

Serenity Sans Sense: Indemnification and Amelioration of Identity in Wallace Stegner's *The Spectator Bird*

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Despite much research and broad-ranging interest in the term "identity", the concept itself remains something of an enigma. The term "identity" is a complicated and unclear one. Philip Gleason in 1983 observed that the meaning of Identity as we currently use is not properly captured by the dictionary because it reflects only the older sense of the word. And the same is true in the present as well. While everyone is familiar with everyday usage of this term nonetheless it becomes quite difficult to give an exact definition of the term Identity. The aim of the present paper is to explore an entirely different concept of existence as developed by the psychologist Erik Erikson. The acceptance of inevitable demise and coping with one's own death, as well as that of one's loved ones has been the area of much speculated research among psychologists, and in particular has been the area of study of Erikson, who is a development psychologist, and who in his Stage Theory of Psychosocial Development outlines the stages which a man passes through in the course of his life, finally culminating in the last stage, the stage of Wisdom, in which an individual either learns to cope with impending death, and gets strength from the life he has spent, or falls into despair and despondency. At the same time, Erikson delineates the search for a final identity of an individual, based on a life spent in its entirety, and the creation of a self that is close to obliteration in any case, and the comfort that such a creation or discovery of the self provides.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the creation of the self in its final moments of existence, and the coming to terms with annihilation of the individual, in Wallace Stegner's *The Spectator Bird*, in particular with the Erik Erikson Developmental theory. Wallace Stegner's *The Spectator Bird* is the day-to-day life of a retired literary agent, suffused with the nostalgia of youth and agony caused by aging and physical corrosion.

The narrator of the story is Joe, a retired literary agent of seventy years of age, who in his own words is a judgemental fellow traveller in the lives of other people and usually makes ironic comments upon them and a globetrotter in his own. He is leading a dubious, discontented and an uncertain life and of course is very much dissatisfied with his countrypeople, his community, his job and himself. Being a traveller he keeps himself busy in search of unexplored places. He feels the aches and pains of age subsiding into geriatric crumble, and quiet regrets about a life that was, after all, pretty well-lived. And now, he feels still a young man trapped within the precincts of an aging body, as, according to Erik Erikson, "while the end of adolescence...is the stage of an overt identity crisis,

identity formation neither begins nor ends with adolescence: it is a lifelong development largely unconscious to the individual and to his society" (113).

He rakes over the history of his life. *His mother and his only son Curtis have died.* Joe finds some distraction from this loss when he visits his maternal homeland in Denmark and becomes involved in a gothic mystery as it unravels. The loss of his son is upsetting for him and he is inconsolable. *He describes their deaths as the disappearance of past and future from his own life.* Joe sees himself as a failure in both his roles as a son to his mother and as a father to his son, when he says "I learned to scratch dead leaves over it as I scratched them over it twenty years ago" (Stegner 24). *Erikson clearly states in his developmental theory that identity is formed through psychological experiences with the social environment. In other words, his chief concern is the development of identity of a person within a social context. According to Erik Erikson, in old age, that is the last stage of his psychosocial Development Theory, the sense of ego-integrity arises from the individual's ability to look back on his life with satisfaction and on the other hand, there is sense of despair if the individual sees his life as a series of misfortunes and missed opportunities.*

In *The Spectator Bird* when Joe reads his journals to Ruth, he comments that he sometimes gets the feeling that his whole life happened to someone else. Although a few paragraphs later, he admits to himself that, while in Denmark and involved with the lady, "I wasn't quite spectator enough" (Stegner 82). The crisis which he felt at this point of age presented challenges to his identity. He feels that time is too short to find an alternate route to integrity.

He treats aging and death with dark humour: "Getting old is like standing in a long, slow line. You wake up out of the shuffle and torpor only at those moments when the line moves you one step closer to the window" (Stegner 171). Without another chance, Joe, now desolate, finds it hard to accept that Death is near and besieged with defeat, bitterness and hopelessness. *Failure at this stage leads to fear of death. According to Erik Ericson, "The lack or loss of this accrued ego integration is signified by fear of death: the one and only life cycle is not accepted as the ultimate of life" (98).*

Joe is aware of his perplexed state of affair and his personal sufferings within him. With his growing age and as he observes the persistent reminders of his approaching death in the form of his own recurring illnesses and the death of his close friend, Joe is depressed and gets frustrated with his life

enough to question his own self predicament. He wants to know how to respect himself when he knows he is confused and how to respect a world where nothing he believes in is valued?

