Soren Kierkegaard, born 1813
Erotic Love as Identity and Purpose in Kierkegaard’s Autobiographical Works

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Søren Aabye Kierkegaard was born in 1813 in Copenhagen, Denmark and was a Romantic philosopher and theologian. His thoughts and writings presaged later Existential thought in the twentieth century, though with distinct departures and differences. His earliest works, notably Either/Or, Fear and Trembling, and Stages on Life’s Way, among others, were inspired by Kierkegaard’s interactions with a woman named Regine Olsen. Kierkegaard met her in May of 1837 visiting a family friend’s house. There he fell in love with her and began to pursue her. In September of 1838 Kierkegaard asked Olsen to marry him.1 Kierkegaard a year later broke off the engagement thinking he had “made a blunder” asking her to marry him in the first place.2 Using his feelings of melancholy that derived from his broken engagement, Kierkegaard’s wrote works dealing with the role erotic love plays in personal fulfilment throughout different stages of life. He described three different stages of life: the

aesthetic, ethic, and religious stages. In *The Seducer’s Diary* and “Quidam’s Diary,” Kierkegaard argues that defining identity and purpose as erotic love fails to sufficiently supply contentment for the aesthete, and introduces solutions in the ethic and religious stages for the problems erotic love created.

*Either/Or*, Kierkegaard’s first work after his break with Olsen, proposed and developed the aesthetic and the ethic stages. Kierkegaard presented his thoughts not through direct discussion of the stages, but rather through the use of the stories or journals of the lives of everyday aesthetes or ethics. The first half of *Either/Or*, written by the pseudonymous “A,” depicts the aesthetic worldview, where the sole object of life is the pursuit of pleasure. The section culminates with *The Seducer’s Diary*, which depicts the journal entries of Johannes the Seducer telling of his seduction of the maiden Cordelia. After months of pursuing Cordelia, Johannes secures her affections. Though he had achieved his goals, Johannes “retreats before her, so that she will know ‘all the powers of erotic love, its turbulent thoughts, its passions, what longing is, and hope.’”3 In his pursuit for pleasure, Johannes’ goals undid themselves. He was not content with the pleasure he had found, always trying to find more as the initial excitement for each new event in his relationship waned. He pushed her away so that she would pursue him and he could find enjoyment from her affections. His efforts to distance himself from Cordelia did not end successfully, resulting in a broken engagement.4 In the second half of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard describes the letters of “B,” also known as Judge William, written

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3 Updike, Introduction to *Seducer’s Diary*, xiii.

in response to A. The letters argue against A’s aesthetic, pleasure-seeking life, saying that it is possible to abide by ethical codes without compromising pleasure or enjoyment. William asserts that the individual must choose absolute good, specifically referencing the good that comes out of marriage. This assertion is Kierkegaard’s solution to the problems created by erotic love in the aesthetic stage. Kierkegaard, through Judge William, argued that responsibility and commitment is not necessarily a bad thing, but rather protects individuals from their transient passions.

*Stages on Life’s Way*, written two years after *Either/Or*, served as a continuation of the thoughts contained in his first work, though Kierkegaard developed the aesthetic and ethic stages further and fleshed out the religious stage, first depicted in *Fear and Trembling*. *Stages* begins with a dinner party made up of various drunken aesthetes. Each aesthete is prompted to tell a story to the personified Love. Upon the completion of each story, there is left a hollow sensation, as if there is more to life than what the aesthetes described. While not directly stating the downfalls of the aesthetic life, Kierkegaard is very critical of it. The fact that the guests are drunk colors the perception of them. They appear irresponsible, and their stories are woefully shallow. Listening to their stories, the guests are almost pitiable in their state of incontinence. After all of the stories are related, Judge William, B from *Either/Or*, reappears to speak to the dinner party guests. Once again William asserts the good that arises from marriage, but “the Judge is older now and sees more difficulties. He finds that marriage requires faith, ‘honesty toward God and

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5 Updike, Introduction to *Seducer’s Diary*, vii-viii.

