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Making Connections:
Network Analysis, the *Bildungsroman*, and the World of *The Absentee*

Abstract: In the late eighteenth century, European novelists discovered youth. Writers like Goethe, Austen and Scott developed a new genre, the *Bildungsroman*, in which young, enthusiastic protagonists explore the world, develop themselves, and find a place to remain. This, at least, has been a popular argument in modern criticism. Recently, however, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse have brought it into question. Studying a number of British and American novels, they show that an alternative genre, the "network novel," arose in the period, which "disrupted" the image of an organic, domestic world which lay at the heart of the "domestic novel" (their term for the classical *Bildungsroman*). Here, I propose that the "network novel" and "domestic novel" can actually be seen as two distinct but interrelated aspects of the *Bildungsroman*. To demonstrate this, I use Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee* (1812) as a case study, utilising Franco Moretti's innovative digital technique, "character network analysis," to analyse its structure.

I

There is a precious moment for young people, if taken at the prime, when
first introduced into society, yet not expected, not called upon to take a part

1

in it, they, as standers by, may see not only all the play, but the characters of the players, and may learn more of life and of human nature in a few months, than afterwards in years, when they are themselves actors upon the stage of life, and become engrossed by their own parts. There is a time, before the passions are awakened, when the understanding, with all the life of nature, fresh from all that education can do to develop and cultivate, is at once eager to observe and able to judge, for a brief space blessed with the double advantages of youth and age. This time once gone is lost irreparably; and how often it is lost—in premature vanity, or premature dissipation! (Edgeworth *Helen* 1:277-78)

The world is more visible to the eyes of youth. So wrote Maria Edgeworth in *Helen* (1834), her last and most tender novel. Now in her sixties, she hadn't written a novel since 1817, the year her father died. *Helen* was something of a swan song, the only one of her novels that "really express[ed] her tastes," according to her biographer Marilyn Butler (*Maria Edgeworth*, 488). It was a paean to youth. Its young heroes, Helen and Beauclerc, think and feel at a high pitch of intensity, and melt with the heat of their sincerity the cold rationality of the older characters, Lady Davenant and General Clarendon. It was also a paean to a great age of the novel in English: the age of Frances Burney, Jane Austen and Walter Scott, all of whom did much to re-imagine this "precious moment" of youth in their fiction. Austen had died in 1816, Scott in 1832. Burney had published her final novel, *The Wanderer*, in 1814. A new age was round the corner: the Great Reform Bill had passed, Balzac had begun *La Comedie Humaine*, Dickens's first novel would appear in 1836.

Modern scholars have not always considered Edgeworth's period a "great age of the novel" in English. In the influential view of J. M. S. Tompkins, there was not one novelist whom "posterity has consented to call great" from the death of Smollett in 1771 until the publication of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811 (v). Many scholars have striven to fill this void in the history of the novel, but in some ways it remains a void.

According to the editors of the *Cambridge Companion to Fiction of the Romantic Period*, Romantic-era novelists had no "unifying artistic sensibility." Indeed, they were not really "Romantic" at all, unlike their fellow poets, painters and composers (Maxwell and Trumpener 1). Edgeworth might have been nostalgic for the fiction of her youth. Modern scholars have often seemed confused by it.

This confusion is strange, because in the European context, the significance of Romantic-era fiction is clear. Franco Moretti argues there was a vast "symbolic shift" in European culture in the late eighteenth century: "Youth, or rather the European novel's numerous versions of youth, becomes for our modern culture the age which holds the 'meaning of life'... ." For Moretti, the "decisive thrust" was made by Goethe, with in his 1796 novel, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Way of the World* 3-4). With this book was born the *Bildungsroman* destined to become a master-form of European narrative in the nineteenth century. Edgeworth's own writing would seem to partake of this "symbolic shift." She wrote much on the education of youth. In books like *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795) and *Practical Education* (1798), she argued that the aim of education was to help individuals teach themselves, cultivating their own personalities and abilities. In her major novels, she gave this ideal concrete form. The protagonists of novels like *Belinda* (1800), *Ennui* (1809), *The Absentee* (1812), *Harrington* (1817), *Ormond* (1817) and *Helen* are all young and enthusiastic, on the cusp of adulthood, determined to learn the ways of the world and fit themselves for life. They are resolved not to waste the "precious moment" of growth and decision that Edgeworth eulogised in *Helen*.