Stegner brings out time and again in the book the lack of acceptance and affiliation to a place. Joe decides to resolve the issue of this feeling of lack of sense of belongingness. So this feeling drives Joe to a place where his mother has her origin is a small town in Denmark. And from where his mother emigrated to America to escape the suffocating impound of the Danish society. Stegner has made Joe richly introspective and a wisecracking fellow traveller. When he visits Denmark, Joe happens to meet the famous writer Karen Blixen who herself is a wanderer in Africa with never-ending roots in Denmark. They discuss this human need and the civilization gap in attaining this need with much clarity.

While visiting to his mother's place, Joe is not alone but is accompanied by his wife Ruth. He has a deep regard and respect for his wife and with whom he enjoys a companionship of love and gratitude. In Denmark, Ruth and Joe meets a lady who is also sharing apartment with them. The lady is a victim in Danish society and has fallen on hard times and avoided by the Danish people at large. Stegner reveals the tragic state of the lady gradually word by word and page after page. It is revealed that the village where Joe's mother used to live is actually under the control of the now deceased lady's father and rule by his estranged brother presently. The difficulties of the lady are on account of the incestuous relationship between her and her father who is a scientist and an expounder of the emerging science of genetics. Her father sees it as a duty to science to promote eugenics and gives no judgement to this relationship. Joe shares sympathetic feelings with the lady and assures her to help her to migrate to America but the offer gets refused by her.

Yet by the end of the story, Joe calls this interconnectedness everything especially with his wife. For him, the truest vision is the bird which flutters from the dark into the light and then again into the dark. But he is also agree with his wife who considers her as a fellow bird with whom you can share your feelings, emotions and one who helps you from every difficult situation.

What Joe discovers is that as much as he may wish to be merely a spectator, he isn't. By the end of *The Spectator Bird*, however, an older Allston rails less and understands more.

The motif of the diary serves multiple purposes in the novel. Most importantly, it serves as a connecting link between Joe's past and his present, and a means of assessment of the time gone by, and whether the objectives that Joe began his life with came to a successful conclusion or not. Erikson in his theory lays emphasis on the successful culmination of a life lived well as a prerequisite to the attainment of integrity, and in Joe's case the diary serves as an effectuation of this desire, to gauge the extent to which his existence has had meaning. The search for an identity is thus not entirely conventional, as it encompasses an element that extends beyond the realm of the

living, and which incorporates within itself the concern of the immediate future as well as that of beyond the grave. In the Wisdom stage Erikson considers the gratification of the need to have lived a full and complete life, as there is no scope for doing it all over again. The process of reading the diary he kept many years ago, going down memory lane, and at the same time critically analysing the time gone by, through his wife Ruth's interjections and his own comments, Joe takes a bird's eye view of his own life, and comes to terms with the events that shaped his life in a clear cut manner. Joe unearths a new kind of introspection through his diary, and while in the Wisdom stage an individual only has recourse to introspection, Joe has comprehensive documentation to aid him in reaching a conclusion in this context. Along with Joe, Ruth utilizes the reading sessions to clear up confusions about their life together, and in the process develops insights about her and discovers who she really is.

Joe begins with memories of his mother, and traces the entire course of the journey that shaped the life he was to lead. Joe had no roots even in the beginning of his life, and towards the end as well, he finds it hard to ascertain whether his life really rounded off as well as it should have. And yet, while Joe accepts that life has not treated him well, he reaches the conclusion that it was all worth the trouble in any case. He does, as Erikson would put it, achieves integrity:

The sixties are the age of anxiety. You feel yourself on the brink of old age, and you fret. Once you pass your seventieth birthday that all clears away. You are like a man with an old car and no particular place to go. You drive it where you want to, and everyday it keeps on running is a gift (Stegner 15).

While on one hand Joe is not completely accustomed to the onset of death, it is nonetheless an acceptance that finds its way into his consciousness, and in spite of difficult and adverse situations in his life he reaches a point where he can easily say that no matter what he has faced in his life, there is still a reason for him to go on. Instead of despair, there is still left in him a zest for life, even if his enthusiasm got lost somewhere along the way.

Erikson's Stage Theory of Development finds an echo in Stegner's novel, as Stegner only mirrors human experience through his characters, and voices concerns that are universal to the human condition. Not only does he voice the common questions relating to life after death, and death after a life that can either result in acceptance of the final end or despair at lost opportunities. Through Joe's eyes, Stegner witnesses the panorama of human existence that spans love, loss and legacy, and whether the amalgamation of these can provide an answer to the eternal question of the meaning of existence itself. He describes the struggle of an individual towards the end of life to come to terms with the identity that he has lived with his entire life, and which, if it is not enough to justify the purpose of his existence, leads to despair at losing the one and only chance at life the individual had.

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