

The Narration of Ego Identity Achievement in “*The Beggar Maid*”

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ABSTRACT

Since the publication, Munro’s “*The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose*” (1978) has been examined from various aspects, and more commonly considered to be a representation of social changes and/or feminist movements. In this paper and from a new perspective, the authors critically read the story as a narration of psychosocial development and ego identity achievement of its protagonist. Investigating the psychologically significant incidents that Rose, the heroine, undergoes provides the opportunity to justify “Epilogue”, the actual unpromising ending, compared to the potential cliché happy-ending some 20 pages before the last page. The theoretical framework consists of Eriksonian theory of psychosocial development, which maps the protagonist’s quest to find her ‘self’ and resolve her identity crisis, and Marcia’s theory of identity statuses which investigates the kinds of identity she develops into.

Keywords: Alice Munro, ego identity, identity achievement, identity confusion, identity development, identity foreclosure, the Beggar Maid

INTRODUCTION

Alice Munro (b. 1931), a prominent contemporary author of Canada and winner of some governmental and international awards, portrays dysfunctional relationships

and life of multi-layered characters in her fiction. Her 1978 collection of interlinked short stories, “*The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose*” (henceforth, “*The Beggar Maid*”) provides a host of examples of the main character’s personal behaviour and social interactions, and also covers the pattern of her psychological growth, offering enough material for her character study and text analysis. Reading the

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heroine's life through her memories, this book not only gives the record of social and individual life of the protagonist, but also of her personality development, and particularly identity development.

Utilizing Erik H. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and James E. Marcia's theory of identity statuses, this article is an attempt to find the significance of the planned beginning and ending (especially the ending which is in contrast with normal/cliché closings) through mapping the psychological pattern of Rose, the protagonist's growth. Hence, Rose's life and her life choices, which make the story, will be defined as a quest to establish a genuine ego identity.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Erik Erikson (1959, 1963, 1968) claims that there are precisely eight prominent turning points or stages in everyone's psychological development. In each stage, there is an opposition between the syntonic, i.e. the positive pole and the dystonic, which is the negative one. In case the crisis is solved (the individual gains a balanced perception between the polarities), s/he acquires a lesson or a virtue and proceeds in her/his psychosocial growth; otherwise, the unhealthy outcome (which could be a malignancy, i.e. an extreme perception of the syntonic, or a maladaptation, i.e. an extreme perception of the dystonic) or unresolved crisis will affect later stages, reappear again and cause troubles. These stages (Erikson, 1968, p. 94) are shown in Table 1, on the diagonal line, whereas the corresponding

virtue of each stage (1963) is presented in Table 2.

To Erikson, youths' understanding of their selves and the environment surrounding them is the most significant issue – it is also the most recurrent theme in his works. The current article is highly dependent on his epigenetic chart (Table 1), in which he demonstrates the relationships between the psychosocial struggle of adolescence (the 5th stage) and other additional minor struggles related to main stages.

Discussing this model, James Marcia suggests four identity statuses in the process of achieving a complete identity development and labels them (1993) from the lowest psychosocial development as 'identity diffusion' (when there is no search for identity), 'moratorium' (when the individual begins to investigate his/her self), 'foreclosure' (or a false commitment) and 'identity achievement' (or the ideal outcome, which is a commitment based on experience) to distinguish between the conferred personal identity and the constructed ego identity.

The main distinction noticeable between the 'foreclosed' and 'achieved' identity studied in this article is that the first one is a result of shallowness, and is not based on self-discovery or experience; it can also be a conformity caused by fanaticism or self-ignorance, and therefore, is not as deep and true as the latter. This unwelcome outcome of 'moratorium' can be scrutinized by the means of a new experience or an emotional epiphany, making an individual undergo the 'moratorium' stage one more time, which

TABLE 2
The eight stages of psychosocial development and related virtues

Stage	Psychosocial Crisis	(Basic) Virtue
1	Trust vs. Mistrust	Hope
2	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	Willpower
3	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose
4	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competency
5	Ego Identity vs. Role Confusion	Fidelity
6	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love
7	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Care
8	Ego Integrity vs. Despair	Wisdom

may lead to an(other) identity foreclosure or hopefully, an identity achievement. In Marcia's theory, as also elaborated by Waterman (1993), the change is a lifelong process and one will never cease reviewing him- or her-self.

