Development, Line by Line: An Introspective Case Study on Narrative Identity and Development through Poetry

Milla Miller

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Development, Line by Line

An introspective case study on narrative identity and development through poetry

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Advised by Thomas Hummel and Christie Scollon

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# Table of Contents

Introduction 3

Psychosocial Development 6

  Understanding Erikson & Psychosocial Development 7

Preschool, ages 3 to 5 10

  1518 11

  Fight 13

  Initiative v. Guilt 14

School Age, ages 5 to 11 19

  Flame 20

  Organization 21

  Industry v. Inferiority 22

Adolescence, ages 12 to 18 25

  1901 26

  Mirror 27

  Blinded… 28

  Finding Stars 29

  Memorize 30

  Alphabetically 32

  Change 33

  Identity v. Identity Confusion 34

Emerging Adulthood, ages 18 to 21 40

  Touched 41

  Heat 42

  Relationship 43

  Dear Diary 44
Intimacy v. Isolation 45
The Parental Relationship & Depression 50
7920 51
My Parents Tell Me 52
Deserving 53
Tuck In 54
I Am From the Pencil 55
Last Resort 56
Beauty 57
A Woman 58
[I Send Them All] 62
The Parental Relationship & Depression 63
Conclusion 65
Bibliography 66
Introduction

Storytelling connects people in a way that nothing else can. From bedtime stories to poetic epics, the oral histories to cautionary tales—it is an essential art form practiced around the world. In the field of psychology, stories have been found to be particularly fascinating because they also have the power to connect people to themselves. Autobiographical narratives have been widely used in education and psychotherapeutic settings as a way for individuals to process significant life events or uneasy emotions. Beyond this, however, the internalized autobiography and its development across the lifespan has also been found to have a significant impact on personality, cognition, and identity development. The storyline of a person’s autobiographical narrative can demonstrate one thing; the continuous development of that narrative throughout the lifetime and why its author chooses to tell it in such a way can tell us even more.

By merging literature and psychology, this project utilizes poetic works composed throughout my life, from early adolescence to the present, to explore development throughout middle childhood and into early adulthood. Specifically, my analysis highlights the ways in which concepts derived from psychosocial and narrative identity theories appear and the effects that parents and guardians have on an adolescent’s likelihood of developing depression. Poetry is an extraordinary kind of storytelling because it requires the author to consider word choice, form, length, and unconventionality. The author’s choices in these areas, and the extent of their intentionality, in conjunction with the story being told on paper, can provide critical insights into the patterns and processes of their development. Furthermore, by contrasting poems written about a developmental stage in process with those written in reflection of previous stages, my work reveals how the understanding of self evolves throughout the lifetime. To best utilize such a unique set of resources, the body of my analysis is written in third person in a way that
addresses the author, rather than myself. In doing this, I can present my work as a case study on development rather than an internal reflection on autobiographical events.

The majority of these findings were inspired by contemporary understandings of narrative identity development. Dan McAdams defines narrative identity as “an individual’s internalized, evolving, and integrative story of the self.”\(^1\) It is something that evolves throughout the entire lifespan and involves not only the shaping of the life story itself but also an individual’s cognitive ability to tell a comprehensive narrative. As one’s story evolves, so does one’s identity.

At the age of three, parents and guardians begin to co-construct past experiences with their children, which tend to improve future storytelling skills. Increased parental encouragement of storytelling at an early age has been shown to lead to richer autobiographical memories. By five years old, children develop the ability to recognize that a story needs a time, place, and characters that will act upon their desires and beliefs. As a child moves through elementary school, they begin to fashion their stories in a way that mirrors what their environment classifies as a “good” story. This might include an interesting plot, well-rounded characters, a protagonist, and a villain. Children at this age also begin to understand the meaning of a “life story” and how certain stages such as birth, childhood, getting a job, and reaching old age happen within a lifetime.

Once youth reach adolescence, they begin to develop causal coherence, or an understanding of how events that occurred in the past affect who they are today. During these years, narratives can also have an impact on mental health and cognitive development: portraying oneself as the hero can lead to personal growth while re-telling and processing of negative narratives can lead to improved mental well-being. Finally, once an adolescent becomes a young adult, external pressures and the desire to define themselves cause refining the internalized narrative identity to become a central psychological challenge. During this age,

a person has a strong grasp of causal coherence, generally understands the developmental process, and understands how their story, however they chose to fashion it, becomes their identity.

As opposed to traditional autobiographical accounts, this project utilizes poetic narrative to trace not only one individual’s narrative identity but also other forms of development. Previously, there has been success from other scholars in comparing narrative identity to Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development.\(^2\) When older adults were asked to recall memories from various stages in life, the themes within each story often directly correlated with the conflicts that Erikson’s theory would predict them to be experiencing. This project takes this realization a step further by highlighting numerous cases in which Erikson’s theories appear across multiple stages of development, where they differ, and how other external events might affect the developmental trajectory. Furthermore, this work demonstrates such analysis while the individual is still in the midst of developing. Poetry from the age of eleven will greatly differ in complexity and understanding of self than poetry written at the age of 21. Still, work completed at the age of 21 might not exhibit as complete an understanding of development or oneself as future work might. By examining such a variety of poetry upon so many levels, from form and word choice to psychosocial and narrative identity, a deep, complex case study is built revolving around one developmental journey.

\(^2\) Conway and Holmes, as cited in McAdams, *Handbook of Personality*: 249.
Psychosocial Development
Understanding Erikson & Psychosocial Development

Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development explicitly states that each developmental stage and its outcome can be verified through reflection of one's past. This is likely why studies on narrative identity have previously found connections between developmental stages and themes in autobiographical narratives. This connection is straightforward: the primary themes within stories told by adults seem to mirror Erikson’s stages of basic conflict according to the age during which the story is set. For example, adults recalling an experience from elementary school will often recall struggling with things like desiring praise and feeling inadequate in their environments, common within the stage of industry versus inferiority. For this author, themes such as these exist throughout many of the poems in this collection. Such pieces do not only recall experiences consistent with Erikson’s proposed stages, but also convey such experiences as they are unfolding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Basic Conflict</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage two: Toddler</td>
<td>Autonomy v. Shame &amp;</td>
<td>Learning to do things on their own; discouragement can lead to doubt in their abilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(18 mo to 3 yo)</td>
<td>Doubt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage three:</td>
<td>Initiative v. Guilt</td>
<td>Focussing on things independently and developing goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool (3 - 5 yo)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage four:</td>
<td>Industry v. Inferiority</td>
<td>Becoming aware of individuality within a bigger system (school, sports) and will seek praise around them to feel adequate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Age (5 - 11 yo)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage five:</td>
<td>Identity v. Identity</td>
<td>Identity crisis stage; establishing goals, needs, priorities, etc. while being overwhelmed by expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescence (12 - 18 yo)</td>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 6:</td>
<td>Intimacy v. Isolation</td>
<td>Building relationships; the lack of relationships can lead to loneliness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Adulthood (19 - 40)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One way that this collection of poetry aligns with Erikson’s work is how the stages of development appear to progress over time. In accordance with Sigmund Frueed’s stages of psychosexual development, Erikson’s theory, while chronologically constructed, allows the developmental timeline to be defined by an individual’s biological and cultural maturation as opposed to their age.\(^4\) For this reason, while the poetry in this collection is organized by age, the set range is not concrete and does not necessarily signify the exact age in which the author transitioned from one stage to the next. The limitation that Erikson presented was that each stage of psychosocial development would surface systematically in a way that did not allow individuals to go back to a certain stage after passing it, which contradicts what some contemporary scholars propose.\(^5\) He reasoned that the experience gained with age made it impossible to truly return to the former state of conflict. However, he did believe that earlier conflicts might reemerge to a person’s life when they wish to reflect and find new meaning around it, but it will not return as the primary psychological conflict. Through this process, a person can achieve further clarity and strength in areas of their psychosocial development that they did not find full closure on. This explains why this author continues to return to and reflect on certain stages of psychosocial development across the entire lifespan.