one’s wife,” and he speaks of God’s existence as that which sustains the mutuality of marriage.” Just as a purely aesthetic life does not create fulfilment, the ethic life still lacks all the necessities for a full life, as acknowledged by William. Suddenly Kierkegaard makes a break with the events of the dinner party and introduces “Quidam’s Diary,” which contrasts and explores the transition from the aesthetic stage to the religious stage. The diary was supposedly found in a chest at the bottom of a lake, and contains the journal entries of a man who pursued a woman in a similar fashion to Johannes, became engaged, and likewise broke off the engagement. Unlike The Seducer’s Diary, “Quidam’s Diary” alternates between entries describing the seduction of the Quidam’s love interest and his thoughts a year after he breaks off the engagement. While from the viewpoint of an ethic dealing with the consequences of the aesthetic stage, “Quidam’s Diary” struggles with the problem of guilt. The ethic stage did not adequately absolve Quidam of his previous actions. Rather it constantly reminded him of his failures to live by the moral code he had discovered.

In Seducer’s Diary Kierkegaard contemplates the identity of his characters, how they are created, and how they manifest themselves. Johannes in Seducer’s Diary laments the state of mankind and how it resembles the mirror that he sees Cordelia in through her window. It can only show her image when she is present before it, yet when she leaves, the mirror returns to emptiness. The mirror individually contains nothing, yet when it has an object in front of it, that is the only thing it can show. There is no hiding the image

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8 Kierkegaard, Stages, 188-362.
from the whole world; rather it is on display for all to see that happen to encounter it. Kierkegaard laments the “unhappy mirror...What torture if a human being were fashioned that way. And yet are there not many people who are like that, who possess nothing except at the moment when they are showing it to others, who merely grasp the surface, not the essence.” In comparing humans to mirrors, Kierkegaard argues that humans do not innately contain an identity, but must fashion one for themselves. While humans do not have an inherent identity, one can be fashioned by metaphorically putting an object in front of the mirror to be reflected back to the world. Thus, identity is something that is chosen by each individual, based off of what each individual values in objects or people around them. Identity then is only a shallow effort to mimic others’ qualities rather than a personally derived definition of the self. In a way, the object or person chosen to be put in front of the mirror, to act as identity, is worshipped. In the words of N. T. Wright, worship is “a bit like falling in love. In fact, it is a kind of falling in love. And when you fall in love, when you’re ready to throw yourself at the feet of your beloved, what you desire, above all, is union...You become like what you worship.” Just as Johannes was obsessively in love with the pleasure he derived from Cordelia, he worshipped it. He became so enthralled with it that when he finally obtained the goal of winning her affections, he distanced himself from her so that he could still find that enjoyment without the responsibility of commitment. In Johannes’ case, he reflects Cordelia and the erotic pleasure that he derives from her.

9 Kierkegaard, Seducer’s, 20.
Erotic love as the object in front of the mirror, as an identity leaves Johannes empty, and in actuality identity-less. He is never satisfied with his current state, always wanting more of Cordelia’s presence if she is not present. Yet when he does encounter her, he immediately begins to plan when he can find her again. Johannes, contemplating his good fortune to discover Cordelia, ponders his longing for her: “My soul is demanding more and more actuality, and it is becoming stronger and stronger.”" Though earlier he laments the state of man, only being able to reflect what is in front of him, as if it does not apply to his superior musing, Johannes finds himself in the very same state. By defining his identity through Cordelia, Johannes must be in her presence to know himself. He only holds her image, his identity, when he places her before himself. Despite his calm exterior, between each instance of Cordelia, Johannes is filled with a restless melancholy caused by the absence of identity. Johannes acknowledges this conclusion, to an extent, talking about finding oneself in love. “Being overwhelmed is a curious mixture of sympathy and egotism. [A man] will, however miss out on an enjoyment, for he does not enjoy the situation since he himself is wrapped up in it, hidden in it.” Johannes argues that by choosing love as an identity, the lover is consumed by his identity. Every action is taken in consideration of the object of his affection. Any interactions with others are viewed as shallow and wasted time because it was not spent with the person. In Song of Solomon, the strength of love is related to death. “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is

11 Kierkegaard, Seducer’s, 48.
12 Ibid.
fierce as the grave.” Similarly, Johannes sees an overwhelmed lover as dead to the world. The lover cannot take pleasure from the moment, or any moment, because the drive to act upon that love overshadows the love itself. As an aesthete, where the purpose of life is to find pleasure, this idea is very disheartening. In attempt to create identity, identity is shattered. With such an outcome, melancholy is free to creep into life, since there is nothing there to keep it at bay. In this way, erotic love fails as an identity because of the unrest, sadness, and melancholy it creates.