Analysis of the Text

In accordance with the chronology proposed by Erikson (Table 1), the significant events of Rose's school age will be observed with an elaboration on her relationships with Cora and Ralph, leading her to the emotional conflicts of the first two 'contrary dispositions'. The impact of this particular stage, which results in questioning her existence and social class and brings forth the struggle with the concept of 'social identity', will be discussed in her adolescence. The foreclosed identity imposed upon her by marriage results in a temporary balanced identity but does not last as Rose begins to explore her alternatives in order to gain a real knowledge of her self, i.e., an achieved identity. Marcia's theory can describe this situation the best. Getting

divorced, she is once more in moratorium stage. By underlining her chosen career and relationships, the authors will examine this as the time when she overcomes the inertia that she always felt in her matrimonial life. It is when she achieves a constructed identity.

The main character of "*The Beggar Maid*" makes mistakes, reviews herself, learns and changes mostly when she is emotionally involved in doing something. Being a school girl, she becomes attracted to a girl called Cora. From Rose's point of view, Cora is the girl other boys want to be with, a womanly femme fatale with shiny makeup, and plenty of colourful clothes. Her distinctive traits become the ideals for the identity-diffused Rose. At first, she imitates her, practices in front of the mirror to talk like her, acts like her and desires to accompany her; "It was Cora Rose loved" (p. 32). After they meet and when Cora acknowledges her presence, she finds out that it is not enough – Rose wants to be her, not with/near her; "She wanted to grow up to be exactly like Cora. She did not want

to wait to grow up. She wanted to be Cora, now" (p. 33).

Meanwhile, as revealed in the very last pages of the story, Rose is with a boy called Ralph Gillespie, who sits in front of her in the classroom. They spend time together and help each other with homework. He is the only friend Rose has at school; he is the psychologically significant peer in her life, as they experience different new things together. One day, Ralph begins to imitate the village fool. Based on the very small society of schoolchildren in West Hanratty – where "[f]ights and sex and pilferage were the important things going on" (p. 31) – acting foolish and making others laugh is the nearest thing to Erikson's notion of 'industry'. Surprised by this act, Rose observes how he overcomes his shyness, which "had always equalled her and had been one of the things that united them" (p. 204). She wants to do the same – she wants the 'courage'. But after some time, Ralph leaves the school; Rose misses the chance to go through this psychosocial stage by never doing the village fool and forgetting all about him until the end of the story. At school, there is no replacement for Ralph, and once again, she becomes a passive ordinary girl who does not dare to do things in public and thus overcomes the crisis of 'task identification'. (This crisis is directly related to the 4th stage and the virtue which Rose fails to learn).

However, Rose experiences another world at home. Despite the fact that family is the most significant relation of 'initiative vs. guilt' stage, to Rose it means nothing but

merely a stepmother. Her father is absent most of the time, and her brother, Brian, is just a child. Rose spends most of the day with Flo, her stepmother, who severely criticizes Rose for not being useful, not helping around the house and being spoiled. She humiliates Rose regarding her friends; she has a special way of reading the title of books to discredit what Rose reads and her education. What Flo does brings the malignancy of inhibition. Rose, as a result, does not gain much courage to live *her* ideas at this stage.

At this time, she finds Cora the illegitimate girl who wears stylish clothes and uses glossy cosmetics. The significance of her being is the affection Rose feels toward her, which unfortunately is not mutual. Rose's dreams represent a psychological state in which she can experience what she yearns for and is deprived of in real life. She dreams of Cora and in her dreams waits till she comes and rescues her or sometimes she herself would go to save her, and then it is all "[n]ighttime cuddles, strokings, rockings" (p. 35). If Rose did not have time to establish and experience a passionate attraction to Ralph, the untouchable Cora leads to a great love which brings nothing but embarrassment. As Erikson and Marcia mention, the love at this point, regardless of how sexual it may seem, is just a process of self-discovery. This is specifically referred to when on a warm day, by chance, Cora sees her and decides to polish her nails, as she and her friends did for themselves. From this point onward, Rose begins to compare and see her own self in a new way, as if for

the first time: “[she held her hand and] saw with alarm how mottled it was, how grubby. And it was cold and trembly. A small disgusting object” (p. 34). She experiences more things with a diffused identity; she begins to dislike her body although it does not become a crisis at this stage.