Understanding Erikson’s proposal in this way is significant to the construction of this piece due to the limited poetry available in this collection. Poetry written before age eleven or after the author’s current age of 21 is not present. That said, Erikson’s conceptual flexibility allows for the inclusion of stages that would otherwise be completely left out. Psychosocial development that occurred between the ages of three and eleven are explored by utilizing poetry that describes events from such periods. In this way, this project is able to focus on four

of Erikson’s stages of development: initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus identity confusion, and intimacy versus isolation.

It is important to acknowledge that while Erikson’s theories are still largely accepted as an adequate representation of typical American youth and have largely been applauded for covering development across the lifespan, some of his work beyond early childhood is being questioned for its applicability in the contemporary world. Recent criticisms of his theory have attempted to define where this developmental theory’s real-world connection needs updating and how it can still apply to life-long development today. People in the 21st century are experiencing development with nearly instant access to the internet, increased cultural concerns about the morality of procreation, changing norms regarding goals and career expectations, a larger diversity in relationship dynamics, and so much more that Erikson couldn’t have foreseen in the 1950s. Additionally, Erikson, like many other 20th-century theorists, does not take into account the different childhood experiences that individuals encounter due to varying race, class, cultural expectations, or geographical location. These limitations and possible areas for improvement have become a significant conversation in contemporary psychology and add a layer to this process of analysis. While examining this author’s poetic narrative through Erikson, we can also examine how the poetry and the life experiences it expresses might stray from his theory.
Preschool, ages 3 to 5

1/26/17 & 12/30/17

I apologize for almost breaking your arm.
My dad taught me how to hit
Before I turned age 6.
He taught me how to squeeze neck,
break, pull, and twist.
He said, “Don’t think twice.
Don’t hesitate if they put up a fight.
They might send you to the office.
But it’ll be alright.”

So when you ate my lunch,
pulled my hair,
toasted my friends,
and took my books,
I realized I needed to make it end.
I apologize for taking your wast
and causing you harm.
Please forgive me, for I’m almost sorry.
I almost broke your arm.
In the evenings monsters cast shadows across the sky.
Little hands picked little treasures.
Leaves grass strands of hair seeds.
Mixed together in our blue batman frisbee with rainwater.
Maybe it would keep the monsters away.
The monsters I created to scare my sister.
Dad would try to scare us too.
He started to tell us scary stories.
Women hiding under the crawl space in mom’s closet.
Or little boys getting lost in the forest.
Dad worked two hours away and slept in late.
The purple yarn stuck to the carpet best.
So we strung it across the living room floor.
Writing “Happy birthday Daddy.”
Or drawing stick figure families.
Something for the crocodile in the fireplace to look at.
I brushed my teeth in my parents’ bathroom.
So mom could help me get them clean.
The dog ate his shit off the carpet and puked it out.
I lost a tooth and spat it out.
Dad fished it out the drain for me.
Out beside the porch there were pink rocks.
We would throw them against each other.
They were bombs grenades powerful spells.
Really they were sharp and cut my hand.
I didn’t want to cry Dad didn’t cry.
The rocks were precious.
The monsters would be coming to take them.
They would be taller than the clouds.
And turn my sister to stone.
The office had a pretty glass door.
I was in the office when mom told me
My other dad didn’t want to see me again
I don’t remember if I felt like shit in the carpet or a lost tooth.
I remember the door.
My other dad had made me things.
Cards paintings of my favorite princesses.
And a beautiful magic fairy staff.
I paired it with my Princess Jasmine costume.
The neighbor girl was too big for my costume.
Another friend broke the staff hiding it under the bed.
We weren’t friends anymore.
I was usually red.
My sister was blue.
Until everyone confused me with pink.
Then I chose black then I landed on green.
Our bedroom was a shade of blue and a shade of green.
It was time for our dollhouse to go.
Mom said we didn't use it enough.
Dad brought it to the driveway and handed me a hammer.
I wish my other dad had just given me the dollhouse.
Fight

I apologize for almost breaking your arm
My dad taught me how to hit
Before I turned age 6
He taught me how to gooseneck
Half nelson and twist
He told me, *Don’t think twice*
Don’t hesitate if they put up a fight
They might send you to the office
But it’ll be alright

So when you ate my lunch
Pulled my hair
Teased my friends
And took my books
I realized I needed to make it end
I apologize for taking your wrist
And causing you harm
Please forgive me, for I’m almost sorry
I almost broke your arm.
Initiative v. Guilt

Between the ages of three and five, children expand their understanding of autonomy by building their ability to initiate activities and daily tasks in relationship to the surrounding world. It is the hope that during this stage, a child will develop confidence in their independent action rather than a sense of guilt or hesitation when acting without specific permission or assistance. Typically, if and when a child has access to an environment in which they can explore and make decisions, the result is a sense of security and trust in self-directed action: initiative. If, however, a child’s primary environment is one in which self-assertion is consistently criticized or condemned, the result is a sense of apologetic shame: guilt. Understanding and actively negotiating control is another critical part of this developmental stage that can have long-term effects because a child is also learning the limits and boundaries regarding what they have control over and what they do not. The poems 1518 and Fight demonstrate how one child’s environment and familial relationships can alter their understanding of personal autonomy and initiative. Furthermore, these two poems are written with almost a decade of development between them. A greater understanding of causality and narrative identity at the time that 1518 was written produces a stark contrast when placed beside Fight, providing an opportunity to examine the development of narrative identity.

At the age of fifteen, children are beginning to grasp causal coherence and to understand how events that occurred in early childhood might affect them in the years following. Poems written at this age, like Fight, were crafted ignorantly, without any understanding of the developmental processes that they communicated. Despite this lack of understanding, however, the author would have felt compelled to explore the ways past experiences influence her present values as a means of contextualizing identity through narrative. Alternatively, 1518 was

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6 Syed and McLean, “Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development.”
7 McAdams, Handbook of Personality.
created at the age in which young adults are motivated to connect and analyze past experiences to define their present identity and greater purpose. For this reason, *Fight* portrays a simpler and less symbolic storyline, while *1518* is intentionally introspective in the way it connects a variety of distinct childhood experiences within one piece while both recalling the author’s emotions from that time and communicating her current thoughts about the events.

By contrasting youthful pleasure and familial complexity, *1518* ironically portrays the limits of a child’s understanding as it is contrasted with the author’s complete understanding. First, it paints a scene in which the author in her youth is experiencing an environment that allows room for initiative to develop through freeplay and conflict management. Allowing a child to practice everyday acts of initiative in multiple spheres of life promotes their confidence in decision making and boundary setting during playtime. The author intentionally portrays this youthful bliss before contrasting it with the more difficult elements of childhood.

Here, we are then introduced to the contrast of two tasks: the brushing of teeth and the destruction of a dollhouse. While playtime is the primary environment in which this basic conflict is tested, another common area in which initiative is either built or deterred is during everyday tasks like getting ready for bedtime. The common conflict that occurs between the parents and child when the child wishes to complete daily hygiene tasks on their own is a direct extension of Erikson’s previous basic conflict, autonomy versus guilt. Children often wish to self-govern by completing simple tasks on their own. Ultimately, this experience of needing help to brush teeth is one of those that, in theory, might hinder a child’s development during this stage but are necessary for their overall health.

This necessary task is then contrasted with the challenge of being asked to crush a previously-cherished dollhouse with a hammer. The difference between this experience and brushing teeth, however, is threefold. Preserving one’s health is an idea the child can vaguely understand, teeth brushing is a low-stakes event that occurs regularly, and assistance
completing this task will improve results. On the other hand, destroying a toy is done for a reason that the child cannot yet understand, it is outside of the child’s daily routine and does not add to the effectiveness or quality of the task at hand. For these reasons, the latter event causes proportionally greater distress. Discarding or returning childhood toys to make way for new ones is not unusual, rather it is the child’s participation in the toy’s destruction that makes the experience truly unique.

