

Exploring Childhood in Olive Schreiner's
The Story of an African Farm

Brianna Vollmer
ENGL422
Jason Rudy
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Jacquelyn Spratlin Rogers asserts that parents in the Victorian era typically “accelerated” their children through childhood. As a result, the children of the time “had no childhood as we understand that period of development today” (Rogers 42). Various great child and adolescent psychologists, such as Erik Erikson, would become prominent figures at the turn of the century. In her novel, *The Story of an African Farm*, Olive Schreiner focuses on the development of three children—Waldo, Lyndall, and Em—demonstrating a structure of child and adolescent development that mirrors the progressive research of the time and challenges others. As portrayed in the similarities between the novel’s developmental schema and Erikson’s, the character’s identity assumptions and their educational experiences along with the untimely deaths of Lyndall and Waldo, Schreiner highlights the main facets of human development as it was understood after the turn of the century while challenging some of the current beliefs.

Erik Erikson is the father of Psychosocial theory, a dominant model in human development. Psychosocial theory is grounded in the idea that people experience a series of psychosocial conflicts, or crises, that involve the individual and society (Green 88). These crises begin at birth and occur throughout an individual’s entire lifespan; they are the “mitigating” factor in each developmental stage (Green 91). In general, Erikson constructed an eight-stage theory that accounts for eight different psychosocial conflicts. According to Erikson, “the crises are predetermined by epigenesis, resolutions are not” (Green 93). In other words, genetically and biologically, all individuals are exposed to certain triggers in a predetermined sequence. How individuals respond to these triggers, or resolve their crises, is not predetermined. Therefore, these responses affect the individual’s development. Crisis resolutions are unique to the individual and are shaped by multiple factors such as supporting trust figures and environment.

In *The Story of an African Farm*, Schreiner dedicates an entire chapter to dispelling the stages through the development of what she calls “the soul.” In the chapter “Times and Seasons,” Schreiner writes, “the soul’s life has season of its own; periods not found in any calendar, times that years and months will not scan, but which are as deftly and sharply cut off from one another as the smoothly-arranged years” (137). In comparing this description to Erikson’s stages of development, there are distinct similarities. For one, Erikson’s theory also identifies stages of development that are inherent to human nature and have clear beginning and end points “not found in any calendar.” Though Schreiner only lists seven stages in her explanation, they align well with Erikson’s eight stages. In particular, there are five stages that exhibit clear overlap between Schreiner’s explanation and Erikson’s model.

Erikson identifies the first crisis as trust versus mistrust and, the resolution of which is determined by whether the needs of the infant are met by the primary caregiver, or trust figure. If the infant’s needs in terms of care, attention, and protection are met, then the infant will have successfully resolved the crises, concluding that her or she can trust the caregiver. In general, the infant’s social universe is limited to interaction with the caregiver (Green 93-93). Likewise, the first stage Schreiner describes is infancy, which is marked by the child’s desire to be “comforted” by “some large figure” (137). Schreiner describes the infant experience as an attachment to the large figure, riding around on its shoulder, and enjoying the time spent with him (137-38). The large figure is the only other person depicted in infancy, much like Erikson’s depiction of the infant’s small universe centered on the main trust figure.

In Erikson’s third stage, initiative versus guilt, children “struggle to achieve independence” and understand “adult-like social transactions” (Green 95). Children initiate new social interactions and attempt new skills in their growing universe. Children are either supported in their efforts, resulting in continued initiative, or become frustrated, resulting in guilt. In

Schreiner's third stage, the seven-year-old becomes aware that he is affecting others and can now put the needs of others before his own. The child becomes social and looks towards the adult figures for reassurance because "the grown-up people are very wise" (140). Similarly, in Erikson's third stage, children look to adults for reassurance in their own initiatives, hoping that their actions will not produce shame but instead be approved by the wise adults.

According to Erikson, when entering the stage of adolescence, one experiences a conflict of identity versus identity diffusion. Erikson highlights this as an important stage in human development. At this stage, adolescents experience a "self-awareness" brought on by biological and hormonal changes (Green 97). Inevitably, adolescents experience an identity crisis, which pushes them to define themselves. It is important to note that an adolescent will not be able to partake in the identity formation process without the support of an adult trust figure, usually the figure from infancy (Green 97). The adolescent looks to the trust figure to provide support during the exploration process. Furthermore, the exploration process is unstable and the individual needs the trust figure to create a sense of stability in their life. Under the right conditions, adolescents will eventually experience the MAMA cycle (as described by James Marcia) during their identity exploration—this will be explored further later. Just as Erikson stresses the adolescent period, Schreiner describes the fourth stage in more detail than the others, implying that this stage may be central to development. This fourth stage describes the trials of adolescence at about fourteen-years-old, marked by the individual's tendency to ask questions "louder" only to find that he is "not satisfied" with the answers anymore (140). Therefore, the individual searches and explores until "at last, at last [they] have found it," which Schreiner illustrates through a religious metaphor. The adolescents are also self-centered; the individuals "put down [their] head[s] again and weep. Youth and ignorance: is there anything else that can weep so?" (143). Schreiner is seemingly describing the egocentrism that most adolescents