This self-doubt attracts her more to Cora. The question of industry arises again, and Rose becomes her apprentice. Then, she decides to steal some candies, jellies, gums and maple buds from Flo’s shop and bestows them all upon the adorable Cora. Bringing them to school, she cannot face her and tries to put them anonymously in Cora’s bag. Unfortunately something falls down; Cora’s friend turns and asks what she is doing; she leaves the sweets and runs away. But it is not the end. Cora comes to the store to change the candies; she tells Flo what has happened and brings Rose a new sense of shame. The psychological load of this incident is too heavy for the young Rose. The shame she feels toward Cora is like of an apprentice acting silly in front of the superior; she feels guilty towards herself that she stole things from the store, and towards Flo who questions her love, mocks her emotions and scorns Cora even long after the incident. Her love fades; Cora joins the Air Force and marries an airman. Rose apparently “not much bothered by this loss” (p. 38), continues her life, goes to high school and experiences a class with ‘towners’.

In her process of psychosocial development, the process of getting acquainted with Cora is a turning point in

Rose’s life. So far, she had admitted a lack in her life, but never hated herself. To her, Cora is not only a person, but also a style of talking, dressing, acting, and living. She lives in a world not much familiar to or experienced by Rose (or her family) yet. When Rose attends high school, she finds out about the boundaries of social classes more explicitly, and realizes that what she hates is not herself, but her social class and what she wants is not Cora, but a role in the upper class society. As Holton highlights, “Rose is intensely aware of how her location in this stratified community imposes a class-based identity on her, a social valuation which limits her options and negatively influences her sense of self. She thus associates the possibility of escaping her social identity with a departure from confines of the town” (1999, p. 49).

At an earlier time, Rose has clarified that though their house was located in West Hanratty, where “social structure ... ran from factory workers and foundry workers down to large improvident families of casual bootleggers and prostitutes and unsuccessful thieves” (p. 6) in contrast to Hanratty, where doctors and lawyers lived, she could not accept the fact, and “thought of her own family as straddling the river, belonging nowhere” (p. 6). She knows about the social geography of the town; however, she dreams that there is an exception, that ‘nowhere’ exists and they live happily there. This metaphorical image expresses her dissatisfaction with her self, and her life. At this moment, even if she does not confess, she knows by heart and “by the expectations

of her working-class situation" (Holton, 1999, p. 51) that they belong to the poor class. Leaving the town behind is the only way to evade the truth.

Her moratorium begins by searching for the values of the new world, experiencing and learning from it during adolescence. In class, she desperately wants to "align herself with towners, against her place of origin, to attach herself to those waffle-eating coffee-drinking aloof and knowledgeable possessors of breakfast nooks" (40-1). She pretends to be one of them, but not just to find better peers and friends. Rose's intention "articulates a symbolic motif: that of a passage from one universe to another" (Daziron, 1985, p. 123), and the subject reappears more often in the story. She seriously wants to be one of them, so repeats what they do. This is perhaps one of the earliest roles she plays in front of others. As time passes, she sees the origin of every misery in poverty; stained underwear represents the smallest point of their lives and her father's sickness intensifies everything when they cannot afford the hospital. Because of poverty, "there was not a thing in their lives they were protected from" (p. 50). The lack of privacy caused by the attached bathroom on the corner of kitchen, which does not cover noises, is a part of her everyday life.

Now, she is determined to change in order to gain a new social identity. She memorizes Shakespeare to overcome the accent of West Hanratty. She goes to Toronto on her own; feels "Flo receding, West Hanratty flying away from her, her

own wearing self discarded as easily as everything else" (p. 60), and experiences the world outside and loses her innocence. She also tries to change her appearance. This moratorium is not separate from curiosity - Rose is willing to meet new and unknown places.