From eating vegetables to completing chores, children must accomplish tasks they are averse to each and every day. Beyond any immediate value they hold, these tasks are important because a lack of routine or dearth of meaningful tasks can harm a child’s development, causing them to feel unhappy and without purpose. Within these tasks, however, there is an opportunity to inspire a child’s autonomy and initiative rather than discourage it. Regarding 1518’s culminating moment with the dollhouse, the parents’ intention was likely to promote the child’s sense of control by having them participate in the toy’s destruction. What might have promoted the child’s development even more, rather, is letting the child sort through their belongings and choose which ones to let go of, or letting the child donate the toy so they could find solace in the idea that it would bring someone else happiness. These are methods that the author’s parents implemented many other times throughout her lifetime. Letting a child feel that they are in control of some element of the situation, while also teaching them the limits of their control and importance of valuable life skills, can be vital in promoting development.

These small exercises of the limits and bounds of control are ultimately connected to a more significant experience: the abandonment of a father figure. In the second half of 1518, we are introduced to an “other dad” who chooses to break contact and give up custody. This event can be referred to as an unforeseen life crisis. While basic conflicts like initiative versus guilt

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are predictable, other conflicts have a chance of emerging – including death, divorce, violence, or poverty – and can cause excess stress or trauma to an individual. When unforeseen crises are experienced in conjunction with expected forms of conflict, their consequences may cause children to leave a psychosocial stage with internalized and unresolved developmental issues.\(^\text{10}\)

As 1518’s author reflects on this unprecedented conflict, she recalls multiple material losses that allude to the feeling of losing control. Her neighboring playmate rips her favorite princess costume, another friend breaks the magic fairy staff that her other dad gave to her, then finally she loses her other dad himself. These experiences build upon each other as the author reflects on greater and greater stressors. Finally, the author writes, “I wish my other dad had just given me the dollhouse.” Looking back at the experience of destroying her dollhouse, she feels a sense of unresolved resentment in conjunction with the understanding that she had more control in that situation than she did in losing her relationship with this father figure. She additionally acknowledges that this unforeseen conflict was something that severely altered her perception of what can and cannot be controlled, particularly within her familial relationships.

When a child feels that they have no power over their surroundings, or when they feel subject to another’s whims, the concept of control is distorted. In 1518, a child learns that she may not have control over the outcome and longevity of the relationships around her. This situation—in contrast with her experience with the dollhouse—hints at an environment that would greatly harm this child’s perception of control. Fortunately for this author, many other opportunities for healthy growth in a stimulating environment were implemented to counter the effects of other events, as must be done for any child that experiences an unforeseen, extraordinary life crisis. Children that experience loss of control, especially during the phase of initiative versus guilt development, often need extra support to promote healthy development.

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The concept of control in the face of familial influence is also seen in *Fight*, although it is communicated in a rather different way. While *1518* describes a loss of control in one parental relationship, *Fight* describes a positive experience with control in another parental relationship. The poem recalls a memory in which her father taught her self-defense skills and communicated a set of values that he expected her to uphold. She understood at a young age that it was within her family’s culture and expectations that she would be brave, strong, kind, and defend those in need. These expectations were both verbally communicated and inherently learned through the observation of her father’s career. While this author never actually participated in a physical fight like the one described, *Fight* portrays her conscious understanding of her family’s social expectations. Furthermore, her relationship with her father taught her the importance of initiative not only within the home but also once she steps out of it. She learned that taking initiative in social situations, although potentially frightening, is the right and expected thing to do.

The contrast between the parental relationship in *1518* with that of *Fight* also demonstrates the kind of support that is needed after an unforeseen life crisis occurs, particularly in early childhood. With the abandonment of one father figure, this author experienced the reassurance of another alongside the continuation of her other familial relationships. One of the most immediately available and successful ways to buffer the effects of unforeseen personal crises and toxic levels of stress is the provision of stable and supportive relationships with caregivers.¹¹ This can involve caregivers beyond parents and guardians, including educators, extended family, and trusted adults. *Fight* and the following piece, *Flame*, demonstrate how this author’s caregivers provided an environment which allowed her to more easily recover from this unprecedented challenge and change.

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School Age, ages 5 to 11

"Flame"
by me

Beautiful flames,
Pleasure and flame,
You and I,
Are the perfect pair.

Flames above,
Ashes below,
We gather around,
Smiling so,

When the flames greet,
Darkness fills the air,
We cry out,
In despair,

Stop crying,
Don't you hear,
The fire is still
Very near.
Organization

I used to shelve them
Alphabetically. This way, I could decide
Who to invite to my birthday.

I kept names and dates
In a notebook. Notes don’t change
When I remember things wrong
Flame

Beautiful flames
Flicker and flare,
You and I
Are the perfect pair,

Flames above,
Ashes below
We gather around,
Smiling so,

When the flames go out
Darkness fills the air,
We cry out,
In despair,

Stop crying,
Don't you fear
The fire is still
Very near.
Industry v. Inferiority

Through elementary school education, youth begin to understand their place within the broader social systems they inhabit. While the previous stage of development focuses on developing the initiation of tasks, the industry versus inferiority stage focuses on completing them to established standards. Encouraging task completion teaches a child how a given environment defines capability and assesses accomplishments alongside their peers. Consequently, this establishes the boundaries between confidence and inferiority. Of course, task-oriented success is subjective, so positive or negative feedback from those around them can alter how a child perceives their capabilities and, therefore, themselves. The subject and form of Flame and Organization reveal how and to what extent this collection’s author developed her relationship with goal-setting and confidence in their accomplishments.

Flame is particularly special because it is the earliest accessible poem from this author. It was written at the age of eleven for the purpose of being entered into a youth poetry competition sponsored by the Seattle Public Library. At the time of this poem’s conception, the author was neither conscious of her narrative identity nor aware of their development. She had little understanding of causal coherence or advanced literary tools, but she was aware of standards set by her teachers and parents. She knew that a poem should have lines, stanzas, rhyme, and an intriguing storyline. She knew that a title was meant to hint at the poem’s subject and that it was important to double-check her spelling. She was conventional in how she placed her punctuation and consistent in her choice of line and stanza length. By her learned standards, she had utilized every tool to make a conventionally “good” poem.

This behavior perfectly aligns with what is expected from an eleven-year-old regarding storytelling and narrative identity. Furthermore, the purpose of Flame demonstrates how this author was actively encouraged to complete tasks and felt motivated to accomplish goals beyond expectation. She was encouraged to accomplish tasks that were beyond necessity and
challenged both her cognitive and behavioral development. After submitting this piece to the library, the author was then given immediate praise by her parents and then, later, public praise from strangers when she was given the chance to read it aloud. Through this early experience, the author gained positive associations with poetry and learned that accomplishing challenging goals would merit and generate praise. This experience also marks the beginning of the author’s identity as a creator and writer.

The poem itself offers even greater insight. *Flame* portrays the author’s sentimental relationship with campfire while communicating her understanding of her social environment, which, at this age, is her family. She sees herself as a part of a unified family without much distinction between each member. They feel and think as one. In the last line, she echoes something that her parents might say to comfort her, demonstrating a feeling of safety. Given the context of parental abandonment that poems like *1518* provide, expression of such positive familial relationships is critical to understanding the support system and coping styles that this author adopted later in life. It is clear that she greatly valued and depended on her remaining family members.

Secondly, the intentional connection between extinguishing the fire and feeling despair demonstrate an early understanding of purpose and how accomplishing an expected goal is understood as positive. In this case, the goal of a fire is to be aflame within a fire pit; the goal of camping is to keep warm around said fire. When achieved, this goal brings happiness to not only the author but those around her. However, when this goal is momentarily failed, the author communicates an understanding that it can be once again fulfilled. Although it is a simple piece written at a young age, the context, writing style and subject matter of *Flame* paints an intricate picture of this stage of development as it was in the process of evolving.

*Organization*, on the other hand, was created at the age of 21, just before the creation of this project. Although its opening line is derived from a poem written at the age of fifteen, it is
based on an experience from the ages of about ten to eleven which is conveyed in *Alphabetically*. This experience of feeling compelled to organize one’s thoughts and feelings, particularly regarding peers, can be understood as the author’s attempt to find relief by remaining task-oriented. Through the formal organization of friendships as if she were taking notes for class, the author was able to break down their social life into a language that she had become more comfortable with. This habit becomes even more meaningful upon learning that the author did not keep the same friends for long due to frequent moving between homes and schools for her father’s job. The accumulation of a new set of friends every year or two, and the addition of typical social anxiety around the early teens, lead to an unconscious search for stability. By recording the names of people that she had met over time and the interactions she had with them, she was able to gain some element of mental stability.

