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Life Review: At Sea in John Banville's *The Sea*

An Eriksonian Perspective

Author: Shivaun Lindberg

Supervisor: Carmen Zamorano Llana

Examiner: Billy Gray

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Introduction

“I do not remember thinking anything. There are times like that, not frequent enough when the mind just empties. They were far out now, the two of them, so far as to be pale dots between pale sky and paler sea, and then one of the dots disappeared. After that it was all over very quickly, I mean what we could see of it. A splash, a little white water, whiter than that all around, then nothing, the indifferent world closing.” (Banville, *The Sea*, 180).

Max Morden, the recently bereaved 60 plus art historian, protagonist, focaliser and narrator of *The Sea*, relates the tragic drowning of his childhood friends Chloe and Myles in the passage above. This tragedy was even more traumatic given that Chloe was his first love and the source of “self-consciousness” in him (125). It was via Chloe, Max observes, that the world was “first manifest for me as an objective entity”, neither his mother, father, teachers nor Chloe’s mother, Connie Grace, whom he initially harboured a schoolboy infatuation for, were delegated that pivotal role (125). The harrowing witnessing of the drowning occurred when Max, at ten or eleven, was at a vulnerable stage of his development. Roy Lubit explains that children are less resilient than adults to traumatic events due to the fact that “adults’ personalities are relatively formed and stable” and “those of children are still forming... their perceptions of the world and of themselves” (3). The profound impact of the twin’s drowning corresponds to the first wave literary trauma theorist Cathy Caruth’s claim that trauma is “amnesiac and unspeakable” as “trauma is an experience so intensely painful that the mind is unable to process it normally. In the immediate aftermath, the victim may totally forget the event” (qtd. in Pedersen 334).

Morden's words in the epigraph to this section, "I do not remember thinking anything," echo Caruth's theory of trauma (180). Caruth's theory is based on the work of prominent contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists, in particular Judith Herman and Bessel van der Holk (Pedersen 334).

The insidious nature of a primary once-off trauma in childhood is known to resurface if the trauma victim is subjected to another trauma later in life. One of the trauma themes can include the loss of a loved one, exposing the ego once again to being "helpless, vulnerable and without boundary" (Hunt et al. 26). Thus, the death of Morden's wife has the debilitating effect of submerging him in the primary trauma experienced in childhood of the drowning of the twins, or as Kathleen Costello Sullivan puts it the "founding trauma" based on Dominick La Capra's explanation that disturbing experiences "may . . . give rise to what may be termed founding traumas . . . that paradoxically become the valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity" (343). The key word in this quote is "cathected" referring to the concept that Sigmund Freud used to explain the "invest[ment] of mental or emotional energy" as defined in the Merriam Webster dictionary. The trauma was internalised to such an extent in Max's persona that the loss later of his wife Anna is particularly devastating, especially as Max saw his marriage to Anna as "the chance to fulfil the fantasy of myself (77)" and considered her to be "the fairground mirror in which all my distortions would be made straight" (160).

Given that Banville has been described as "a writer's writer" and lauded as "the most stylistically elaborate Irish writer of his generation" by the British Council for Literature, it is not surprising that *The Sea*, the Booker prize winner in 2005, has attracted considerable critical attention. Banville has crafted a unique style over his almost five decades as an author and this style encompasses hallmarks of

postmodernism, a prose which verges on poetry, a web of intertextual references, a metanarrative tendency to style over content and an interest in the unreliability of the narrator.

The Sea is awash with intertextual references: Max's mother refers to Max's father as Gentleman Jim from Conrad's *Lord Jim* (147); Banville uses art as a literary device with Bonnard, Vaublin and Whistler featuring in *The Sea*; Max compares his ageing reflection to a Van Gogh self-portrait that looks as if it has "emerged from some punitive dousing...and expecting the worst, as so he should" (96). On the subject of expecting the worst, the dream which instigates Max's life quest to the seaside village of his childhood "allude[s]to... Molloy's journey to his mother's room" (Facchinello 38) in Beckett's novel, something which does not bode well for the future.

Kathleen Costello-Sullivan points out that the presence of the theme of trauma in *The Sea* results in the narrative being "not merely...another Banvillian exploration of narrative or modernity" and "the focus on Banville's style in *The Sea* seems to pose a distraction, however, side tracking readers from considering how Morden's language reflects his character" (340-341). This essay will focus on Max's character development across his life span using the Eriksonian lens as opposed to foregrounding style.

