless person, always wishing to live a different life. The inability to stand on their own make these characters either rebel against themselves or stay as they are, starting an unhappy life resulting in never-ending problems with themselves and what surrounds them. Sophie, unconsciously, becomes part of the first kind of *Bildungsroman* protagonist, a rebel against herself.

Female protagonists are created in a particular way that show how stories "shape young people's expectations for life, and especially how the strict hierarchies of fantasy and fairy tale can limit what future girls imagine for themselves" (Sachiko, 227). After all, *Howl's Moving Castle* is a fantasy book that tells the story of a girl that escapes her home due to a curse. Once Sophie has left the 'loss' stage aside, she begins her journey of discovery after being cursed and transformed into an old woman. With her new appearance, Sophie begins to think of herself in a different way. She does not reject—as anyone would expect—the old and at the same time new version of herself. On the

⁸ Mimicking Wilhelm Meister, Sophie also tries to escape the bourgeoisie she lives in, as his father was the owner of a hat shop and pretended her to be the heir.

contrary, she embraces it and tries to deal with it the best she can. As we read in the novel, “the face in the mirror was quite calm because it was what she expected to see. It was the face of a gaunt old woman, withered and brownish, surrounded by wispy white hair” (36); as her “quite calm” initial reaction to her new appearance shows, Sophie may not be happy about it, but she is not angry at it either. She acts with the passivity characteristic of Sophie at the beginning of the novel. In fact, Sophie expects her change because of her internalized and unconsciously accepted future: “Sophie felt as if the past months of sitting and sewing had turned her into an old woman or a semi-invalid” (17). The future she once accepted, is now rejected because she is forced to leave—even though leaving that home and therefore future is necessary for her to both grow and discover her true self. Once she steps out of her house, she almost directly comes across the Moving Castle and becomes involved with it, starting her internal transformation as she creates a personality of her own—presenting herself as a cleaner—in order to try and find a solution to the curse inflicted by the Witch. Wilcox observes that “Sophie has internalized socially-accepted concepts of duty, and this abdication of personal agency is ultimately what gives the Witch of the Waste’s curse its hold over her” (165-166).

It is then when Sophie’s personal growth begins. Howl Pendragon is a special character, he does not follow conventions, nor any rule established; he is childish, annoying and certainly dramatic. On the contrary, Sophie Hatter is more mature and pragmatic than him, and because of her situation she has an enormous fraternal feeling—towards both her sisters and everyone inside the Moving Castle. Sophie enters the Castle with prejudices towards everyone, envious of her own sisters for being able to choose their futures—while she had her own already selected—with a negative vision of her stepmother because she has not let Sophie choose what she really wanted and believing everything said about Howl in the streets—including that he eats young girl’s hearts. The

road to Sophie's growth is, thus, a rather harsh one, as she has to deal with a Wizard that differs entirely from her, and deal with Calcifer and Howl's curse, which she agreed to break because of her sense of duty and help towards the others.

Howl is what in the original *Bildungsroman* could translate into the mentor of the main character once they have developed a relationship. He is the one guiding Sophie through her journey, allowing her to behave as she really is and expressing herself in any way; he never gets really mad at her even though they argue at some points. Their disagreements about Sophie's cleaning habits or Howl's secrecy are what make Sophie grow, she is used to agree and accept everything pleasantly, and Howl teaches her how to disagree, even with herself. It is then that Sophie discovers that she can do magic after realizing what had happened to the hats she had brought life to⁹, and this is crucial for her to grow and understand herself better.

Her newly discovered magic is what the *Bildungsroman* understands as the process of trial and error. Through her learning, she learns what error means, and that she needs to work on it in order to gain experience and grow as a person. Magic becomes a metaphor for herself and shows her that any human can fail, but only what a person does with failure creates the human personality. In the Castle, Sophie not only understands how to handle Howl's eccentric personality or her magic, but also what surrounds her. Taking distance from her personal situation opens her eyes, and it is then when "Sophie is able to apply the lessons she learns to both her handling of Howl and her understanding of her sisters and stepmother" (Mendlesohn, 41).