experience at this age. Erikson's adolescent stage also centers on the individual's increased questioning and exploration. Both figures recognize that adolescents become more aware of themselves and want to establish an individual identity instead of merely accepting the limitations adults had previously set.

In early adulthood, Erikson defines the conflict as intimacy versus isolation. This stage becomes grounded in the individual's ability to participate in a "close, loving, sexually satisfying, give-and-take relationship with another of the opposite sex" (Green 98). A committed relationship—mostly in the form of marriage—marks the successful resolution of this stage. In order to fully commit oneself to another, one must be secure in his own identity. Resultantly, one cannot achieve intimacy without first successfully finding a secure sense of self in the previous stage. Just as Erikson defines this stage by levels of intimacy, Schreiner explores an individual's need for love. Only after one has accepted the self, after it sees "nothing but [its] own ideas" can one move forward and accept the love of another (147). In Schreiner's explanation, Love comes from God, and the individual seeks an emotional intimacy with Him (148). It is at this time, "in this hour of need" that the individual most needs another to be near (149). For Erikson, the love one experiences at this stage is directed at a human, but in the same intimate manner. At this stage, the individual strives to be in an intimate relationship that requires one to "invest one's belief's, feelings, and values in a trustworthy recipient" (Green 98). Now that the individual has established his values and beliefs through identity, he seeks a companion to share them with—whether it be another human or God.

The final overlap in the stages occurs just before one's death. For Erikson, late adulthood poses the conflict of integrity versus despair. At the end of life, one inevitably reflects on the life experience. If the individual is satisfied with his attainment in life, it can result in "ego integrity; a sense of self worth" and an overall appreciation for life (Green100). This mindset helps one to

adjust to old age and accept the coming of death as well. On the other end of the spectrum, an individual may fear the end of life and attempt to compensate for lost time, provoking a sense of “dread, regret, and emptiness” (Green 100). Schreiner also describes the various responses one could have to death. On one end of the spectrum, one could be pessimistic, looking back on life and claiming that “there is no justice” (149) and that “in truth, nothing matters” (150). However, death can also cause an eye-opening experience—a realization of the world and an appreciation for it. Whereas before people may “have been so blinded by thinking and feeling that [they] have never seen the world,” they now see it appreciatively—“struck with its singular beauty” (152-3). At least, just before death, they realize that everything in life has meaning and have accepted the life they have lived (154). And now, after death they “begin to live again” in whatever religious world their acceptance has led them to (154). Both figures outline the polarized experiences one may have with the coming of death. When individuals look back on life and can accept it, can see the beauty in their legacy, they resolve the conflict with integrity and can accept death. On the other hand, despair will occur if one is not satisfied with life and fears death.

By the end of the novel, two of the children have died. As Thomas E. Jordan reports, the mortality rate for Victorian youth was high (261). Many different environmental factors affected this rate including health variables, economic status, and social matters. Furthermore, Jordan specifies that “to children of the poor, life itself was at stake, to be followed all too soon by entrance into work at the loom, on the farm, or in the factory” (258). Even if the children survived childhood, they were often forced into labor. For Waldo, this is the case as he works on Tant’ Sannie’s farm. Still, this does not protect him from an early death. Lyndall is the first to die of the two. Gregory Rose finds Lyndall after giving birth to a child who died just two hours later. The doctor claims that Lyndall “almost went with it” but lived, only to spend the rest of her days in bed (Schreiner 255). While Gregory nurses her, Lyndall reflects on death, noting, “when the

old die it is well; they have had their time. It is when the young die that the bells weep drops of blood... [The old] should have made their plans accordingly!" so that they are accepting of death, but the young, "when they have not seen, when they have not known" that is when the bells weep blood (263). Because the young have not had the chance to live a full life, death is unexpected, unwelcome, and unwanted. The young are in a stage in life that does not allow them the opportunity to prepare for death. As Erikson describes it, old age allows the opportunity for one to "adjust to...death" (Green 100). Schreiner's explanation in "Times and Seasons" also seems to align with Lyndall's thinking—for a youth, death is untimely and unjust, whereas an elder could accept that "all is meaning-full" and accept the beginning of a new life after death (Schreiner 154). After Gregory nurses Lyndall, she finds the strength to leave her bed and take a ride with Gregory. Once in the carriage, Lyndall ultimately succumbs to her untimely death.