The predominant subject keyword in analyses of *The Sea* is memory and the concomitant ideas of reminiscence and nostalgia. Affective narratology or literary analysis of the emotional structure of stories, narrative technique and style are other approaches that have been taken and combined with trauma and illness narratives to explore identity issues. In addition, there has been a cross-section of other approaches including the impact of ageing, the concept of Freud's uncanny,

Levinasian readings and an investigation into post-modern Derridean traces. In the article “The Sea: “Was’t Well Done”, Rüdiger Imhof foregrounds existential questions such as identity, the transient nature of human existence, grief and loss, atonement and guilt and also pays tribute to the “magic and music” of *The Sea*. It also deals with flawed relationships and points out that it is literally about the sea and is also “figuratively about the sea of memory” (166). Several other studies have focused on memory including Hedda Friberg’s “In the Murky Sea of Memory”: Memory’s Miscues in John Banville’s *The Sea*”, in which three of potentially seven different types of memory transgressions are analysed in relation to the workings of memory in *The Sea*. Another perspective on memory written by Zheng Jie “Towards an Ethical Subject: Mourning and Memory in John Banville’s *The Sea*” probes memory and its role in articulating an ethics of mourning in the self’s interaction with the world not only with the deceased, but also in the self’s interactions with the living.

Carmen Zamorano Llana’s ““The Figures of the Far Past Come Back at the End’: Unmasking the Desired Self through Reminiscence in Late Adulthood in John Banville’s *The Sea*” focuses on Banville’s novel through the lens of literary gerontology and frames Max’s life review reminiscence by showing how style and narrative technique merge to chart the protagonist’s progress. The treatment of the physical and especially the psychological effects of ageing are prominent in Llana’s chapter dedicated to Max’s self-reconstruction.

Also on the topic of aging, Heather Ingam provides a comparative review chapter entitled “Ageing, the Individual and the Community in the Fiction of Iris Murdoch, John Banville and John McGahern”. In particular, there are parallels between Banville’s novel *The Sea* and Murdoch’s *The Sea, the Sea* both of which

centre around a male character's struggles with identity formation through narration. These two novels with their alienated male characters are also juxtaposed with the more socially active protagonist in McGahern's novel, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, and highlight the difference that being part of a community makes and how this benefits recovery from the trials and hardships of life.

An area that has remained uncharted in the scholarly canon on *The Sea* is an examination of how Max's insecure childhood and adolescence impinge on stages of the Eriksonian developmental life cycle (stages prior to the last and eighth stage, integrity versus despair), which have repercussions for the likelihood of being in a position to resolve the later stages. Erik Erikson's theory of identity development is based on psychosocial critical phases in the life span as opposed to Freud's emphasis on psychosexual factors (*Childhood and Society* 247-274). The Eriksonian life cycle consists of eight successive stages from cradle to grave and outlines prerequisites for overcoming specific psychosocial crises in each of the stages. For example, in infancy basic trust versus basic mistrust would result in hope if a successful outcome has been achieved, which would involve having stable, loving and caring parents. The last stage of Erikson's eight-stage developmental theory is ego integrity versus despair and covers the period of old age with wisdom possibly emerging as the ego quality/strength or value from this stage. Each of the Eriksonian life stages can be defined as an antithesis with either a positive/negative or syntonetic/dystonic trait (see diagram of the Psychosocial Crises on page 12 in the body of this thesis). Syntonetic is defined in the field of psychology as being emotionally in harmony with one's environment or ego syntonetic defined as compatible with or acceptable to the ego (Merriam Webster). The sequential order of the eight stages is based on the epigenetic principle which Erik Erikson described

as “anything that grows has a ground plan, and that out of this ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole” (Identity, Youth and Crisis 92). Erikson maintained that just as the human embryo has a critical time for ascendance or defect, so too does the development of a healthy personality depend on individuals resolving the crises in each stage to be equipped to tackle the next developmental stage. The final stage of Erikson’s developmental life cycle has been examined by Carmen Zamorano Llena in her article on *The Sea*, but there has been no examination of the earlier stages of Erikson’s developmental life cycle in *The Sea*.

Novelists and psychologists are almost inevitably involved in character development albeit from different angles; this essay aims to combine these two disciplines to gain an in depth understanding of the protagonist’s journey in life. Analysing literature together with psychology has the potential for synergy. In fact, one prominent social psychologist Sarbin (1986) has proposed that the narrative is a root metaphor for all of psychology (qtd.in Sherman 39). Banville’s narrative in this novel encompasses the bereaved and distraught Max and his search for meaning in the past; this is the essence of the term life review and its purpose to “reintegrate past issues and experiences in the present for the purposes of achieving a sense of meaning and ego integrity” (Reminiscence and the Self in Old Age 29). This essay will contend that factors such as the impact of the unresolved psychosocial crises on Max’s life, the resurrection of his childhood trauma, the loss of his beloved wife, guilt, ageing and the cumulative effect these have on Max jeopardise his chances of attaining the Eriksonian syntonic trait integrity versus the dystonic trait despair in the last developmental stage.