Like the other pieces written at this age, *Organization* is written after the author gained an understanding of both narrative identity and psychosocial development. In this case, the author’s greater level of cognitive development and experience with different forms of poetry demonstrate an intriguing contrast to *Flame*. While *Flame* is written in simple rhyming quatrains, *Organization* is written more organically and is less explicit in its conceptual framework, leaving room for interpretation. This deviation demonstrates a change in what the author understands as “good” poetry and, therefore, a change in literary goals. Over time, she learned that creative expression and academic projects not only brought satisfaction and praise, but that goals could be adjusted and translated for different purposes or in the face of different circumstances.
Adolescence, ages 12 to 18
There is  
A girl in the  
Window across the street  
She can't stop staring at herself  
It seems  

My friend  
Went missing last  
Winter but I forgot  
She wasn't much fun anyways  
She's back  

Walking  
With her mother  
What an ugly little  
Thing who even talks to that girl?  
I don't  

Recall  
Where the change was  
I was just holding her  
Hand so tight in the grocery  
But now  

She irks  
Me completely  
Insufferable I  
Cannot stand another moment  
Beside  

Her eyes  
They pull at me  
I hate her but I can't  
Stop capturing them again and  
Again.
Mirror

I look in the mirror
I don’t know who I see
I don’t know who that girl is
That girl looking back at me

I see all of these people
They’re all doing their thing
I don’t know who they are
And they don’t know me

This was so unexpected
You were all I knew
This was not what I wanted
Please don’t say I’m through

Cause out of all these different faces
The one that stuck was you
And out of all these different places
I picked the one with you

I look in the mirror
I don’t know who I see
I don’t know who that girl is
That girl looking back at me

I see all of these people
They all look at me now
I don’t know who they are
But they think they know me
Once upon a time
I rode a road
Both long and wide
With twists and turns
And signs that never failed
To lead
Then you came
A shining light
Upon the darkest night
An angel in disguise
I was blinded
By your beauty
I failed to see
Those who cared
Were right in front of me
I was blinded
By your kindness
I failed to see
The lies they told
Reflected off of me
I was blinded
By your humor
I failed to see
My happiness
Was limited
To thee
I was blinded
By your smile
I failed to see
The rumors told
Always ended in
Pain and misery.
Finding Stars

Star light, star bright
You outshine every other star in sight
My hearts racing, my knees are shaking
And when you spin me around, I can hardly breath
But that's exactly what you’re not telling me
You're a rule breaker, a chance taker
Without a care in the world
A strong speaker, an eye catcher
So smooth, its killing me
And that's what makes it hard
Because I can see
That's exactly what you don't find in me
Memorize

Strong hold
Look bold
Sit tight
Mothers right
Back straight
Please wait
Be strong
He’s wrong
Chin up
Buttercup
Sweet thing
Needs wings
Don’t cry
Thick thighs
Warm socks
Hard rock
Short flight
Mothers right
Long legs
Full kegs
Beer bong
He’s wrong
Tight shoes
Belt loose
Bras slipping
Skinny dipping
Lose weight
Eat cake
Long tongue
Bells rung
Petty fight
Mother’s right
Cheepstake
Headache
Money’s gone
He’s wrong
Mama dear
Dirty tears
Earthquake
Stomach ache
Back straight
Just wait
Chin up
Times up
Sit tight
Mothers right
Three-fold
Be bold
Look strong
He’s wrong
Alphabetically

She shelves her friends
Alphabetically
Scheming, planning
Scientifically
She knows what she wants
And its Godly
This is the woman
Of Reality
She feeds herself
Almost literally
Thinking, dreaming
Democraticall
She preaches gold
Hypocritically
Yes, this is the woman
Of reality
Change

This was not supposed to go
How it went the year before
You were always there for me
When I could not find my feet
I had so much going on
But I lost track and now its gone
Things are changing way too fast
Just not in the way I’d asked
Identity v. Identity Confusion

The poetry from between the ages of twelve and eighteen is uniquely intriguing because it was written after the author developed metacognitive fluency and egocentrism. This means that the adolescent has gained emotional awareness, an understanding of their internal thought processes, and is hyper-aware of her external perception. This results in a poetry that is more intentional, therapeutic, and exploratory. As a person draws near adulthood they are also approaching the age at which they will be consumed with the idea of defining their narrative identity, or their life story. Some choose to begin this process orally by speaking with friends while others depict it in writing, as our author has done with her poetry.

Within the identity versus confusion stage, adolescents often become consumed by external pressures to determine their future college, career, and greater purpose, which each work together to shape their identity. Although identity is built and reformed throughout an entire lifetime, the environmental pressures at this age make the identity crisis the primary internal conflict in an adolescent’s life. Due to the development of egocentrism, this stage often presents issues rooted in social anxiety, self-esteem, and a phenomenon known as the spotlight effect, the belief that one is under constant observation. Such stress or failure to achieve identity clarity can lead to an over reliance on external validation to define selfhood, resulting in a perilous confusion of self-perception.

The poems preceding this text demonstrate the internal labor that adolescents experience while searching for their identity in the midst of environmental and cultural pressures. Furthermore, those written during this age, from Mirror to Change, exhibit an internal dialogue and behaviors that are often prevalent when teenagers experience intense anxiety and

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internal crisis before they are completely conscious of what those things look like. Alternatively, *1901* is written in retrospect, from an emotionally-aware adult reflecting on what the spotlight effect felt like as a young girl. With this alternative perspective, the author is able to organize experience in a way that differs from other pieces in this section.

One side effect that may come from an adolescent’s attempts to define themselves is the act of tethering their identity to others due to a lack of confidence in their perceived identity. When this tethering leads to an aggressive obsession with a peer, it can be described as a naive way of “falling in love.” Steve Tubber and Karen Tocatly write that this phenomenon “is not primarily relational, but more an attempt to define one’s image by projecting one’s more diffused, murky identity onto others and gradually gaining clarity through the image reflected in return.”15 It is through experiences like these that youth can develop intense “crushes” on popular classmates they have never actually spoken to before. In these cases, the unconscious idea is not that they have developed a romantic relationship by any accepted standards, but that they are attracted to a projected identity and that they, too, wish to be perceived that way.

In *Blinded*, our twelve-year-old author finds herself captivated by a classmate in this fashion. She admires his physical appearance, kindness, and sense of humor. But more than this, she admires that her peers see these characteristics in him as well. She is attracted to his perceived identity and social popularity despite lacking any formal relationship with him at all. As the author reflects on her adolescent crush, she realizes that no relationship is going to form, yet still finds herself infatuated with him. Because of the author’s age, *Blinded* appears exaggerated and immature. This further accentuates the phenomenon of identity tethering and adolescent crushes.

Through the age of fifteen, the author continued to experience this phenomenon, although her attempts to connect identity to a preexisting and meaningful relationship show signs of social maturation. *Finding Stars* is written about the author's unreciprocated admiration of a friend. She expresses a deep disappointment in herself for not exhibiting the same character traits her friend embodies. She aspires to be perceived as adventurous, rebellious, carefree, and naturally charismatic. These are traits that she has grown to value and, therefore, yearns for a meaningful connection with this peer to reshape what she knew her perceived identity to be. She obsesses over the prospect of a relationship and gradually becomes more disappointed and depressed as the peer fails to validate the identity she hopes to create. Part of this obsession includes making distinct changes in her everyday habits, behavior, and persona. Generally, guardians or other adults might notice changes like these in teens when their grades begin to drop, after “hanging out with the wrong crowd,” or when they begin to change their physical appearance after making new friends. What makes these experiences so distinct, however, is that adolescents are not consciously aware of their internal motivations when this occurs. In hindsight, it becomes clear that these behaviors were in response to the very real search for their identity and external validation.