With erotic love being the main supplier of identity in *The Seducer’s Diary*, the purpose of life becomes the avoidance of boredom. Since attraction waxes and wanes and whoever is the object of love cannot always be around, any spaces between both conditions of attraction and presence being satisfied are filled with boredom. With the absence of attraction identity, therefore purpose, is also absent. When the object of love is not present there can be no direct action to provide enjoyment or pleasure. Near the beginning of *Seducer’s Diary*, Johannes plays a game of sorts with personified Chance. He challenges her, demanding to be given the chance to seduce Cordelia. “Or has the balance wheel in the world structure stopped, is your enigma solved, and so you, too, have plunged into the sea of eternity? Terrible thought—then the world will come to a halt out of boredom! Cursed chance, I am waiting for you!” The challenge that Johannes presents is essentially asking that he be brought into contact with Cordelia. The reaction to his assertion is anticipation for more encounters beyond the few that he has already experienced by this point in the plot. The anticipation he feels creates excitement,

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13 Song of Solomon 8:6 (ESV).
which is a distinct lack of boredom. Unfortunately, if Johannes’ demands were not acknowledged and he did not encounter Cordelia more, anticipation would give way to despair. While not boredom, despair is a deeper sort of melancholy that is much more demoralizing and potentially much more harmful. In this way, the purpose created by the identity of erotic love at best leaves the aesthete bored and at worst draws him down to the depths of melancholy.

Despite his challenge, Johannes tries to outwit chance and avoid boredom by intellectualizing his relationship with Cordelia so that he can satisfy the two previously mentioned requirements to gain pleasure from erotic love. “How beautiful it is to be in love; how interesting it is to know that one is in love. This, you see, is the difference.”

By viewing his relations from an aloof point of view, Johannes is trying to escape being overwhelmed by the situation so that he can enjoy the whole process of being in love. This allows him to manipulate the circumstances, so that he can time his affection/obsession to coincide with his encounters with Cordelia. However, this leads to him distancing himself from her as if the whole affair is a game against boredom that he is trying to win. In doing so, he paradoxically does not accomplish his purpose because he loses Cordelia by the end of the journal. In losing Cordelia, Johannes’ purpose undoes itself, leaving him with no object for pleasure. Also, by manipulating the circumstance Johannes feels as if he gains a measure of control or power over the situation and his life. The power in and of itself serves as a source of pleasure for him. As Henry in Lord of the Flies “became absorbed beyond mere happiness as he felt himself exercising control over

15 Ibid., 46-47.
living things,” Johannes was able to find a similar kind of twisted, dark happiness from being able to have control over his own feelings and those of Cordelia.\textsuperscript{16} Despite these feelings of contentment derived from power, this kind of happiness is very flimsy. Not every event or action is controllable, especially the emotions of such a volatile situation. If Johannes were to lose control, a shell of helplessness and melancholy would be left in the place of the power that he once had. Once again the purpose of erotic love is paradoxical. Johannes does end up losing control of the situation when he is separated from Cordelia. His manipulations drive them apart so that he no longer can find pleasure from his identity or purpose.