Despite examples such as Edgeworth's, scholars have often excluded English-language fiction from the early history of the *Bildungsroman*. For scholars such as Howe, Buckley and Jeffers, the *Bildungsroman* was a German invention. Only after

Wilhelm Meister was translated into English in 1824 did the form become possible in Britain (Howe 10; Buckley 9-13; Jeffers 3-4). There is a certain irony to this argument: Karl Morgenstern, who invented the term *Bildungsroman* in 1817, argued that almost every novel in English since Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) could, "mit größerm oder geringerm Rechte" ("more or less correctly"), be considered an example of the form, including the novels of Edgeworth's predecessors, Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith (86).

Morgenstern's theory is intolerably vague (Selbmann 16; Martini 260), but there are a number of recent scholars who argue that the *Bildungsroman* arose independently in Britain. Mitzi Myers argues that Edgeworth invented the English *Bildungsroman* ("Double-Voiced Narrative"; "Quixotes"), while Lorna Ellis and Moretti himself suggest it was Jane Austen (Ellis 114-37; Moretti *Way of the World* 12). The more popular approach among Anglo-American scholars, however, is to eschew the term "*Bildungsroman*," and instead adopt Nancy Armstrong's term, the "domestic novel." In the latter half of the eighteenth century, argues Armstrong, "one author after another" found that traditional ideas about "human value" were misrepresentations. Rank increasingly seemed as less important measure of value than a person's "essential qualities of mind," revealed in their personal relationships (3-4). This emerging ideology of domesticity had its effect on the novel. By the time Austen wrote, the novel was defined "in a way that gave meaning to such narratives whose resolution depended on marriage" (50). Austen, Edgeworth and novelists like them turned marriage into a double symbol of personal maturity and social cohesion. Their heroines would grow up, achieve self-consciousness, and prove their maturity by selecting the ideal husband and therefore the ideal community in which to live. Armstrong's argument is highly original and persuasive—particularly in her

emphasis that the "domestic woman" was at least as important a figure in eighteenth-century culture as the "economic man" (59). But her description of the narrative structure of the "domestic novel" is not essentially different from classic descriptions of the *Bildungsroman*. Moretti himself argues that in the classical *Bildungsroman*, "marriage becomes the model for a new kind of *social contract*" (*Way of the World* 22). For Armstrong, the representation of female consciousness is the distinctive feature of the genre; for Moretti, its political and social dimensions, understood mostly in terms of class. But both describe a similar narrative structure.

Perhaps, then, the *Bildungsroman* is the "unifying artistic sensibility" scholars have searched for among English-language novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Armstrong herself would now demur. In a recent essay co-authored with Leonard Tennenhouse, she argues that another form of realistic prose fiction arose by the end of the eighteenth century, a form which "unsettled" domestic fiction: the "network novel." The domestic novel presupposes an organic, intimate world, into which the protagonist is born, and within which they must develop. But a number of novels of the period, particularly American ones, paint a rather different world-picture. In America, the colonists formed "a community that was in the process of making itself out of disparate materials" (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 307). In novels like Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799), characters come together and fall apart in an uncertain social world. Having no "positions to maintain," they morph and adapt (309). With no existing social relations to hold the world of the novel together, the protagonist, Mervyn, must become the glue of society: "Shaped entirely by his encounters with other characters and their households, Mervyn emerges as nothing but connective tissue and becomes a force in his own right on this basis" (310).

These arguments have profound implications for the study of Edgeworth's fiction. She was an Anglo-Irish landowner's daughter, living in the depths of County Longford, and wrote most of her works of fiction in the decade and a half following the union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1800. If ever there was a disintegrated society in need of new connections, it was this new version of the United Kingdom, reeling from the United Irish Uprising of 1798, teeming with supposedly "British" masses of poor, disenfranchised, Catholic Irish peasantry, and locked in an endless, debt-fuelled war against resurgent Napoleonic France. Edgeworth's novel of 1812, *The Absentee*, elucidates the problem vividly.[1] Its protagonist, Colambre, is the son of absentee Irish landlords, living the high life in London while the debt mounts and their agents in Ireland bleed the estates. Colambre comes down from Cambridge to find his parents the butt of all London's jokes, his mother putting on an affected English accent and wasting a fortune on crass home decorations, his father a depleted man and a drunk, who spends his days carousing with the Falstaffian reprobate Sir Terry O'Fay. Alarmed and disgusted, Colambre decides to visit his native Ireland, "determined that he would see and judge of that country for himself, and decide whether his mother's dislike to residing there was founded on caprice or on reasonable causes" (5:391).