Slowly, her prejudices disappear, and she begins to understand that her sisters have chosen their futures following their hearts, and that she could have also rejected her duty

⁹ It was common for Sophie to invent stories about the woman who could wear one of her hats, creating perfect lives according to the hat's final result. It is seen in the novel that Sophie enchanted some of the hats because the women who wore them started to live as Sophie had said.

as the older sister since she did not want to inherit the hat shop. Moreover, her position as an old woman and, therefore, the experience she has gained help her to expand her understanding:

Being old gave her an entirely new view of Fanny. She was a lady who was still young and pretty, and she had found the hat shop as boring as Sophie did. [...] Then she had suddenly been afraid she was just like Sophie: old, with no reason, and no reason to show for it. (383)

Sophie grows to be more empathic towards her maternal figure, understanding her position and the reason behind every action she has done. Sophie's older appearance helps her to understand better what her stepmother was trying to do; had she remained young, the level of empathy would have not been the same.

Being in the Castle deconstructs Sophie only to make her construct herself after learning what she is capable of. This reflects directly to the final stage in the construction of a good *Bildungsroman*: maturity. "Jones", Lucyk claims, "creates narratives that appear to abide by the conventional female-male dynamic, but ultimately turn this dynamic upside down when the female turns out to be the world-saver after discovering her own power and potential" (174). The final stage of her development shows an assertive Sophie that breaks the curse, turning her into the hero not only of her life, but Howl's. She discovers that her magic is powerful enough to break both her curse and the wizard's.

Breaking the curse is the last pursuit to achieve Sophie's full development. However, her insecurity remains almost until the last pages of the novel, making Howl angry at Sophie for still thinking of herself as naïve. It is difficult for a person to leave their identity aside, but what characterizes this novel—and Wynne Jones' characters—is that "Jones's female heroes are unique because each of them has another 'self', an alternate identity, in some sense" (Lucyk, 174). It is inevitable to think about Sophie without relating her to fear. The fear of being a failure in breaking the curse, not being able to manage the results if anything goes wrong. Her duality in terms of personality is

something that characterizes Sophie, and when ‘young Sophie’ reappears in the last pages only Howl can bring ‘old Sophie’ back.

The alternate identity in Sophie turns out to be the one she has been hiding all along, as she has not been able to leave it behind. However, it is important to mention that Sophie’s new self is predominant until she saves Howl’s life; only then do those insecurities appear. Nonetheless, Howl—who has also evolved as a character thanks to Sophie—is the one that can bring ‘old Sophie’ back, as seen in one of the last scenes of the novel in which Howl and Sophie have just defeated the Witch of the Waste and Howl is talking about her letting the Witch enter the castle. Howl tells her she had just done a big mistake but shows her that even if she had acted wrong, the final result was still the same: the defeat of the Witch:

“I’m the eldest!” Sophie shrieked. “I’m a failure!”
“Garbage!” Howl shouted. “You just never stop to think!” (416).

The objective is for Sophie to finally understand what she is capable of, and having the Wizard Howl yell at her that she can in fact make mistakes and solve them, reminds her of her potential. The most important feature that has changed in Sophie is her thinking, which is reflected in her magic directly. The more she believes what she says, the more it becomes real. No one can make her change her appearance and become young again other than herself. The final pages of the novel show how Sophie, unconscious of her development, returns herself to her younger look even if she does not utter any word to make it, her change of mentality towards herself is enough to break the curse.

In the end, Howl is the one that opens Sophie’s eyes, reminding her of her potential but also of her mistakes. Sophie spends most of the novel repeatedly telling herself that she is not able to seek her fortune, that she does not deserve anything good, and her magic acts as a result of her words. What really becomes part of Sophie’s maturation and development, what Howl teaches, is accepting life as it is, letting the decisions shape her

either good or bad, and letting them become part of herself. Not only does she grow an identity and thought of her own, but a sense of understanding of everything, both herself and her surroundings.

After following every step associated to the original *Bildungsroman*, it is easy to characterize Sophie's story as part of it. In the subgenre of the *Bildungsroman* the focus is how a character reacts to the quest of self-formation, and Sophie converts herself into a new person after going through a long path. She discovers herself and also that there is more life outside the expectations, and that it is not bad to not follow them. Sophie learns to put her sense of duty aside, and most importantly, she learns that only she can write her future; the goal is to be happy after every decision made.