After learning of Lyndall's death, Waldo soon dies too. Of the three children, Em is the only one to live. Though Jordan's research points to environmental causes, the different developmental characterizations of the three could account for their fates. Throughout the novel, all three characters are constantly referred to as children. Whether it be Waldo being called "boy," Em and Lyndall being called "girls," or any of them being called "child," Schreiner rarely seems to identify them beyond their youth. Em, however, does eventually become "a premature little old woman of sixteen" just before she succumbs to marriage (Schreiner 154). Waldo and Lyndall, on the other hand, fail to ever fully complete an adult duty and earn an adult title. In fact, Bonaparte professes, "what a little man [Waldo] is," only to be immediately corrected by Otto: "A fine boy" (93). Therefore, it is interesting that these two forever-children are the ones that die.

Claudia Nelson researched the characterization of adults as children in Victorian literature. Though she does not account for Lyndall or Waldo in her findings, the two definitely fit the characterization due to their consistent labeling as children. In a developmental sense, the

two seemed to have negatively resolved previous psychosocial conflicts, specifically in attaching to stable trust figures, which hinders their development. As Erikson notes, “children who are unable to resolve the crisis between trust and mistrust in a positive way may forfeit some progress in later development” (Green 94). Therefore, Schreiner’s consistent characterization of them as children seems to account for this lack of progress. In Nelson’s research, she specifically focused on the “child-woman” and notes that she is “unable to mature or to function in the adult world” (Nelson 71). In the adult world Lyndall inhabits, maturing and functioning would translate to marriage and a family; however, Lyndall cannot manage either. Lyndall tells Em that “it must be a terrible thing to bring a human being into the world” and that she is not the sort of woman that would be “glad of such work” (203). After her child’s death, she claims to have never loved the child (263). Similarly, she refuses to marry because he does not love her the right way—he only loves her because she is “unattainable” and marriage would make her attainable (229). Clearly, Lyndall is against the two main facets of a woman’s life in the adult world. Additionally, the child-woman is often the subject of the male gaze and a “spectacle” to be looked upon (Nelson 78-79). Again, this is inherent in Lyndall’s character: others are constantly praising her for her beauty, Em puts her beauty on a pedestal, and Schreiner defines Lyndall by physical attributes. Because of her beauty and nature, Lyndall is able to win over many; however, as Nelson argues, “although the narrative paints a sympathetic portrait of [the child-woman’s] charms, she must die” (Nelson 71). Furthermore, her death even augments her romantic appeal (Nelson 73). Nelson explains that this child-woman’s death is a necessary occurrence, without it, her man “could not grow to full adulthood” (71). The death of the child-woman releases the man from the woman’s hold. In the case of this novel, Lyndall’s death allows Gregory to grow and eventually marry Em, achieving his adulthood. Waldo, on the other hand, dies soon after.

Waldo's death challenges Nelson's claim—he is portrayed as a man-child, never meant to actually achieve adulthood.

Beyond their characterizations as children, Em, Waldo, and Lyndall each also harbor distinct identity characteristics. As previously mentioned, adolescents attempt to form an identity in Erikson's fifth stage of development. As explained by Marcia, there are four statuses of identity that are marked by the relative amounts of commitment and/or exploration present in each status (Green 103-5). Identity Diffusion is the status one occupies when he has a disjointed understanding of self. At this status, there is neither exploration nor commitment; the individual is basically not actively working on his identity. If an individual spends too much time in Identity Diffusion, it can have negative impacts. Prolonged Identity Diffusion can result in self-doubt and self-destructive activities, including alcohol and drug abuse (Green 103-5). As an adolescent, Waldo seems to constantly be in a state of Identity Diffusion. After he loses his father, he no longer has a stable trust-figure in his life. When the stranger finds Waldo by his father's grave, Waldo tells him, "I have never done anything" (168). And when Lyndall comes home from boarding school, he tells her that he has done "nothing" (183). Furthermore, Waldo eventually turns to alcohol and begins to drink "without thinking" (Schreiner 244). Considering Waldo's alcohol abuse, though short lived, along with his persistent portrayal as inactive, Marcia would categorize him as an adolescent experiencing Identity Diffusion.