Outwardly, *The Absentee* seems to fit the classic model of the *Bildungsroman* or domestic novel, as Colambre travels the world, forms his values, and selects a spouse and a place to live. But there is an obvious problem with this reading: Colambre himself is a fairly rational chap from the start. It is really his deluded mother, with her "*Londonomania*" (6:294), who needs a spot of the *Bildung* ("education") that defines the genre. This problem has provoked some debate over

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[1] The novel was published as volumes five and six of *Tales of Fashionable Life* (1809-1812). All references will be to this first edition.

the novel. Kara Ryan has no problem calling *The Absentee* a "historical bildungsroman" (190). Contrariwise, Marilyn Butler argued that not one of Edgeworth's Irish Tales is a *Bildungsroman*; in the end, they are too "magical or allegorical" for the label, even if they do start out seeming to be about the hero's education ("Histories of the Future" 172). Whether or not the novel is a *Bildungsroman*, however, it certainly does have features of the network novel. Colambre moves between London, Dublin, and the countryside in both England and Ireland, and eventually becomes the hub of a social network stretching across the Irish Channel, with an Irish estate, an English education and a half-Irish, half-English bride with a Catholic pedigree to offset his own Protestantism.

All this poses a challenge for any reading of *The Absentee*. What is the significance of Colambre's learning process? Is he a "domestic" hero whose inner mental development is significant? Or is he a "network" hero whose position in the world is all the matters? In what follows, I argue that *The Absentee* contains both "domestic" and "network" elements, and that in fact these are both simply aspects of the *Bildungsroman* itself. Following Lukács's influential reading of *Wilhelm Meister* (132-43), scholars of the *Bildungsroman* have tended to focus on the formation of the protagonist's "self," and the way this is "reconciled" with society, rather than on the protagonist's role in actually forming the society they occupy. To demonstrate how the domestic novel, network novel and *Bildungsroman* are intertwined in *The Absentee*, we need a technique which clearly reveals Colambre's role in the novel. Moretti himself provides an elegant solution, as outlined in two recent articles ("Network Theory"; "Operationalizing").[2] By modelling the verbal interactions of

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[2] Sociologists had previously experimented with literary applications of network analysis (Alberich, Miro-Julia and Rosselló; Stiller, Nettle and Dunbar), but Moretti, to my knowledge, was the first literary critic to do so.

characters using a computer, we can visualise and quantify *The Absentee* as a "character network." The technique is ideal for Edgeworth's dialogue-driven novels. *The Absentee* itself began life as a play, and as Butler notes, it is in their witty dialogue that Edgeworth's characters reveal themselves (*War of Ideas* 143). It allows us to temporarily set aside the issue of Colambre's mind or "self," and to study the novel as a system of interaction between characters. We can then use traditional methods to add Colambre's "self" back into the equation, to see what role it plays in this system of interaction. This should help us see *The Absentee* more clearly, as well as revealing Edgeworth's place in the European tradition of the *Bildungsroman*.

II

The Absentee's character network is displayed in Figure 1. Each "node" represents a character. Each "edge" represents words spoken by one of them to another. Moretti suggests that graphs like these give us a sense of a text's "character system" ("Network Theory" 82). The term comes from Alex Woloch, who argues that character systems are determined by how they allocate "character space" among the actors in the narrative (13-14). For Woloch, a character's inner qualities are less important than the space they occupy and the pattern of their interactions with others. In Figure 1, the size and position of the nodes would seem to represent something like a character's "space," and the other aspects of the layout would seem to give some suggestion of how the "system" is structured. In order to see how this might be the case, we need to see how the graph was produced.

[Figure 1 here: "Figure 1. *The Absentee* (1812), whole network."]

The underlying data was collected by hand, processed using iGraph and R, and visualised using Gephi (R Core Team; Csardi; Bastian, Heymann and Jacomy).

Data was collected by hand, because although some teams have demonstrated that automatic extraction works (Elson, Dames and McKeown; Lee and Yeung), a human is able to collect far more accurate and detailed data. This is preferable for close reading.