In “Quidam’s Diary” the image of mirrors reappears, this time in the context of a father and a son. The son acts as a mirror in which the father occasionally sees his reflection. “It happened only a few times that the father came to a stop, stood before the son with a sorrowful countenance, looked at him steadily and said: ‘Poor child, thou art going into a quiet despair.’…And the father believed that he was to blame for the son’s melancholy, and the son believed that he was the occasion of the father’s sorrow—but they never exchanged a word on this subject.”\textsuperscript{17} Now in \textit{Stages on Life’s Way}, the mirror is directly applied to a person rather than humanity as a whole. Compared to Johannes’ distanced eroticism, Quidam finds the unhappy mirror to manifest itself in the close relationship of a father and son. Instead of the father finding identity by putting an object in front of his own mirror, the father “beholds himself in the time to come.”\textsuperscript{18} The father

\textsuperscript{17} Kierkegaard, \textit{Stages}, 192.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
finds his identity in his own reflection seen in his son. From this image, identity appears to be slightly inherent, since the son inherits some of his identity from his father. Thus identity becomes a cycle rather than an act of mimicry, with each generation being an iteration of the cycle and the identity slightly tweaked by its transmission from father to son. The transition from an aesthetic view to an ethic view is seen by the comparison of family to a mirror rather than beauty and erotic love. Despite the transition to what Kierkegaard’s analysis. The father’s responsibility for the son, rather than creating happiness, creates melancholy. The father, while seeing all of his own positive qualities in his son, also sees all of his shortcomings. Seeing his faults being perpetuated draws out melancholy and sadness in the father. This in turn brings out the same in the son because the son blames himself for his father’s gloom. Thus, a cycle of melancholy still perpetuates itself between the father and son within each iteration of the cycle of identity inheritance. Kierkegaard perhaps experienced similar emotions concerning his own father, who had the same melancholy that Kierkegaard had.\(^\text{19}\) The philosophical musings about ethics with his father did not adequately overcome melancholy for either of them. Hence Kierkegaard needed to introduce the religious stage to overcome the failures of the aesthetic and ethic stages. While the ethic stage attempted to correct the problems created by erotic love in the aesthetic stage, the ethic stage still did not adequately assuage melancholy, rather creating guilt.

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A year after the events of his diary, Quidam in *Stages on Life’s Way* wrestles with finding purpose as he is transitioning from the aesthetic to the religious stage of life. Thinking when he told the woman he was previously engaged to about his love for her, Quidam wishes to show her that he genuinely cares for her. “That is the impression I would like her to have of me, and that is the impression I myself would like to have, the rest I commit to God—as also this that I have done, though in another way.” Quidam stepped out of the aesthetic stage, through the ethic stage, and is on the verge of the religious stage. He no longer wishes to exclusively find pleasure in life, but he now wishes to work on commitment and love without artifice. Quidam has redefined the purpose presented in *Seducer’s Diary* from the pursuit of pleasure to one more in line with the ethic view of Judge William: responsibly engaging in a lasting relationship with one person. Yet Quidam finds that the ethic view fails when confronting guilt. Because of the failures of William’s view, Quidam has begun to move beyond it by turning to faith in God rather than just moral codes as a system to live by. Talking about his past actions with his beloved Quidam writes, “But does eternity talk so lightly about guilt? Time at all events does not; it still will go on teaching me what it has taught me, that a life is something more than a yesterday evening.” Once he left the aesthetic stage, Quidam felt remorse over his actions that he had committed. The ethic stage created guilt rather than reconciliation. Quidam had committed a wrong therefore under the ethic stage; he had failed and there was no way to fix it. Instead, Quidam lived with his failures of “yesterday evening” because they were the cause of today. By moving to the religious

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21 Ibid., 356.
view, Quidam found a new purpose, one not focused on the empty pursuit of pleasure, but instead about the abolishment of guilt. The religious stage, through forgiveness and reconciliation, overcame guilt by mending broken relationships.

Kierkegaard’s experiences with Olsen gave him the backdrop to write about such poignant images and ideas. Through these experiences Kierkegaard funneled his melancholy to create imaginative scenarios and characters to wrestle with the transitions between the various stages of life. The identity and purpose of erotic love in the aesthetic stage did not satisfy the needs of relationship for Johannes, Quidam, or Kierkegaard. The ethic stage, while laying out a plan for an ethically good life, did not adequately deal with the guilt created by the actions performed in the aesthetic stage. The religious stage resolved the problems of identity, purpose, and guilt by taking the failures and shortcomings of the previous two stages and finding ways to overcome them through reconciliation, forgiveness, and faith.