Identity Foreclosure is also a "lesser" identity status because it is a premature commitment to an identity. During this stage, the individual experiences high levels of commitment without any evidence of exploration. This often manifests in an adolescent assuming the same identity as a parent, therefore establishing an identity without doing any of the work. This state of identity formation is evident in Em's character; she is frequently depicted as fulfilling the expected womanly duties. For instance, at just 12-years-old, she is already sure

that she will marry at 17 (Schreiner 56). She is the one excited about marriage and a family, not because she has fallen in love, she specifically explains that she does not know if she harbors romantic love, but because it is the role she is expected to assume by society. Marcia would consider Em to have foreclosed on the identity society has presented her.

Identity Moratorium, conversely, is a positive stage for adolescents; while in moratorium, the individual is actively searching for an identity and experimenting with various roles. There is a limited level of commitment at this stage but a high level of exploration. This status particularly relies on the support of a trust figure so that the individual can actively explore and search. Finally, there is Identity Achievement—the state of finding an identity. In reaching Achievement, the individual has actively explored his identity options and has committed to one that suits best (Green 103-5). Marcia made it clear that identity exploration is a lifelong process in which individuals can constantly progress and regress through the statuses. It is unclear which state of identity formation Marcia would have classify Lyndall as. For one, she definitely has not foreclosed on an identity like Em has. Likewise, she has never been a dormant character like Waldo. However, she has not reached a secure achievement or endured the process of exploration since she has never had a stable trust-figure. Lyndall's character challenges Marcia's model, perhaps because she is not the typical adolescent but instead, a "woman-child."

Erikson found that children could latch to "substitute trust figures" if the initial crisis at infancy was not successfully resolved or if the original trust figure is no longer available (Green 104). Em and Lyndall were orphans, both parents having died in their youth. Em's dad had initially married Tant' Sannie after her mother's death, but his death soon followed too. As a result, Tant' Sannie became the sole caregiver for her new step-daughter, Em. Similarly, Lyndall was Tant' Sannie's niece through marriage, but both of her parents died. Therefore, Tant' Sannie again assumed the role of caregiver. Because their original caregivers and trust figures died

while they were young, Lyndall and Em should have been able to look to Tant' Sannie as a substitute trust figure; however, she did not provide much nurture for the two. Schreiner describes the girls' experience living with Tant' Sannie as "the house where Tant' Sannie lived and ruled was a place to sleep in, to eat in, not to be happy in" (65). Similarly, Waldo's parents also die, leaving him to live on Tant' Sannie's farm as a worker. Prematurely robbed of true trust figures, the children cannot even rely on their current caregiver as a substitute. As Jordan states, "youngsters line in a world defined by perceptions whose major figures are parents and brothers and sisters" (259). Em, Lyndall, and Waldo do not share a positive perception of Tant' Sannie—the one major figure in their world. In fact, in her research on Victorian childhoods, Ginger S. Frost found that step-children were in "particular danger" when it came to abuse or neglect by caregivers (Frost 150). During the period, the prevalent belief was that parents and caregivers had the right to discipline their own children—law-enforcement was unlikely to get involved in domestic issues. At the time, 67% of child homicides were of either stepchildren or illegitimate children (Frost 150-51). Though Tant' Sannie is never depicted as physically abusing the children—she does allow Waldo's whipping—it is clear that their childhood experience was filled with neglect based on their perception of her "ruling" the home.

Substitute trust figures can come in many forms, not least of which are teachers. Beyond educating, teachers have a lot of other responsibilities in the classroom, which are grounded in supporting their students. Therefore, teachers often take on the role of substitute trust figure. Though one Australian journal originally attacks formal education, it does acknowledge the positive affect the "right" kind of teacher can produce. The author writes that the Victorian education system "require[s] better teachers...well-trained, experienced teachers" because teachers are supposed to be a "guide" for the students, not just a vessel of knowledge (Botany 665). Neither Em, Lyndall, nor Waldo have the opportunity to acquire substitute trust figures, in

the form of a teacher, on the farm. Em and Lyndall partake in some lessons with Bonaparte, but these lessons are short-lived and ineffective. When Lyndall begins to question topics Bonaparte deems “not fair and proper for little girls to talk about,” she realizes that she will not learn anything of value from him (Schreiner 85). Because of this, it is clear Bonaparte could never be a substitute trust figure for Lyndall or Em.