This is not a simple process, even for a straightforwardly realistic novel like *The Absentee*. There is first the question of what counts as a "character." Clearly the flesh-and-blood creations at the centre of the story, like Colambre or Lady Dashfort, should be included in the network. But when Colambre addresses "the multitude" or the "bystanders," or when we meet a series of characters simply called "a boy" or "the foreman," should we include them as characters? There is no agreed set of criteria with which we can resolve such questions. Uri Margolin argues quite persuasively that fictional characters are "partially indeterminate" and subject to "readerly imaginative re-creation and … endless interpretive controversy" (Margolin 68-69; Frow 17-21) In the interests of consistency, and of including the maximum possible information, I have included every entity, however plural or indeterminate, so long as they speak or are spoken to in the course of the novel. But this then raises a second question: what counts as speaking or being spoken to? Following Moretti, I have only drawn an edge between two characters if they address words directly to one another, whether in speech or writing ("Network Theory" 81). I have not included conversations which occur offstage, those which are merely referred to and not narrated. There is an ineradicable element of readerly interpretation, even arbitrariness in creating models like these.

The layout of the graph shows who the characters' closest associates are. The graph has been laid out using a Force Atlas algorithm, which places nodes near one another when they share neighbours, i.e. when they share conversational partners.

Thus the characters have mostly been placed in small star-shaped subgroups. In addition, the graph shows which particular verbal interactions were the most intense in the novel. The "weight," or thickness of the edge between two characters is determined by the number of chapters in which they speak. Colambre's mother, Lady Clonbrony, speaks or writes to him in 9 chapters; being of taciturn disposition, he replies in only 6. The arrows at either end of the edges between them are sized accordingly. Finally, a community-detection algorithm has been used to sort the characters into clusters, indicated by the colour of the nodes.

The graph also shows which characters are most "central" in the network's structure. The Force Atlas algorithm places hub characters in the physical centre of their groups. Thus Colambre, the protagonist, lies at the centre of the graph as a whole, while important minor characters like Lady Dashfort, Lady Clonbrony, Grace Nugent, the widow O'Neil or Larry Brady lie at the centre of their star-shaped subgroups. To emphasise the centrality of characters such as these, the nodes have been sized on the basis of their "betweenness." This is one of a number of popular statistical measures of "centrality" developed by social network analysts (Wasserman and Faust 169-219). It rests on the concept of the "geodesic" or shortest path. Imagine all the words flowing between the characters in the network along the edges. How would a piece of information get from Larry Brady, in the bottom-right corner of the network, to Lady Dashfort, on the far left? He could talk to Paddy Brady, who could talk to Sir Terry, who could talk to Lord Clonbrony, who could talk to Lady Clonbrony, who could talk to Colonel Heathcock, who could finally tell it to Lady Dashfort. Or he could tell Colambre, who could tell Lady Dashfort directly. This second path, Larry → Colambre →□Lady Dashfort, is the shortest possible path, or the "geodesic" between Larry and Lady Dashfort. To calculate the betweenness of a

given node, you simply add up the number of geodesics on which it lies, making suitable adjustments when there is more than one geodesic between two nodes, and for the weights of the edges (Freeman). Clearly, Colambre is the most important character in this respect, and accordingly has the largest node.

Figure 1 would indeed seem a good guide to *The Absentee*'s character system. It tells us who the characters are in the novel, and vividly represents their patterns of interaction. But it is worth remembering that the network is a model, and all models have a trade-off: models make things clear and comprehensible, but at the cost of leaving out certain information. Networks have neither memory, judgment nor a sense of time. Figure 1 does not show *what* characters say to one another, nor does it reveal whether their interactions are positive, negative, improving, stagnating or deteriorating. It does not show which interactions occurred when, nor does it show whether information relayed from one character to another is ever passed on to others. We need to look elsewhere for this information, in order to make sense of the wonderfully clear and precise relationships revealed by the graph. Willard McCarty calls this "interactive modelling" (ch. 1). We need to interact with this graph, by comparing it to other representations of the novel (e.g. quotations and plot summaries) to see what meanings these abstract relationships have in the world of the text.

III

Character systems are imagined worlds: societies of imagined people, conjured up to embody a vision of reality. They can be vast panoplies of human types, designed to represent a whole nation at a moment in history in an empirical way, as in Balzac's *Comedie Humaine*. They can be smaller and more focussed, as in Mitford's *Our*

Village (1824-32) or Reitz's *Heimat* (1984-2013). They can be allegorical, and represent a system of moral concepts, as in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96) or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). They can be radically indeterminate or ambiguous, as in much of Beckett's writing. This is the metaphysical element of the system, its relation to the world outside the text. The second element of the system is its distribution of attention, Woloch's "character-space." A character system can be a one-sided monologue, as in Camus's *La Chute* (1956). It may have a single protagonist, surrounded by minor characters, as in Jane Austen's novels. Or it may distribute attention between many characters, unequally and irregularly, as in *War and Peace* (1869). Highly ambiguous distributions are possible, as in Woolf's *The Waves* (1931). As we have seen, the graph of *The Absentee* suggests that the novel is distributed predominately around a central protagonist. Its character system is also clearly supposed to offer a realistic model of British and Irish society at the turn of the nineteenth century. What more can we say about the character system of this novel? What sort of world does Colambre inhabit?