2. Unconventional Aspects of Sophie Hatter as the Protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*

After showing how Sophie follows the universal path of the *Bildungsroman*, it is important to mention that her story differs from it in several aspects, particularly in two characteristic aspects. First and foremost, Sophie is cursed by the Witch of the Waste, which alters the original beginning of the journey proper of the *Bildungsroman*, as she begins the novel being already old, at least outwardly. Her inability to talk about the curse sometimes makes the reader forget Sophie's real age, as she adopts a different personality from the one seen in the first pages of the novel. Secondly and as important as her age, she possesses a kind of magic that differs from simply being a natural ability in Sophie. Both her age and previously unknown magic are two of the most important aspects in which Sophie's story does not follow the conventions of the traditional *Bildungsroman*.

Sophie has always thought of herself as the older sibling, with no other expectation in life than learning how to act accordingly to every word she is told, and even trusting all of them. The traditional society she lives in puts a lot of pressure on her shoulders,

which forces Sophie to leave her life aside and simply follow what is to come, regardless of her desires. After being cursed, she is relieved from this pressure and adopts the passivity of older women concerning expectations. This inopportune change in appearance makes Sophie think about everything she has left behind in terms of responsibility. “Her curse”, Ejaz argues, “becomes a form of liberation as she finally leaves the house in search of finding a way to break it [...] growing up opens up new avenues for Sophie to take on a journey to explore her real potential” (14). Growing old makes her realize that she does not have to fulfil any expectation because her time has passed; she allows herself to enjoy life for the first time.

The fact that Sophie becomes old in the first chapters of the novel is crucial because it allows her to forget about everything she was suffering; no one cares about what an old woman is doing, as she reflects: “As a girl, Sophie would have shrivelled with embarrassment at the way she was behaving. As an old woman, she did not mind what she did or said. She found that a great relief” (83). Sophie finds relief in being old because she is able to leave behind what had been haunting her. Despite being cursed, she is not really bothered about it because of the relief this brings to her psychologically. Although Sophie mentions her condition several times as the novel progresses, she never does it in a disrespectful way, she only reminds herself of her condition without it wanting to really change, as this would mean returning to every preoccupation in her life.

Growing old is a taboo no one wants to confront, and especially in women, it can be a real nightmare since “having internalized the cultural dictate that ‘looking old is bad’ while ‘looking young is good’, aging women in our culture do not want to look old” (Bouson, 15). In Sophie’s case, she breaks this taboo and accepts her destiny in relation to what being old means to her: independence. Sophie learns how to live in the body of an ‘old hag’, and learns how to act accordingly, as a person that does not have any burden

to carry because she is old enough to leave every care behind. In her precise case, her sudden aging allows her to see the world with new eyes because “old age is also seen by some as a time for the maturing and development of the individual” (Bouson, 17).

Sophie manages to develop successfully because of what being old really does to her. Since, “as an old woman, she is not restricted in her position but possesses agency and assertiveness” (Ejaz, 15), Sophie’s agency successfully develops thanks to the game of trial and error mentioned earlier, though “much of the novel revolves around Sophie learning to overcome her own incorrect negative perceptions of herself and other people and to realize how much more flexible the ‘rules’ of life are than she thinks” (Sachiko, 227). Having Howl around makes her really think about what she is capable of by the simple expedient of taking care of him and learning to manage his tantrums. Her behaviour around Howl is, nonetheless, characterized by tiredness. Sophie is usually tired about Howl’s reactions to certain things, and this makes her be sincere to him. Old Sophie can say what she thinks, and her new outspokenness is an instance of her developing agency. As shown in the beginning of the novel, Sophie is used to agreeing with anything others say about her or to her, but Howl’s annoying remarks make her explode in some cases and break the main rule that she had imposed to herself, that of trying to please everyone. Once Sophie breaks this rule and reveals her true self, she does not fear any other ‘rules’ anymore.

Sophie’s personality changes radically since she is first cursed, and this can be seen when she moves to the Moving Castle. She develops an almost motherly relationship with Howl’s apprentice—Michael—and a strange relationship with the wizard himself—as they are not friends but not enemies either¹⁰. Sophie’s sense of humour is unveiled when she is in the Castle and no longer feels embarrassment, as she would if she were

¹⁰ Howl’s initial reaction to Sophie is one of passivity. He accepts the fact that she will live in the Castle, but he questions her cleaning habits stating that cleaning is not really necessary, which annoys Sophie.

young. As Webb observes, “to be a young girl, a potential heroine in the world of stories—or merely a potential failed sister—is experienced by Sophie as confining; to be a crone, outside the limits of maiden, wife or mother, is to be liberated” (157). Her liberation comes at the same time as the curse, creating tension between them though the fear of liberation disappears the second she becomes younger again.