Part of the stress that causes the “falling in love” phenomenon occurs when a teenager is overwhelmed by environmental expectations and how they contrast with their own goals or abilities. *Memorize* was written just before the author turned sixteen and as she is beginning to learn how to consciously analyze the source of her thoughts and emotions. *Memorize* is a repetitive list, with just two to four syllables per line. This form was intentionally chosen to portray the author’s anxiety while juggling the expectations of her parents, peers, teachers, and the world at large. At the same time, the young author was stuck determining where to include her own goals and desires. Such internal dialogue creates a disconnect between one’s
perceived identity and one’s conscious values and goals that can be recognized as a sort of identity crisis, common among adolescents.

*Alphabetically* is a continuation of the identity crisis, but rather than purely expressing her dismay, it is one example of the author exploring possible coping strategies. Most poems within this collection are reminiscent of a diary entry; they are honest in accordance with how the author felt at the time and they are driven by emotion. *Alphabetically* on the other hand, like the earlier *Fight*, has a fictional foundation and resemblance to role-play through narrative. Role-play is an activity that has consistently been found to promote behavioral development in young children and more seldomly found to help adolescents and adults explore their personal identity.\(^{16}\) Through *Alphabetically*, the author takes on a persona that is confident, intellectual, and practical—character traits that she hopes to bring out in herself. In many ways, the author later grew into this character and embodied these traits more with age and life experience.

The piece *Alphabetically* is unique to the others within this section because it is a sister poem to *Organization*. Although *Organization* is written at a later date and conveys the experience of school-age psychosocial development, it does build off of this piece. Firstly, *Organization* borrows the idea of categorizing one’s friends: “I used to shelve them / Alphabetically.” This is a line that the author created at the age of fifteen upon writing *Alphabetically* and then became captivated with. When she first wrote the line, it was used to explore an identity narrative that she felt drawn to but did not yet feel she embodied. Upon returning to it at the age of seventeen, she was unsure of what to make of it but still attracted to it. Finally, the author used the line in *Organization* at the age of 21 as a way of reminiscing on the age in which she first saw these traits appear. Watching the use of this line evolve

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\(^{16}\) Anne Goodall and Truong Alexis, “Pop Culture and Social Insertion: How Can Play in Adolescence and Adulthood Be ‘therapeutic’?” *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*, 6, no 1. (2021). This source finds that role-playing tabletop games have been used in therapy to help individuals explore their personal identity.
demonstrates how a person’s chosen narrative identity can change over the course of just a few years.

In contrast to other pieces within this section, 1901 is curated intentionally. The form, structure, material, and word choice is selected to convey something particular: the spotlight effect and social anxiety within early adolescence as it is remembered and processed in adulthood. Firstly, 1901 is loosely constructed in the form of a cinquain so as to allude to the idea of consistency and structure. This is an idea derived from the author’s experience of environmental stability—financial, academical, and familial—and the simultaneous experience of personal instability. Secondly, each stanza was written as if from a different perspective, which is an element that is less obviously apparent. The piece moves from the perspective of a stranger passing by the author’s home in the first stanza, through the perspective of loved ones and peers, until it takes on the perspective of the author herself in the final stanza. Along this journey, 1901 expresses resentment, regret, curiosity, disgust, hatred, flippancy, and nostalgia coming from people that the author loves or admires. These interactions appear to be real and hold a great amount of weight, as they did for the author in her teenage years. In reality, the only experience that was verifiably real is the author’s experience with her own perspective in the final stanza. At the time, however, this made no difference. Due to social anxiety and intense feelings of objectification—whether through her bedroom window or on a walk with her mom—the author believed these perspectives to be true, even if only momentarily. Upon seeing peers in public especially, she would immediately be overcome with the anxiety that they were assessing her movements and committing them to memory.

At her later age and gained experience, the now twenty-one year old author is able to look back on her adolescence with a complete understanding of how this experience occurred. In lieu of this experience, the creation of 1901 was a significant part of the author’s present construction of narrative identity. Processing this past experience and understanding that the
spotlight effect is a grave internal exaggeration was a significant moment of growth. Learning coping skills and understanding the intricacies of this experience can help individuals break down their anxieties and develop more positive cognitive habits.

Although 1901 is the only poem within this section in which the author fully understood the developmental process, Change does begin to approach it. Change communicates sentiments that are prevalent among most adolescents and young adults: the feeling of childhood slipping away, the transformation of the parental relationship, and the disappointment of a year passing by. More specifically, disappointment regarding the failure to meet external expectations set by their environment. When comparing this piece to the others written during adolescence, it appears to be the first instance in which the author is aware that the environmental changes occurring in her life are directly related to developmental progression. Additionally, it shows a more conscious acknowledgement of time beyond the immediate. Instead the author alludes to the passing of the last year, the year before, and the impending passing of the year approaching. Although simple, Change demonstrates a definite, early advancement in developmental awareness.

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Emerging Adulthood, ages 18 to 21
Touched

Something I can never express
Is how much I love their

Names I don’t remember only faces
Until I do suddenly

I can feel each of them reaching
In through my sternum and against.

I never feel it as it happens
And they never feel at all I know

I’m going to see them at work tomorrow
Or in the grocery store.
Heat

Down the coast and into California
They liked the cold I needed heat
What I think of now
Is not the beaches but the roads
On the sand I was burning
Tossing turning dreaming of clouds
Walking in the cities I was scorching
Sticky tired anxious
Praying for the next cool breeze to tickle my legs
On the highway there is always a breeze
Windows down left hand up
Fingertips dancing on the wind
On the road the sun still beats down
But its rays are softened before landing on the skin
Relationship

When an eldest daughter dates
A youngest son they find everything
Each other yet are everything
The other hates the eldest daughter
Needs control the youngest son
Needs to hold the youngest son
Despises questions but I have them
Dear Diary

I guess I never truly knew what it felt like. Not really. I remember there was something about the orange hiding the ahead from view, yet still knowing exactly what it would look like once I got there. I always got there, but I didn’t know that. Even then I was just approaching the feeling. I always had the map, just like my mom used to say. The haze was carved into playtime when my sister and I would be outside far away from everyone else but kept just within the boundaries. It was hidden in the smell of rain. An ant tickling my hand. The slug we named Sam. Running through the tall grass just before feeling that first itch deep in my nose, skin, fingernails, crying back to mom. Why didn’t she tell me? The instructions were always so unclear. Now, I can feel it in the trees outside my bedroom window. It dances and jumps between them. I can listen to morning and look straight out, finding the gaps. I can see it when I leave a mess on the counter or the floor or the schedule and just leave it there. I know I can pick it up later. It is as if I opened my palms to the sky one morning and it just fell into them. Now, it is everywhere. It is wiggling my toes within my favorite pair of socks. It is cooking a meal I know no one else will like. Somehow in between the maps and the rain, I misplaced almost everything I was afraid of. Maybe we became tired of each other so they left me for someone else. Perhaps I am just now seeing it because it is something exponential. Something that can never truly be felt at full volume. Like the progression of love, or the feeling of making someone laugh, or gradually getting sick but not realizing it for days. Maybe it is the itch after the grass rather than the running before.
**Intimacy v. Isolation**

Historically, as an American adolescent ascends into young adulthood, they are expected to reach financial and social independence, to determine their current if not lifelong occupation, and to find a romantic partner. As the 21st century evolves, however, the period known as adolescence, as well as its accompanying identity confusion, is expanding beyond the boundaries originally proposed by Erikson.\(^\text{18}\) And as the chances of a person meeting traditional expectations within their twenties becomes slimmer, so too is the developmental period known as emerging adulthood extending its limits. Not only are emerging adults continuing to lose childhood friendships and to experience destabilizing familial changes, but the increased diversity of societal norms is also influencing their search for new relationships. Households today include same-sex marriages, queer couples, long-term relationships without marriage, roommates, or multiple adult family members living together for financial or medical reasons. Given these changes, the emerging adulthood stage looks vastly different from the one Erikson originally modeled. That said, evolving circumstances do not eliminate the internal struggle that is prevalent during this age, they simply translate differently for different individuals. The pieces *Touched, Heat, Relationship*, and *Dear Diary* demonstrate one young adult’s journey to define their experiences with intimacy, relationships, and the socially-imposed fear of isolation.