The community-detection algorithm provides a clue. It has divided the network into ten communities, which fall roughly into three types:

(a) Noble households. First, there are four groups which represent different noble households in the novel (Figure 2 contains an example). In each group, there is a central hub character with the highest betweenness. There is the household of Lady Dashfort, to the left of the network in yellow. There is the noble household of Clonbrony Castle in dark blue to the right, run by the agent Nick Garraghty while Colambre's family is absent. Colambre's estranged parents, who disagree about how their household should function, have been divided into two separate communities. Lady Clonbrony's "household" comprises the green characters at the top-left, mostly

the lofty nobles she invites to her disastrous social events. Just to the right, in light blue, poor Lord Clonbrony isn't even the hub character of his own community. That role is taken by his niece Grace Nugent, who tries as hard as she can to make the Clonbrony's townhouse run smoothly. These groups account for slightly more than half of the novel's world, containing 56 of the 104 characters. Predominately, Colambre moves through a world of noble households, dominated by the upper-class householders who run them. They form a network of acquaintance stretching across the Irish Sea. The Dubliner Lady Dashfort knows Lady Clonbrony's London associate, Colonel Heathcock, and hires Mrs Petito after she is sacked from the Clonbronys' London staff. And of course the Clonbronys are connected to their Irish estates through the medium of their agent, Nick Garraghty. This is a domestic and aristocratic world, of local economies dominated by noble families, their servants, households, tenants, and retainers.

[Figure 2 here: "Figure 2. An example of a noble household: Lady Dashfort's."]

(b) Go-betweens. In the bottom-left and bottom-right are two communities, a green one centred around Captain Bowles, and the other in orange, centred around Larry Brady. Near Colambre is a similar community in purple, containing Sir Terry and the coach-maker Mordecai (see Figure 3). None of these communities represents a household. Captain Bowles is an unmarried, itinerate soldier, who travels awhile with Colambre. His small community comprises a couple of fellow travellers and two servants. Larry Brady is a postilion from Clonbrony, who drives Colambre about the Irish countryside. His community largely comprises lower-class Irish characters they meet on the road. Sir Terry we have already encountered; Mordecai is a scheming coach maker who duns the impecunious nobles of London. These communities represent restless, "go-between" positions in the network. Members of these

communities must rely on hospitality (Captain Bowles, Sir Terry) or the service economy (Larry, Mordecai) to find a place in the world of this network.

[Figure 3 here: "Figure 3. An example of a go-between community: Larry Brady and friends."]

(c) The alienated. The final kind of community is represented by Colambre's red group in the centre, the yellow group of lower-class Irish pub-goers in the top right, and the light blue group of servants from Clonbrony Castle at the bottom. What distinguishes these characters or groups is their tenuous connection to the network as a whole. While resourceful go-betweens like Captain Bowles, Larry Brady, Mordecai and Sir Terry can move through the network, making connections, these characters would become disconnected from the network were Colambre removed from the picture, as in Figure 4—with the single exception of Mrs Rafferty and her set, who know the Garraghtys. Most of these characters are lower- or middle-class, unlike the bulk of the characters in the householders' communities. Uniquely among the noble characters in the novel, Colambre goes to a local pub, enters a kitchen, queues up to see an agent, interacts with the itinerate poor, talks to a protestant clergyman, and speaks with the virtuous agent Mr Burke. These characters are often economically essential to the noble households who dominate the network, but without Colambre, there would be little or no communication between them and the lofty aristocrats who rule the novel's world. Colambre may not be a democrat, but he is, uniquely among the novel's aristocrats, a man of the people.

[Figure 4 here: "Figure 4. *The Absentee* without Colambre.]

This image of the world, derived using Moretti's mathematical methods, largely conforms to Armstrong and Tennenhouse's description of the network novel.

In classic network novels, argue Armstrong and Tennenhouse, "households" act as the "hubs" in the network. The world is a network of noble households, linked by the exchange of persons, letters, and things. The graph emphasises a crucial point, however: to every household, there is a householder, a Lady Dashfort or a Lady Clonbrony. But as the split in the Clonbrony's household reveals, this relationship is not always simple. We will return to this point.