"The Beggar Maid" narrates the climax of this moratorium. Rose lives with Dr. Henshawe, a former professor of English. Dr. Henshawe awakens her to truth. She wants Rose to discover her scholar side, and see 'generativity' in producing works of art, and not taking care of children or a husband. Another consequence of living with Dr. Henshawe, as Rose learns later on, is to evoke Rose's attention to another possible kind of life in which there is no poverty to threat. It is after living there that she distinguishes things in Flo's house, bought from the five-and-ten, from Dr. Henshawe's "polished floors, glowing rugs, Chinese vases, bowls and landscapes, black carved screens" (pp. 69-70). Now, she is able to see the "embarrassing sad poverty in people who never thought themselves poor" (p. 70). This realization is a fundamental part of knowing the society, or in Marcia's terminology, experiencing the alternatives which leads to a genuine decision regarding Rose's (future) place in such a society.

It is also the time when Patrick Blatchford shows up. He is apparently a personable suitor. However, in Rose's point of view, there is something "edgy, jumpy, disconcerting, about him" (pp. 68-9); he is naïve, in love, honest. Unlike Rose, he does not play roles or pretend. She does

not love him. She knows it, and she knows that his family is rich. Rose and Patrick stay together and learn more about each other. Rose realizes that they “come from two different worlds” (p. 78) but cannot ignore the privilege and respect she receives from other girls, other people, even from Dr. Henshawe. As they see each other, live, experience and learn different things together, Rose assimilates into upper class society, and wonders how she can speak like them. On the other hand, she claims that money is not, at least consciously, among her priorities. She even decides to break up with him, yet the love she receives is so great that in her mind, she replaces his image with a pleasant one. She decides, consequently, to marry him; she says she loves him, but feels a pain inside, something hard to explain, and starts to write something – a poem. This is her first creative writing, perhaps rooted in unconscious and foreseeing the future of her moratorium:

Heedless in my dark womb
I bear a madman’s child . . . (p. 84)

Rose is a scholar by nature, as Dr. Henshawe believes. She is concerned about words, phrases, and amazed by connotations. A part of her doubt regarding the marriage is about the future of her academic role. She, who has seen herself in this role for many years, has studied and become a scholarship student; thus, cannot find any other useful function for herself. To Rose, it is a question of being useful. Cora, her previous love, was a student of Entrance Class (which is a transitional school year for educationally

privileged students), and this was a way (if not the only way) to move away from West Hanratty and her social class. Once again, when Patrick talks of marriage the conflict between ‘industry and inferiority’ comes up, but she, identity-diffused, cannot find an appropriate answer as long as they are just friends. She has had and still has a lifelong dream of becoming an actress, a childhood memory shared with Ralph.

On the other hand, she wishes to change her social class. Having lived her childhood in West Hanratty and experienced life in Dr. Henshawe’s house, she is now completely aware of the gap. Rose knows that there are only two possibilities for the final turns of events; she should work all her life, always depend on a scholarship or an award and still worry about the future, or marry Patrick and be secure.

As quoted by Erikson,

[a] state of acute identity diffusion usually becomes manifest at a time when the young individual finds himself exposed to a combination of experiences which demand his simultaneous commitment to *physical intimacy* (not by any means always overtly sexual), to decisive *occupational choice*, to energetic *competition*, and to *psychosocial self-definition* (1959, p. 123).

And here, Rose finally plans to re-define her social class via marriage. After

their fifth or sixth sexual intercourse, i.e. when she experiences the private moment of an orgasm, she even surrenders to the idea of loving Patrick. In Orlofsky's terminology, she constructs a 'pseudointimate' relationship (1993) with him. Pseudointimate relationship is a false intimacy, or a mimic of a real relationship; it is similar to Marcia's foreclosed identity in shallowness and falsehood. At the moment, Rose is still struggling with the crises of the 4th and 5th stages of psychosocial development. According to Erikson, an individual is only able to deal with two stages at a time, and for Rose, there is no place for 'intimacy' (i.e. the 6th stage) at this point. Patrick, however, insists on marriage. She knows that it is wrong. Once she even breaks the engagement and claims not to love him anymore: "I don't love you [and] ... I never loved you" (p. 95), but she forgets to give the ring back. After a while she considers the consequences: she would lose her social class and would have to find a new job; even the idea of it is 'frightening' to her. It is tempting and much easier to obtain the almost ready foreclosed identity proposed by Patrick (and society) than going through the process of acquiring a genuine one by herself. So, she goes back, apologizes and asks for forgiveness "because she did not know how to do without his love and his promise to look after her" (p. 98).