The first piece within this section, *Touched*, conveys an internal experience that this author has experienced for several years. In many ways, it is possible that the feeling existed well before adulthood, but the author was only just made aware of it recently. The content of *Organization*, for example, hints at an unusual relationship to friendship and social interactions. *Touched* communicates the feeling of instant emotional connection to someone whom you have not developed a close relationship with yet. For the author, this included strangers that she met once without learning their name, coworkers whose phone numbers she will never possess, or

\(^{18}\) Tubber and Tocatly, "Intimacy versus Isolation Revisited".
dear friends that she hasn’t spoken to in over a decade. For her, it is a recurring process that occurs almost daily. Sometimes, the process is left in its early stages of development while in other cases the process allows the connection to evolve into a cherished relationship.

In describing this process, *Touched* demonstrates the author’s inherent desire for connection and an awareness that she feels so. The motivation for such a desire at this age is affected by her experience with previous parental abandonment, frequent relocation, loss of childhood friends, isolation due to a global pandemic, and inexperience with maintaining lifelong friends. Each of these past experiences greatly impacted how the author perceives friendship but, according to Erikson, the onset of adulthood that accentuates the internal conflict of finding intimacy due to the impending possibility of eternal isolation. The social and emotional awareness that accrues during this age makes an individual more aware of the threat of isolation versus the threat of creating a relationship with the wrong person, which causes them to dive further into this conflict. Additionally, the advancement of one’s narrative identity causes any present relationships or hopes for a relationship to become a potential part of said identity. For example, if a young adult hopes to get married and start a family, this will become part of their autobiographical narrative. In another example, if a young adult hopes to procure a partner but rejects the idea of having children, this will become a part of their narrative identity instead. *Touched* demonstrates an awareness regarding how the author forms relationships and how they connect to her greater identity.

Another element of adult relationships is recognizing who one wants to build a relationship with and intentionally selecting companions accordingly, both romantic and platonic. The poem *Heat* alludes to the first steps of reforming relationships in this way. Primarily, this piece is about the author’s first taste of freedom before the burden of financial independence. It is a story of transition. With this, however, is the expression of the author’s initial feelings of dissonance between high school friends. The notion that the author and her friends disagree on
the preference of hot weather or cold appears to be surface level, but suggest foundational forms of disconnect that will eventually lead to them drifting apart. This is rather common as adolescents enter the adult world. In the first years of adulthood, this experience is rather common. Friendships are no longer built due to proximity but rather due to similar interests, values or careers.

While *Heat* ponders what is necessary in platonic relationships, the following poem conveys the difficulties that arise in adult romantic relationships and the frictions that can hinder them. *Relationship* describes the conflict that occurs in a committed relationship between two individuals that sometimes have differing preferences and behaviors. This includes organizational patterns, love languages, methods of communication, and even the smallest pet peeves. Furthermore, it describes the author’s dejection in this dissonance because the relationship is everything to her. The poems throughout this collection have provided details regarding several of this author’s romantic relationships, but this is the first committed relationship of its kind. Additionally, this is the first relationship written about in which the author fully understands the risks involved in committing to a lifelong partner. A lifelong partner, in the way that she envisions for herself, would be responsible for sharing her life, financial assets, children, parenting styles, and medical burdens. This awareness that romantic partners go beyond infatuation and physical attraction only truly arises once a person has become an adult and experienced adult life. In this way, I believe, it is not necessary that one reach complete resolution in the former basic conflict of identity before entering this one. Although, it would likely be beneficial to a committed relationship if one did.

Many of the complexities found in this author’s understanding of this relationship also come from the societal pressure to find the “right partner” or “the one.” This is a common concern in the western world, but in recent years, the standards have both become more fluid and more demanding due to the liberalization of expectations for the household and the rise of
social media. With the rise of social media, glorified versions of relationships and households are put on display and accessible to billions. This has the potential to create unreasonable expectations of one’s relationship or partner. These effects in addition to any experiences that occurred in childhood regarding relationship expectations can determine one’s behavior and level of satisfaction. Social comparison in any form affects levels of satisfaction. With social media and globalization the opportunities for social comparison are endless and constantly accessible. *Touched* reflects on this author’s attempt to consciously navigate these factors.

The final and most recent piece in this section is *Dear Diary*. The author’s choice to write about this feeling is a way of acknowledging that it has only appeared in her life after deep internal examination of the self, one’s past, and one’s behavior. In a way, it is her journey towards finding such contentment into her narrative identity. *Dear Diary* jumps between describing her relationship with her mother, sister, and romantic partner, but is written in a way that covers a large span of time. The reader encounters a mother and sister in early childhood, then a partner in the present, but still the former relationships still exist in the time that the latter does. With these ideas working together, the author conveys how her mental health in adulthood has been shaped by her understanding of the most important relationships around her and becoming comfortable with her independence. Part of the identity versus isolation conflict is understanding one’s feelings regarding the latter. Erikson fashioned his theory in a way that portrayed the idea of isolation as something that everyone is adverse to. For this author, however, becoming content with temporary isolation has been nearly as important as defining her most significant relationships.

Although the expansion of the adolescent period into emerging adulthood is real and present for this author in many ways, the narrative available demonstrates that she has already ascended into the intimacy versus isolation stage. By Erikson’s standards, and by what many of these poems demonstrate, this would also mean that the author has achieved clarity within the
former stage, identity versus identity confusion, and moved on in a timely fashion. However, the creation of such introspective poetry, the creation of this project, and Dan McAdams' theory of narrative identity would suggest that the author still feels motivated to further clarify her identity. It appears that although a person might find clarity in their identity and long-term goals in accordance to Erikson's stages, they will continue to shape their narrative identity separately. In this way, narrative identity differs from Erikson's idea of identity because it deals with past experiences and how they shape a person in the present rather than how a person visualizes themselves in the future.
The Parental Relationship & Depression
When we first moved I just wanted to make paper dolls. We played on the exposed rock flooring. Tape and glue goes on paper not the table. Mom and dad were trying to clean and dad needed us out of the way. Our bedroom only had one window right under the ceiling. From my bunk I would watch our neighbors feet pass by. It was our lookout tower art studio secret cave.

Mom wanted us to keep it clean. Always asking me to put my shit away. When we went on walks I kept my own snack in my pocket even though mom kept some in the stroller. I loved provolone cheese until it got warm and tasted like sand. We had found the stroller on the sidewalk by the lake. We watched it for days. No one came to claim it so we made it ours. When baby grew out of it we tried to put it back. Now mom saves it in the garage for me. Baby slept in the office where we wouldn’t wake her. The highchair was on the stone floor too because food stays on the table not the floor but when it does, stone is easier to clean. One year it actually snowed outside. We walked into the living room that morning and saw the great view out the sliding glass doors. The ladybugs that lived on the bush wouldn’t survive this. Mom said we could look for them again in the spring. Three times a week we would walk two and a half miles up the hill, although it felt more like five. The destination was swim class but my sister and I liked the raspberries we picked on the way.
My Parents Tell Me

Not too long ago, my father told me
Don’t go chasing after boys, my dear
Cause if they’re worth your time, my dear
They’ll come to you
Love is tricky

Just the other year, my mother told me
Keep your options open, dear
Cause strangers come along, my dear
And one might light the spark
Love is tricky

My parents tell me now
We’re here for you, my dear
They don’t love you, dear
We understand it’s hard
Love is tricky.
Deserving

You ask me what is wrong
Then all I do is nod
I wish I could say to you
What's really on my mind
Even now, I can't write it down
In the past, I've been mean
I've been rude
But I still don't think
I deserve what you do
You gave me all I ever wanted
You gave me toys
And fun surprises
You let me go
Were I had wanted
I held you close
You held me tighter
But then you made me
Let it all go
Tuck In