What function does Colambre serve in this world of interconnected noble households, roaming go-betweens and lower-class characters excluded from the society of the drawing rooms? Moretti argues that from a network perspective, the protagonist's function is to provide "stability" ("Network Theory" 88). A group of network theorists who have studied Marvel Comics make a similar point: from a network perspective, the protagonist is "the character that minimize[s] the sum of the distances to all other [nodes]" (Alberich, Miro-Julia and Rosselló). We can quantify Colambre's stabilising role in a number of ways. Firstly, as shown in Table 1, he has by far the highest betweenness of all the characters in the novel. More than any other character, he links nodes together.

Table 1. Top 10 Betweenness Scores

Character	Betweenness
Colambre	5776.083
Lady Clonbrony	1842.583
Larry Brady	858
Lady Dashfort	655.333
Grace Nugent	399.667
Dennis Garraghty	331
the widow O'Neil	315.5
Peggy	312
Lady Isabel Dashfort	252
Mrs Rafferty	251

Secondly, we can also perceive his stabilising function by measuring the number of "components," or clusters of connected nodes, in the network before and

after he is removed. With Colambre in the network, as in Figure 1, the network consists of one connected component, including every character in the novel. When he is removed, as in Figure 2, the number of separate components rises to 14, and 22 of the 104 characters are disconnected from the rest of the network. No other character integrates so many other nodes.

Colambre also stabilises the network in a third, subtler way. When he is removed, the network of noble households takes on a distinctive U-shape. This increases the "distance" between many of the network's main communities. Larry Brady and Lady Dashfort, for instance, are only two "steps" away from one another when Colambre is included. But when he is removed from the network, it takes four "steps" to get from one to the other. This simple method of counting the "steps" is intuitive, but is also limited. Consider Lady Clonbrony, Lady Dashfort and Grace Nugent, three of the hub characters in the novel's major households. Colambre does sit between the three of them, but two other characters, Colonel Heathcock and Mrs Petito, also link them directly to one another. These two characters would seem just as important as Colambre if we simply counted the steps. But he is a far more prominent character in the novel than either of them, appearing in more scenes and speaking more often. This fact is represented in the graph by the edge weights. Since Colambre is a more important mediator between Lady Clonbrony, Lady Dashfort and Grace Nugent, he speaks to them in more chapters, and his edges with them have greater weight. We can measure this using Dijkstra's algorithm, which finds the shortest path between two nodes accounting for the edge weights (Dijkstra). As shown in Table 2, Colambre lies on the shortest path between these major householders in all cases but one.

Table 2. Shortest paths between major householders.

	Path	Length
With Colambre	Lady Clonbrony → Grace Nugent	0.2
With Colambre	Grace Nugent → **Colambre** → Lady Clonbrony	0.3667
Without Colambre	Lady Clonbrony → Grace Nugent	0.2
Without Colambre	Grace Nugent → Lady Clonbrony	0.5
With Colambre	Lady Dashfort → **Colambre** → Grace Nugent	0.5333
With Colambre	Grace Nugent → **Colambre** → Lady Dashfort	0.7
Without Colambre	Lady Dashfort → Mrs Petito → Grace Nugent	2
Without Colambre	Grace Nugent → Mrs Petito → Lady Dashfort	2
With Colambre	Lady Dashfort → **Colambre** → Lady Clonbrony	0.5
With Colambre	Lady Clonbrony → **Colambre** → Lady Dashfort	0.6111
Without Colambre	Lady Dashfort → Colonel Heathcock → Lady Clonbrony	2
Without Colambre	Lady Clonbrony → Grace Nugent → Mrs Petito → Lady Dashfort	2.2

Colambre has by far the highest betweenness, as he links alienated characters to the network, and brings the network of noble households closer together. The graph reveals that he lives in a lopsided and disconnected world. At the bottom are the 22 lower-class characters, alienated from each other and the world. At the top is a network of noble households, whose relations are tenuous and distant. This is a novel about how a young lord seals this lopsided world into a cohesive whole—how does Colambre do it?