She discovers and realizes that she can break every rule imposed to her when necessary, so “Sophie, therefore, functions as her own fairy godmother, artfully influencing her own future” (Rudd, 258). Along with her magic centred in words, Sophie is the one that gives herself security; moreover, it is ‘old Sophie’ who brings ‘young Sophie’ the ability to grow. Sophie unconsciously creates a character— ‘old Sophie’—that opens some doors for her to explore. In a way, she is influencing her future and her destiny by letting the character of ‘old Sophie’ change her way of living and thinking. Her magical potential also plays a significant role in her development.

Sophie’s stay in the Moving Castle with Howl and Calcifer makes her understand that life is easier than she had ever thought. Her condition as an old woman, apart from making her disinhibited enough to act as her true self, helps “Sophie to think and act for herself for the first time in her life, without regarding any familial obligations. She is free to think and act in ways she never would have attempted as her normal, younger self” (Wilcox, 162). In her younger look and because of the expectations others had about her, she can only act in a way that fulfils those expectations. Being the eldest of three sisters shapes Sophie for the bad, making her believe firmly that her job is to follow every expectation that is put into her. It is true, however, that her transformation into an old woman is not completely unfortunate. Rudd comments that “in Jones’s *Howl*, this particular truth is tested to its extreme by making Sophie preternaturally old. Had she remained young, she might have continued to act in these self-fulfilling ‘elderly’ manner”

(258). Her behaviour had always revolved around being old as the eldest child. She had never had the confidence to act accordingly to her age because of her expectations in herself and her surroundings.

Unlike what happens in the conventional *Bildungsroman*, magic in Sophie's case acts as an aid that goes beyond ability. Different from other examples of magical characters – Harry Potter, for instance– Sophie's magic helps her to develop psychologically. Sophie's magical abilities grow with her as the novel progresses, being fully developed at the end, when she is able to break her curse. In her precise case her magic acts as her shadow, never leaving her side. Sophie's insecurities and beliefs about herself make the curse stick onto her because of the nature of her magic, which is expressed through words. "The most powerful people in Jones's fantasies are those who can use words, not those who use magic", Mendlesohn notes (44). In fantasy novels magic is usually the most powerful element a witch or wizard can use.

Sophie's strength—both magical and physical—comes from her thoughts, and therefore, the words she dedicates to herself. When a woman calls her a witch, "oddly enough, Sophie accepted this without any trouble at all [...] it was as if Sophie had always known this. But she had thought it was not proper to have a magic gift because she was the eldest of three" (238), Sophie's inability to believe in herself makes her think she can never possess any kind of magic. The power of words is seen to be crucial for both her curse and her liberation, as it is how she talks about herself the main reason why she remains old the whole novel. Unlike other magical plots and characters, Sophie does not possess any kind of element that triggers her magic – either a wand or another element – but her own words about herself.

Words in this case are more than words, they shape Sophie's future, and play a bigger role than she would never expect. The fact that she believes all she is saying about

herself, makes every magic act stick to her profoundly, not allowing it to disappear. Every thought she utters, becomes real for the simple fact of her magic. The same applies to the curse. Every time she repeats to herself words such as “I *am* an old woman” (364, original emphasis) the curse sticks even more. Sophie is in fact more powerful than the Witch of the Waste or Howl because of the weight her words carry. It is only when Howl reminds her that she never stops to think about herself in a real way, that she is finally liberated from the curse of the Witch of the Waste. Unlike the traditional *Bildungsroman* and even though Howl arguably acts as a mentor, the reality is that Sophie acts as her own mentor, helping herself every time yet being unaware of it. Howl’s function is not one of a helper, though he does help Sophie much with her communication skills, but Sophie is the one that liberates herself.

Sophie works hard, and the fact that she is left alone in the Castle with nothing more than her thoughts most of the time causes her to learn how to treat herself and to grow confident. Even though Howl helps her to develop, the impact he has on her is minimal, compared to the impact she has on herself as the novel progresses. In the traditional *Bildungsroman* subgenre, there is always a mentor¹¹ that guides the protagonist throughout their path and therefore evolution, but in this precise case it is different. It is true that Howl is the one that encourages Sophie to act according to her desires, but it is really Sophie who develops a personality and identity of her own after spending time on herself and being aware of how important she is for other people.