When you close the door
After tucking us in
We don’t fall asleep
Too busy thinking
What's to come of us
What we didn’t do
What we should’ve done
What we’ve lost for you
When the lights go out
The stars are shining
We don't fall asleep
Too busy dreaming
What sights will we see
What thoughts will they think
Riding on dragons
When fear is colored pink
When the sun goes down
The city lights up
We don’t fall asleep
Too busy crying
What we have to lose
What we have to gain
All the tears we’ve rained
Is this worth the pain?
I Am From the Pencil

I am from the pencil
    From both lead and ink
I am from the stuffy rooms
    Ever changing, never permanent
    Its light at war with the shadows
I am from the beaten trail
    The jasmine flowers
    The blossoms that bloomed through ice
I am from the unsocial and
    From Christian and Natalie
    And Scott
I am from the poor family relationships
    And weak hearts
From “We’re always here for you” and
    “They won’t last forever”
I am from the over-cautious
    The over-protective
I am from the scalding hot and the bitter cold
    The barbeque and the greens
From the father that failed both mom and I
    And the other that keeps us up
    Both memories held in the books
I am from a perfect mix of dark and light
    Tears and laughter and
    Cowardly bravery
Last Resort

Riding on the wind, it soars
Across the sky
It enters the child’s home and
Makes them weep and cry

It seeps in through the doors
Crawls between the toys
It sneaks under the bed
And whispers about the joy

It lays upon the window sill
Poisoning the air
It makes you breath it in
Then leaves you standing there
Beauty

Beauty
Is what the farmland is
When the sun goes down
Spreading an orange warmth
Over the wind blown grass
Beauty
Is what the ocean is
Rolling, churning, screaming
Out my name into the cool night sky
Beauty
Is what the child is
With hands reaching up
Laughing at the world with a sweet innocence
And eyes wide, ready to see
Beauty
Is what the mother is
Roaring, teaching, loving so fiercely
No matter the circumstance, no matter the child
A Woman

There is this woman -
A Woman.

A Woman made from the finest stars in the galaxy.
A Woman who wears the cloth sewn from the fibers of your dreams
Hopes and most primitive needs.

A Woman who would have relinquished her last breath on Earth
If it would allow you to take your first.

This Woman is willing to
Slave night and day without rest
To keep you warm, healthy, and strong.
She would give anything and everything in a heartbeat
Just to make you happy.

If only it would make you happy.

But if you treat this Woman
As if She didn’t create you and
As if you just can’t bear to be seen in public with Her,
She might turn to you and spew words and phrases
That you haven’t even heard before.

And if you treat this Woman
As if She’s stupid and ignorant;
If you use Her generosity to your advantage,
But then look straight into Her eyes
And lie to Her face,
She might take Her beautifully thin, nimble fingers
And wrench your heart into two,
Then leave you standing there
Frozen with sickness
Wondering, when will She finally talk to you?

Because if you treat this Woman as if
She didn’t do enough;
As if you could’ve done a better job
Spending 24 hours 7 days a week 365 days every year
Giving away all your time, life, and independence
So that you can be strong, healthy, and happy…
She will yell and scream and cuss

But once you turn your back on Her
She will cry.

Because if you treat this Woman
Like She’s just like any other woman,
She might think back
To all those endless nights;
All those times She would’ve given
Anything and everything She had in a heartbeat
Just to make you happy

She’ll think,

Was it all for nothing?
Did I give her too much?
Did I not do enough?
What did I do wrong?

And She will cry.

But listen,
Oh please listen.
Because if you give this Woman your heart
And let her see into the deepest parts of you
She will give you Hers.

If you give this Woman your time
And let your eyes meet Hers
You can show Her that She is seen.
Show Her the respect that She deserves,
Take the time out of your day to tell Her about your life
To tell Her how you feel
To tell Her who you are, who Her daughter is.
If you give this Woman your thoughts, She will listen.

And if you give this Woman your hand
Help Her through Her day
Ask Her what She needs
Tell Her that you are grateful
Then She will offer you Hers
A million times over.

And if you give this Woman
Your love, and offer her your friendship
If you cherish every moment that you have with Her;
If you give thanks for every sacrifice She makes for you,
She might become your best friend.
She might dance and sing with you
While your sister stands embarrassed, back turned,
Trying to pretend you crazy fools don't exist.

She might become your best friend.

Your mother
Is the first person
That your big, round, hungry eyes see.
From the moment that you are brought into this world,
She nurtured you into existence and then
Molded you into who you are today.
She did spend night after endless night
Rocking and loving you to sleep.
She did slave night and day without rest
To keep you warm, healthy, and strong.
She did give anything and everything
Just to make you happy.

She is only a woman,
But She deserves to be treated as so much more.
[I Send Them All]

To my boyfriend he asks me
What he should say
I used to show my friends
Before anyone else
Asked them for approval ask them
What I should say ask them
What everyone would say
Then counted how many
Liked me. Did they? How many
I was anxious about that I just
Want his love I don’t count
I notice my mom
Has been commenting
Everytime she asks
If I had fun
Wishes me well and tells me
I looked beautiful
The Parental Relationship & Depression

As children enter middle adulthood and adolescence, their relationships with parents or guardians drastically change. At the same time, occurrences of depression and thoughts of suicide can greatly increase during this age, peaking on average at age eighteen.\textsuperscript{19} Factors that contribute to the development of depression are both genetic and environmental, and it is often hard to distinguish between the two. However, the parental relationship is always critical. A person is more apt to develop depressive tendencies if they have experienced parental loss or rejection, or if their parents have experienced depression, insufficient coping styles, or a negative cognitive perception. Each of these factors impact how a person deals with information—whether they think generally pessimistically, anxiously, or catastrophically, for example—and therefore affects their likelihood to develop depression.

There are a handful of lines within the entirety of this collection that suggest that the author might have been predisposed to depression. Pieces like \textit{Organization} and \textit{1901} convey regular feelings of anxiety, a trait that can trigger depression, while \textit{1518} and \textit{I Am From the Pencil} touch on the author’s experience with parental abandonment. In recalling this experience from early childhood, \textit{I Am From the Pencil} also communicates the long-term emotional effect of this event. This is also the only time that this event is mentioned within the pieces written in adolescence. This demonstrates a newfound awareness of self and past events that emerges at the age of thirteen, just as the author is beginning to develop depressive tendencies. At this age, the author is still unsure of the extent to which this father figure’s departure impacted her developmentally, but she recognizes that his behavior was not optimal. Given the possibility of predisposition, the poems within this section, from 7920 to \textit{[I Send Them All]}, convey this author’s relationship with her parents as it has evolved from middle childhood, through the

\textsuperscript{19} Newman and Newman, \textit{Development through life}: 391.
changes that occur in adolescence, and then through the secondary shift that occurs as one enters adulthood. Simultaneously, they narrate the initial development and escalation of depression as it directly correlates with the author’s parental relationship.

Written with an understanding and admiration for the innocence that exists in early childhood, 7920 reflects an emerging adult’s maturity. Like 1518, this piece places youthful ignorance in conversation with a harsher reality that develops with age. While the child wishes to play with dolls and make messes, the adult acknowledges the value of cleanliness and taking care of the baby in the household. The child’s consistent efforts to maintain structure, seen earlier in Organization and Change, demonstrates the ways that a desire for play can be supplanted by a parent’s behavior and cognitive processes. Over the course of the poem, the choices posed by these competing impulses illustrate key aspects of developmental maturation.

There is a sense of independence fostered by the mother’s willingness to let the author pack her own snack in 7920 despite already providing one for her. There is a sense of resourcefulness in finding the stroller, and understanding that others may need what we have in attempting to give it to someone else. This care for others is conveyed again with the sympathy that the author has for the ladybugs that she adores, followed by the mother encouraging optimism when she suggests that they will see them again once the weather turns. Finally, the author communicates the value of finding joy in the most difficult things by highlighting a positive moment during her long walk to the public swimming pool. Although the details that 7920 describes may initially seem small, they ultimately have the possibility of determining how the author views her environment. Furthermore, the choice of the author to include these events in a poem so many years after they occurred means that they were significant moments worth remembering.