Similarly, Bonaparte attempts to assume a caregiver role over Waldo. After Waldo’s father dies, Bonaparte refers to Waldo as “my boy....my dear boy” (109). Furthermore, he seeks to reprimand Waldo and convinces Tant’ Sannie that he is a father-figure and should discipline Waldo. Bonaparte even makes demands of Waldo, commanding, “answer me as you would your own father, in whose place I now stand to you” (125). Though Bonaparte seemingly assumes the role of a caregiver, his actions do not result in Waldo’s trust. Waldo does not connect with Bonaparte and is mostly shamed by him—particularly when Bonaparte destroys his machine and whips him. Therefore, because he cannot invent a trusting relationship with Waldo, Lyndall, or Em, Bonaparte fails to become a true trust figure for any of the children.

Though Erikson would view many teacher relationships as beneficial to human development, during the Victorian period, there seems to be mixed attitudes about the general benefits of education. One Australian journal notes that formal education in schools with teachers and books actually seemed to slow a child’s intellectual progress (“Botany” 665). It went on to assert, “children naturally seek knowledge from nature, not from books” (“Botany” 665). As a young girl, Lyndall’s desire for education is clearly evident. Lyndall professes to Em that she “intend[s] to go to school,” but Em is concerned that Tant’ Sannie will not let Lyndall. Also, Em questions why one would even want to go to school; Em clearly does not harbor the same desire as her cousin. In response, Lyndall proudly explains, “there is nothing helps in this world...but to be very wise, and to know everything—to be clever” (57). On numerous occasions,

Lyndall is seen reading. Therefore, Lyndall supports the journal's assertion that children naturally seek knowledge, whereas Em challenges it. Contrastingly, Lyndall's desire to obtain this knowledge from both a formal school experience and books further challenges the article's claims. Furthermore, when discussing stories and books with the two girls, Waldo comments that books may not be the best source of knowledge. Waldo tells Lyndall and Em that when it comes to books, "what we want to know they never tell" (60). Despite this, Waldo is later pictured enthralled by the new information he garners from books. When he is in the attic, he discovers "a box full, full, of books. They shall tell me all, all, all....I shall read, read, read" (103). In this instance, Waldo contradicts his previous claim that books are not the foundation of knowledge—he now feels that these new books can tell him "all."

The argument on the importance of education during the Victorian era does not end there. A London newspaper warns parents of the "evils of *over-education*" and beginning education "too early" ("Modern" 156). According to the article, because the brain is the last organ to develop, it should not be over-stimulated ("Modern" 156). It is unclear which year the author feels is the adequate point to begin education, perhaps implying that there may not be much sound research into the actual development associated with education. On the other hand, in another English newspaper, the author writes, "no child was too young to be taught a little religion, and the earlier the better if it was to have the best effect" ("Difficulties" 8). With these two views being presented in local Victorian newspapers, the overall attitude towards education is unclear.

Perhaps there may have been a distinction between a child's readiness for religious education versus his capacity for other knowledge. Taking this into consideration, Waldo is exposed to religion quite early in life, and Schreiner depicts the affect it has on his character. At the start of the novel, Waldo is in bed, deeply contemplating the works of God. He weeps alone

at night because he feels that “dear God is trying [him],” which eventually leads him to believe God hates him (50-53). This is an intense religious experience for a young boy. For the majority of his childhood, because his father serves as a sort of minister to the town, the reader can assume that Waldo was immersed in religious education. Schreiner writes that the Bible “had taken the brightness out of [Waldo’s] childhood” (77), it presented “trivial questions that he could not answer, miserable child” (77), and the Bible “had robbed his childhood of its gladness” (77). In accordance with the one English article, Waldo’s early introduction to the Bible should have a positive effect on his character; yet, Waldo grapples with religion throughout the novel.

As Erikson is famously quoted, “many a late adolescent, if faced with continuing diffusion, would rather be nobody, or somebody bad, or indeed, dead...than be a not quite-somebody” (Battle). Today, most recognize the importance of the adolescent stage of development, whereas the Victorian period did not seem to stress its importance. Despite this, the children in Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* illustrate various aspects of this belief throughout their development, to such an extent that two “not quite-somebodies” even die in the end. For most of Schreiner’s novel, Waldo, Em, and Lyndall fall within the adolescent stage of development that this quote exemplifies. Though the characters are resolving the conflict at this stage, the reader witnesses the effects of the presumed resolutions for their past conflicts. Though many beliefs about childhood, education, and development in general during the Victorian period seem unclear, Schreiner’s development of Lyndall, Em, and Waldo demonstrates a progressive understanding in its similarities to later research and challenging of existing ideas.

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