Another reason for 'being' with Patrick is to escape from 'internalized parents'. Flo and Dr. Henshawe are two poles of this psychological concept. Flo, as a representative of wretched lower class—the

one whose life is filled with ugly, dirty, cheap objects and is 'proud of them'—reminds Rose of the social mores and lifestyle of West Hanratty; a world in which there is not even a chance of having someone like Patrick. However, as her guardian, Dr. Henshawe asks her to forget about boys. When she sees Patrick and Rose together, she warns Rose of not marrying him for money, as if there is no other reason for them being together.

After marriage she cannot overcome the 'sense of futility'. During the first three years, the fights occur periodically. Moreover, the metaphoric image of 'belonging nowhere' remains. Gaining a new social class, she is now more confident to talk about her past, relates herself to lower class and defends her old friends or acquaintances. The people of Hanratty, however, isolate her when she moves away and marries a man of upper-class family. On the other side, her lower-class family background makes her a stranger among the upper class community. Admitting the mistake, she realizes that "[t]hey could not separate until enough damage had been done, until nearly mortal damage had been done, to keep them apart, and until Rose could get a job and make her own money" (pp. 98-9). She even tries a couple of times to commit suicide. The matrimonial story of Rose at this point shows nothing but 'distantiation', which is a counterpart for intimacy. Patrick's idea about what Rose should be like (and how she should not behave) is so over-powering that she feels obliged "to repudiate, to isolate, and,

if necessary, to destroy [these] forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to [her] own” (Erikson, 1959, pp. 95-6).

Before her divorce, at the age of 23, Rose meets an artist called Clifford. He is another reason for their divorce. During their clandestine relationship, Rose reviews her past memories from West Hanratty and her dreams, and compares them with Patrick’s and Clifford’s life. She wants to have a creative job. She feels that Clifford’s lifestyle suits her more. To start, she begins by imitating them, helping them, doing their chores and even cleaning the floor to imitate their life. This ‘apprenticeship’ leads to her final decision of living a life much closer to Clifford’s than Patrick’s. After all, these difficult situations, now she knows her capacity and the roles she can play in society, she finds a job at a radio station, starts with a TV program and also teaches at a community college, becomes an interviewer and eventually an actress.

Rose and Clifford fall in love. After Cora, the girl at high school, this is the first time Rose feels love. She experiences the hotness, the desperate need, and the joy. As Erikson suggests, new issues arise when the previous ones are solved. Now that she is done with the initial stages, she enters the sixth stage and seeks the intimacy she believes she deserves. There is a point here, however, where Erikson believes that a minor struggle of identity at this stage could be between ‘sexual polarization’ and ‘bisexual confusion’. By studying the major intimate relationships of Rose so far, it is clear that Ralph and Patrick are her

close friends, while Cora and Clifford play the role of a beloved. Regarding Cora, the furthest point they get is to hug and kiss in Rose’s dream, and regarding Clifford, they have sex only when Jocelyn (Clifford’s wife) is present, too. It is a part of her new moratorium to experience all without any obligation for commitment. ‘Genital love’ is what happens between lovers with complementary ego identities, but all Rose and Clifford experience is ‘genital activity’ which according to Erikson “may help two individuals to use one another as anchors against regression” (1968, p. 71), but nothing more. It assists the young Rose to find herself, the area she is useful in and also motivates her to start her life anew, but not more. To avoid the foreclosed identity exposed by her new social class, she breaks loose. The group-identity she was seeking for and receives because of Patrick does not satisfy her. Jocelyn is the main (if not the only) person she is in touch with. Let us remember what Marcia asserts that “the development of identity occurs in relationship to others” (1983, p. 221). Rose gradually starts to identify with Jocelyn. It is another critical moment when Rose refuses to accept the foreclosed identity and turns to Jocelyn and Clifford.