The poems following this piece, My Parents Tell Me, Deserving, and Tuck In were each written at the age of twelve, amidst the growth of the adolescent’s social circle alongside her
newfound desire for independence and control.\textsuperscript{20} As a child enters junior high school, their social world is now significantly larger than what they had ever experienced in early to middle childhood. For this reason, there is often a push away from the family as the adolescent attempts to find their place among new friends. To this effect, Barbara and Phillip Newman write, “As adolescents’ relationships with people outside the home grow increasingly important, their interactions with their families evolve and take on a new, and sometimes difficult, character.”\textsuperscript{21} This occurrence is demonstrated in \textit{My Parents Tell Me} as the author recalls her parents warning her against pushing her family away in favor of her peers.

Although moments of conflict are abundant, most adolescents and their parents still feel deep, reciprocal admiration and respect for one another.\textsuperscript{22} For this author, this shift in the dynamic led to an internal dissonance between still idolizing her parents in the way that she had in her youth and being disappointed in how they responded to her desire for independence. This is conveyed in \textit{Deserving} as the author questions if she deserved the form of punishment that her parents had awarded her. The adolescent author is angry and yearns for the happiness that she gets from realizing her independence but still feels deep respect for her parents. Furthermore, the fact that the author’s parents still participate in a bedtime ritual communicates the maturity level of the author and suggests that she is still just beginning her transition into adolescence. \textit{Deserving} is also the first instance in which the author communicates the initial signs of depression.

One behavior that tends to fuel the development of depression is turning inward when experiencing stress or emotional instability, which creates a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Due to common gender differences, this is also thought to be the reason girls, on

\textsuperscript{20} Newman and Newman, \textit{Development through life}: 395.
\textsuperscript{21} Newman and Newman, \textit{Development through life}: 397.
\textsuperscript{22} Newman and Newman, \textit{Development through life}: 397.
average, are more likely to develop depression than boys. In *Deserving*, the adolescent author expresses difficulty in communicating her overwhelming emotions to what is assumed to be her parents. Instead, she shuts down and turns inwards rather than expelling her emotions through healthy communication or physical exertion. This internal conflict is then more centrally conveyed in *Tuck In*. In this piece, the author describes the experience of appearing to be in good spirits to her parents but feeling overwhelmed after they close the bedroom door. She describes feelings of anxiety, helplessness, not being able to realize her goals, fear, and deep sadness. At this point in her adolescence, the author is not only experiencing depressive thoughts occasionally but regularly. When an adolescent experiences a persistent loss of pleasure, disturbed sleep due to overwhelming feelings, or thoughts of suicide, it often suggests major depressive disorder. For this author, thoughts of suicide were rare but did occur. *Last Resort*, originally titled *Suicide*, conveys her relationship with suicidal thoughts and demonstrates a culmination of her experiences with depression.

As the author transitions to her teenage years, her relationship with her parents evolves along with her demeanor. In early adolescence, at ages twelve and thirteen, her parental relationship suffered frequent conflict and little mutual understanding. By the time the author reaches age fifteen, the author is no longer completely rejecting her parents in an attempt to find independence and further her relationship with her peers. Instead, she is beginning to recognize that the dissonance between herself and her family was part of the developmental process and, in symmetry with narrative identity theory, has begun to explore why she experienced such feelings of depression. *Beauty* describes the solace the author finds in the landscapes of her new hometown before expressing admiration in the parent-child relationship. She conveys awe in the innocence of youth and the passion of motherhood. This sentiment is then continued in the following piece, *A Woman*. Themes of awe and respect for motherhood resurface in this

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author's work almost as an attempt to repair the rift that she had experienced with her mother throughout the several years previous. She felt deep admiration for her despite their differences and hoped to repair their bond by internally processing her experiences.

As an adolescent moves through high school and into young adulthood, their relationship with their parents shifts once again. In middle childhood, a child perceives their parents in idealized terms and the parent holds most of the power and influence in the relationship. Somewhere in between then and adulthood, things shift and a child will instead begin to view their parents for the individuals that they are and the power balance becomes more symmetrical. By the time this author entered adulthood, the regular conflict between herself and her parents had largely dissolved and her search for secure relationships resulted in the forming of a stronger bond with her mother. This positive change in addition to a richer social circle, greater feelings of fulfillment and purpose, and the development of more effective coping styles allowed her to overcome her feelings of depression.

To this effect, [I Send Them All] describes the author's experience with anxiety on social media throughout her late teens and how her mother emerged as a constant in her emerging adulthood. She recalls grasping for praise and validation from her boyfriend, closest friends, and peers on social media. In her maturity, however, she realizes that her mother has served as an unwavering supporter by consistently providing praise without being enticed. [I Send Them All] signifies the ending of an era of conflict in this author’s adolescent parental relationship. At the same time, it demonstrates the author’s arrival to a new place of maturity and stability. While many parental mechanisms can lead to a higher likelihood of depression, particularly in adolescence, much of this author’s journey may have coincidentally placed the parental relationship directly alongside her relationship with depression. Just as it is difficult to tell the difference between genetic and environmental effects of parenthood, it is hard to tell which

24 Newman and Newman, Development through life: 396.
elements of the parental relationship directly affect mental health and which simply occur at a similar time due to the natural trajectory of development.
Conclusion

There are many connections between the poems in this collection that are not discussed in the present work. So many pieces from throughout my childhood are connected in theme, style, word choice, and more. Some of such pieces were connected intentionally, like *Organization* and *Alphabetically* in my intentional reuse of the opening line. Other pieces were connected purely by accident. These include *Dear Diary* and *Beauty* in their appreciation for nature, the awe that an orange landscape inspires, and the expression of content only found in isolation in nature. *Relationship* is connected to a piece excluded from this collection titled *Eldest Daughter* which communicates the perfectionism that I found was expected of me because of my role in the household. Throughout the works that I have accumulated are the same themes repeated multiple times, but years apart. These recurring themes, regardless of any existing psychological theory, have become a significant part of my identity and autobiographical story. They affect how I subconsciously function and perceive the world, but they also affect who I believe myself to be and project towards others.

Crafting creative work is an excellent way for people to process their emotions. This has long been recognized by educators and psychologists. Beyond this, however, analyzing a series of creative works by one person can reveal essential information about them, their identity, and their lifelong development. Given the multitude of connections that I was able to make from my collection of works within just a decade, I am confident that such methods can also be used in education and parenting. While many students may not find such an interest in poetry as I did throughout my youth, there are a multitude of other forms of expression that could be explored. Some children choose to express themselves through written or spoken narrative, some might choose visual art, others may choose to write music. Then, regardless of genuine interest, most students will create all forms of expression as an assignment for school or as directed by parents. Many of the pieces within this collection were created for this reason. In each of these
ways, there are numerous opportunities for caregivers to read into a young person’s chosen forms of expression. In doing so, a caregiver might be able to locate the developmental progress, literary comprehension, psychosocial setbacks, or the roots of an adolescent’s feelings of depression.

Beyond the caregiver, this process can also be used by adults as a way to form a greater understanding of their narrative identity. Psychotherapy similarly uses narrative, but it is usually significantly less introspective, self-lead, and active. Although it was not the intent of this project, examining the work of my younger self has surprised me in many ways and provided me with a deeper understanding of self. Furthermore, this is a project that could be ongoing as the forms of development discussed in this text remain ongoing throughout the entire lifetime.

In the case of this author, examining development through a decade of poetic narrative revealed layers of development and indicated why it unfolded as it did. Unforeseen life crises, intentional mechanisms of support, and external influences impacted the trajectory of psychosocial development. Early praise for completing a poem titled Flame allowed for a lifelong desire to create. Such creation of narrative became internalized, impacting the formation of identity. Fluctuation in the parental relationship challenged the author’s mental state before later aiding her in her recovery from depression. The active formation of narrative identity throughout adolescence and into early adulthood revealed themes congruent with Erikson’s proposed psychosocial stages of conflict. Intentional introspection and inquisitivity inspired a complex understanding of identity and the formation of a fascinating form of narrative identity. Examining development in the way that this project did proved truly fruitful and hopefully will be repeated, if only by myself, in the future.
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