Armstrong and Tennenhouse, as we saw, claim that the protagonist of the network novel acts as "connective tissue." Scholars of the *Bildungsroman* often make a related point: that the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman* absorbs the other characters in the text. As Woloch puts it in his reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, the protagonist's education is "a formal process in which characters, in juxtaposition, are turned into interior characteristics" (56). Similarly, Martin Swales argues that in *Wilhelm Meister*, "Die Nebenfiguren sind aber beschränkt, eben weil sie bloß Segmente [Wilhelms] Selbst verkörpern …" ("But the minor characters are limited, precisely because they embody mere segments of [Wilhelm's] self …") (417). Here we have two theories of integration. In the network novel, the protagonist communicates between the other characters; in the *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist's mind becomes a

composite of all the people they meet. Both of these processes are visible in *The Absentee*.

(a) Connective tissue. There is a hidden world in *The Absentee*, which only Colambre can see, and only after he has travelled and experienced it first-hand. In the novel's climactic scenes, he describes it vividly to his parents:

> 'Yes,' replied Lord Colambre, 'the very best company (if you mean the most fashionable) have accepted of our entertainments. We have forced our way into their frozen circles; we have been permitted to breathe in these elevated regions of fashion; we have it to say, that the duke of *this*, and my lady *that*, are our acquaintance. – We may say more: we may boast that we have vied with those whom we could never equal. And at what expence have we done all this? For a single season, the last winter (I will go no farther), at the expence of a great part of your timber, the growth of a century – swallowed in the entertainments of one winter in London! Our hills to be bare for another half century to come! But let the trees go: I think more of your tenants – of those left under the tyranny of a bad agent, at the expence of every comfort, every hope they enjoyed! – tenants, who were thriving and prosperous; who used to smile upon you, and to bless you both! In one cottage, I have seen —'
>
> Here Lord Clonbrony, unable to restrain his emotion, hurried out of the room. (6:295-96)

Colambre connects two worlds that were hitherto asunder: the "elevated regions" of fashionable London, and the "hills," "tenants" and "bad agents" of rural Ireland. There was once a personal, face-to-face connection between the Clonbronys and their lands. They could see the "smiles" of their tenants, and admire the grand trees, the "growth of a century." But this has been replaced by an impersonal, economic connection, in which "the entertainments of one winter in London" can "swallow up" the beautiful things the Clonbronys have left behind. Meanwhile, their continual monetary demands upon their agent, Nick Garraghty, lead him to squeeze the

tenants. The "cottage" to which Colambre refers belongs to the widow O'Neill. Garraghty and his brother Dennis have screwed every last penny out of her, promising to renew her lease. When the lease expires, Nick accepts "glove-money" and "sealing-money" from her (i.e. a bribe)—then tells her he has let the house to the surveyor for a higher rent (6:219-20).

Colambre is the only character who can grasp these connections. As we saw earlier, he is the only upper-class character in the novel who interacts with a wide range of lower-class characters. He is the only character who can combine this experience with intimate knowledge of the Clonbronys' London life. It is not that Colambre's parents lack an ethical code—Lord Clonbrony is overwhelmed with "emotion" and leave the room when Colambre presents the facts. The problem is simply their distance from their estates. As Adam Smith explained in one of Edgeworth's favourite books, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, it is difficult to sympathise with people who are far away (157-59). Colambre advocates a traditional, moral economy, rooted not in material self-interest, but in sympathy between tenant and landlord. The Clonbronys, however, are enmeshed in a different economy, the modern, impersonal, financial economy in London, and suffer from what Marx would later diagnose as "commodity fetishism" (163-77). They can see the commodities purchased from the produce of their estates, like the "*Alhambra hangings*," "Chinese pagoda," "MOON CURTAINS," "*sphynx candelabras*" and "Phœnix argands" Lady Clonbrony purchases for a party (5:229-31). But they cannot see the labour and natural resources materialised in them. The "definite social relation" between them and their tenants appears to them in "the fantastic form of a relation between things"—that is, as a relation between the cash Nick sends them and the stuff they buy with it (Marx 165). This leads them to make poor decisions, as when

they decide to fire the agent of their second estate, Mr Burke, and give Nick his job. Burke might not send them whatever sums they demand, but this is due to his ethical management of the estate. Only Colambre can see this, and must deploy all his eloquence and experience to lift the scales from his parents' eyes.

This, of course, presupposes that Colambre's taste and judgment in moral matters is correct, that the Clonbronys' life in London really is hollow and crass, and that the tenants really do deserve the care of their landlords. Is it really so wrong to let a cottage to a new tenant who can pay a higher rent?