According to Erikson, one of the most important steps to acquire an ego identity is to obtain a “habitual use of a dominant faculty, to be elaborated in an occupation” (1986, p. 150). By distancing from Patrick and starting to find a job she always wants to have; Rose advances in her psychosocial development and becomes one step closer to

resolve the crisis of industry vs. inferiority stage. The narrative continues in "Simon's Luck". Here, she is an actress, who is totally satisfied with her 'occupational decision', and preoccupied with her 6th stage of psychosocial growth. She is in search of love – a man who could love and stay, fill her loneliness and make her life complete. For the first time, she envies other (married) people and wants to have a family. She is old, and set apart from the mainstream. She compares herself with other people, remembers her past relations and concludes that others have been successful, have "shed a wife, a family, [and] a house" (p. 160). As Kroger (2007) explains, one needs to obtain two aspects of identity to survive: an "individual ... as well as [a] group-based [identity]" (141). In this phase, she is not much concerned about herself, but a close group of friends, or perhaps a family to belong to.

Simon now appears, has sex and is willing to stay. From the very first moment, there is a connection between the two of them. Rose believes in him, so his eventual disappearance moves her seriously. It is the 'great psychological trauma' of her life, and quite expectedly makes her question the virtues she has learnt, criticizes her life and doubts again. This breakdown leads to the most significant psychological change in her life. She physically and symbolically turns away from her old self, flees from her past, decides to quit her job, and asks for an answer to her problem, i.e. always loving the wrong man. She eventually reaches a "false epiphany" (Foy, 2004, p. 89) and

abandons her quest for intimacy unsolved; she escapes from "[h]er father's beating, Patrick's control, Clifford's rejection of her, Tom's ready acceptance" (Struthers, 1981, p. 250) and Simon's ignorance, so that she would be able to find total independence.

She goes back to Hanratty, to visit Brian and his wife, in order to discuss Flo. By putting her in the 'Country Home' (nursing home), Rose frees herself from Flo. She finally becomes able to overcome the humiliation repeatedly expressed by Flo. At the end, she subdues the sense of 'internalized parents' and begins living for her own self.

Back in Hanratty, she meets Ralph. She remembers past days and misses "his feet and his breathing and his finger tapping her shoulder" (p. 204). She remembers their time together, when they were both equally in need of one another, equally shy or messy. After all these years, in which she has developed her identity, she suddenly identifies with him. She distinguishes his surface, which is available to all, from his deep layers. "Underneath he was self-sufficient, resigned to living in bafflement, perhaps proud" (p. 209). However, he is unable to communicate as if "they were prevented" (p. 209). Therefore, what Rose begins to feel might be her false impression of reality, but whatever it is, she believes it to be true and finds Ralph an answer for her quest.

CONCLUSION

The identification with Ralph reaches the highest point when he dies. This is the time

when Rose reviews their past memories, appreciates his childhood ‘courage’ and ‘power’, and internalizes this sense of difference as a lack in her own personality. The images that Munro depicts on the last pages are about Rose’s menopause, and the deaths of Simon and Ralph – who are the only two men she identifies with. Rose’s last conversation with Ralph, though wordless, conveys “a wave of kindness, of sympathy and forgiveness” (p. 209) that solves the last part of her identity confusion, eases her life, takes away her always-present doubts and finally calms down her lack of certainty that “[e]verything she had done could sometimes be seen as a mistake” (p. 209). The “ambiguous homecoming” (Howells, 1998, p. 51) offers Rose an identity, based on her past experiences and rooted in her childhood. Coming back to the social class she was grown up in, which she is not ashamed of anymore, Rose finally finds herself and her ‘place’.

The story ends with these words: “What could she say about herself and Ralph Gillespie, except that she felt his life, close, closer than the lives of men she’d loved, one slot over from her own?” (210) – conveying the future of Rose; apparently settled down, socially successful, and personally alone, until an accident happens and puts an end to her life.

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