It is only when Sophie realizes the nature behind her magic that she begins to think more about her acts and their consequences. She begins to realize that everything that has happened to her is a consequence of her own thoughts. She tells herself “don’t worry old

¹¹ Retaking the previously mentioned example from *The Harry Potter Series*, Dumbledore clearly is Harry Potter’s mentor in both his magical studies and life. However, it is seen that Dumbledore uses Harry for his own benefit until Harry becomes aware of his mentor’s real intentions. It is only then that Harry frees himself, just like Sophie does at the end of the novel.

thing [...] You look quite healthy. Besides, this is much more like you really are” (36) or “Look at me! I set out to seek my fortune and I end up exactly where I started, and old as the hills still!” (342), these are two examples of her negative thinking. Had she not thought of herself as an old woman—or rather accepted her destiny—she might have not been trapped in an old woman’s body for the entirety of the novel. The same applies to her feeling that she is a failure, which also chases her since the beginning of the novel. Had she not thought of herself as a failure, she would have had a better destiny.

Towards the end of the novel, Howl moves the Castle to Sophie’s city, to open a florist’s shop for her, –and it is only then when we see Sophie talk nicely to herself: “She told herself she had never been happier in her life” (335). It is then when Sophie has fully developed her self-confidence, along with her magic, allowing her to sell flowers in her new life. Once her journey is over, having her younger appearance back and a new and reinforced self, Sophie realizes what she had been rejecting since the beginning of the novel: “as her sisters have believed all along, their destinies are not determined by fairy tale conventions but by their own decisions and desires” (Webb, 158). Sophie is then able to think of herself as someone that deserves anything that happens to her, either good or bad. She finally understands that she also has a destiny and that it is not written, as she had thought, but that she is the only one that can write it, just as her sisters had done.

Conclusions and Further Research

In this dissertation I have discussed Sophie Hatter's evolution and hopefully proven that Wynne Jones's novel needs to be read as part of the *Bildungsroman* subgenre. However, it is important to stress that what characterizes *Howl's Moving Castle* as a *Bildungsroman* is how unconventional Sophie's story is. Sophie not only follows rules but also breaks them—as Wynne Jones breaks with her novel those of the *subgenre*. The *Bildungsroman* is an old subgenre with rather fixed rules, but throughout this dissertation I have shown that it is more flexible than it is assumed. Wynne Jones gives a successful reinterpretation of the *Bildungsroman* for modern times. Like every subgenre, the genre selected has also changed through time and how its conventionality is as important as its unconventionality is something worth investigating.

First and foremost, and despite following several traditional elements of the genre, Sophie Hatter's story and she herself are characterized by their unconventionality. However, the *Bildungsroman* is followed in the novel through the most important convention of all: the journey of self-discovery. In the first section of this dissertation, I have shown how Sophie Hatter follows her own journey. Her psychological change is seen as the novel progresses, she is able to transform herself into a new Sophie by following a process of trial and error, associated with her magic in this case.

Secondly, I have shown that as much as she follows the tradition, she also breaks it. Being a 20th century novel, *Howl's Moving Castle* has some feminist elements that make Sophie stand for herself. The fact that she breaks against taboos and resists social pressure—specifically pressure on those who inherit family business—characterize Sophie as a young woman with much agency. In this novel, Wynne Jones helps child

readers to be aware of their lives and to not let anyone dictate their futures, regardless of their age.

The mentorship Howl Pendragon offers to Sophie in this novel is as unconventional as the female character herself. Howl lays the groundwork for Sophie to fully develop and create a self she feels more comfortable with. Through Howl's indirect help, Sophie is able to work on herself and overcome a full character with agency and self-esteem. Sophie acts as her own mentor, as she is the only one that successfully changes into a better version of herself. She finally lets herself enjoy her life as young Sophie, beginning her new journey of development, accepting everything already learned.

For further research, it would be interesting to focus on other characters that appear throughout the novel. The Hatter sisters are a very interesting object of study as they are three very different types, and quite original. It would also be interesting to focus on Calcifer and its relationship with Howl, as the spirit is also a very interesting element in the novel. Enough work is already done in Howl's case, but it would be interesting to get to know more about children's literature and how does the subgenre of the *Bildungsroman* appear, if present in any other novel of the genre.

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