(b) Self-formation. This brings us to the second way in which Colambre integrates or stabilises the network: by observing the other characters, integrating them into a moral scheme, cultivating his own taste and judgment. In his travels through the network of noble households, he is constantly struck by the beauty of magnanimity in characters like Grace Nugent, Lady Oranmore or Sir James Brooke, and disgusted by the vanity of money-grubbing characters like the Dashforts. But perhaps the most important moment in the cultivation of Colambre's moral taste comes in Chapter 6, when he visits Mrs. Raffarty's mock-Roman villa, Tusculum. Everything about Tusculum is fake. The drawing room is "fine with bad pictures and gaudy gilding." The portico stands upon pillars which look "properly substantial," but are actually "hollow and light as feathers." The park is full of absurd ornaments, like the "little dairy" which is just "for show," or the fisherman on the "Chinese bridge," who turns out to be a stuffed mannequin, and falls in the water as the party approach (6:19-24). As McCormack argues, the "phony improvements" of Tusculum are symbols of Mrs Raffarty's narrowness of mind (135). In Edgeworth's novels, as in Austen's, the landscape of the noble household is always a field of self-expression;

the *nouvelle riche* grocer's wife Mrs Raffarty and her "villa" are inauthentic, hollow parodies of aristocracy.

And yet it is Colambre's sympathy with her that enables him to draw the crucial moral lesson. As they leave, Colambre's companions laugh over the day's events. Colambre is in a different mood, and sighs, for he grasps the connection between Mrs Raffarty's situation and his parents': "It was the same desire to appear what they were not, the same vain ambition to view with superior rank and fortune, or fashion, which actuated Lady Clonbrony and Mrs. Raffarty" (6:29). His parents, trapped in London, deaf to the jokes made behind their backs, are again blind to the truth. It is Colambre, who moves about the world, and savours the moral atmosphere of different households in the network, who is able to draw the right connections and judge correctly. He judges according to a standard of sympathy and integrity: people should be who they are, and love and care for those who are near them. In his family's case, that means assuming their role as landlords, and investing in genuine improvements rather than flashy commodities. His benevolence and openness to others might leave him vulnerable to the charms of the Dashforts in the short run, but in the long run, these qualities enable his self-formation.

IV

The Absentee is not Edgeworth's warmest novel. For a fictional hero, Colambre is rather uncharismatic. But the novel does set forth very clearly the link between the "network" and "domestic" aspects of the *Bildungsroman*, and reveals how novelists like Edgeworth used the new ideal of youthful self-development to make sense of historical change. As Colambre grows up, so do Britain and Ireland. In the major novels of Edgeworth and Scott, claims Butler "[a]n individual grows from

irresponsibility to a sense of himself as Civil Man, just as a community has advanced from barbarous disunity to its modern ordered complexity" (486). Her argument recalls Bakhtin's famous description of the *Bildungsroman*, in which the protagonist "emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself" (23). Character network analysis gives us a clearer understanding of the structure of this world in Edgeworth's fiction, and the way her protagonists emerge along with it. The principle of order in this world is the noble estate, and when the estate crumbles, the world becomes a lopsided place of distant noble houses and alienated commoners. Colambre's quest might not be spiritual, but it is epochal, as he slowly discovers the structure of the world and his role within it. His own self-discovery heralds the reformation of his class and the evolution of the social order, or so Larry Brady hopes in the final line of the novel: "And you see its growing the fashion, not to be an Absentee" (6:466). It seems a fragile hope—"fashion" is hardly the most reliable force of historical change. But it is hope nonetheless.

Armstrong's theories of the "domestic" and "network" novel give us an insight into the two sides of this ideal. On the one hand, there is Colambre, seeing the inauthenticity of his parents' lifestyle, cultivating himself through travel, and returning to restore his family to its true self. On the other, there is the disintegrating commercial society of Britain and Ireland, which he proposes to re-integrate by re-instating the personal connection between landlord and tenant. Character network analysis allows us to see how these processes interact in the novel, as Colambre connects alienated lower-class figures to the network as a whole, and sits between the major households, judging and learning from them. Both the "domestic" and the "network" novel are contained in the classical *Bildungsroman*. They speak to the hope these novelists had, that the old social compact might evolve, that revolution

and democracy might be unnecessary to progress and self-discovery (Moretti *Way of the World* 63-64). It was a sweet illusion, and it is easy to see why, two decades later, Edgeworth published so nostalgic a novel as *Helen*, as a great wave of democratic, industrial, and imperial expansion looked set to sweep both Britain and the world into a cruel but exciting future.

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