Eriksonian Developmental stages: Max from Play Age to the Brink of Old Age

As Erikson emphasises the role society plays in personality development, this section will begin with a background to the social context surrounding Max's formative years and revealing quotes from Max's religious education. Banville has commented on how prominently guilt featured in his Catholic childhood during the fifties in Ireland:

Auden said that children should be loaded with as much trauma as they can bear, because it's good for them. I think that's certainly true of children who are going to turn out to be artists. My traumas were Wexford, Ireland, the fifties, and especially the Catholic Church. The first thing the Catholic Church does to a child is instil guilt in his little soul, and guilt is a good thing for an artist. (McKeon)

Given that the "The Sea" was originally intended to be a 70-page fictionalised account of Banville's childhood holidays in Rosslare on the south-east coast of Ireland it reflects to some extent the ambience of guilt in childhood present in Irish society of the 1950s (McKeon). Banville envisaged the 70-page account that was the genesis of *The Sea* as "a direct return to my childhood, to when I was ten or so" (McKeon) which happens to coincide with Max's age when his memory takes him back to the memorial summer with the twins. A few years before this summer when Max received the Catholic rites of First Communion or "more to the point, the First Confession that preceded it" at the formative age of seven he was given an "enraptured disquisition" of the various types of sins, "commission and omission, the mortal and the venial, the seven deadly, and the terrible ones that it was said only a bishop could absolve...the passive sin" (88). This was delivered by a Fr.

Foamfleck, comically portrayed as having flecks of white stuff at the corners of his lips, who asked the terrified and impressionable children “did we imagine that sin must always involve the performance of an action?” and inculcated a lasting sense of guilt in the young Max (88).

According to Erikson’s eight developmental stages across the life span, initiative versus guilt occupies the third stage or “play stage” from 4 to 5 years of age on the developmental ladder. Erikson explains that “the great governor of initiative is conscience” (Identity, Youth and Crises 119) and it becomes established in this stage. The inner voice of the child’s conscience is activated, and the child now feels not only ashamed when found out but also afraid of being found out. The foundations of morality are laid as the child begins automatically to feel guilty for mere thoughts and deeds which nobody else has seen. A danger at this stage is that deep regressions and lasting resentments can occur if parents fail to live up to the new conscience which has emerged in the child. Erikson maintains that “one of the deepest conflicts in life is caused by hate of a parent who served initially as the model and the executor of the conscience” (Identity Youth and Crisis 119). The parent who fails to live up to the very transgressions that the child does not accept of himself, results in the child “com[ing] to feel that the whole matter is not one of universal goodness but of arbitrary power” (Identity Youth and Crisis 119). The exploiting of the power dynamics between adults and children is reflected in Max’s descriptions of the inappropriate role model behaviour of his father, and how he torments both Max and his mother, by subjecting first his mother to rough handed water games at the beach which Max remembers in “a paroxysm of disgust” (27). Max is the next victim who escapes from his father “in a panic...and stood in the surf, retching. (27)” In addition, Max’s description of his parents’ behaviour in the

summers of his childhood as “rancorously playing at house in the childhood of the world” reveals what Max had to endure and given that “their unhappiness was one of the constants of my earliest years, a high unceasing buzz just beyond hearing” we can deduce the negative effect on Max (26). Further evidence of his father’s failure as a role model is his innate volatility and his abandonment of Max and his mother: “He was a violent man, a man of violent gestures, violent jokes, but timid, too, no wonder he left us, had to leave us” (27). The mark of guilt seems to have been impressed on Max as he admits “I was a very virtuoso of guilt in those younger days, and still am in these older ones, for that matter.” (87). The consequences for Max at the end of this stage is a likelihood to have been laden with guilt which is mainly due to the instability and eventual failure of his parents’ marriage and his father’s temperament.

Max enters the next developmental stage which spans the years from 5 to 12 with the psychosocial crisis industry versus inferiority. Erikson identifies the danger at this stage as being “the development of a sense of inadequacy and inferiority” (Identity and the Life Cycle 91) which “may be caused by an insufficient solution of the preceding conflict...he still compares himself with his father, and the comparison arouses a sense of guilt” (91). Leading up to one of Max’s analepses in the second section of the book, he confides that he “was always ashamed of my origins” (153) and relates how “tongue-tied...nervous and really terrified” (154) he was of being ignorant of the appropriate dining etiquette when invited to the Grace family for dinner. Thanks to the autodiegetic narrative in *The Sea*, the dinner scene offers a revealing account of Max’s feelings of inferiority. The Graces belong to the upper middle, class owning a car and going on foreign holidays while Max’s parents are cramped into a chalet relegated for the lower classes. Another example

which illustrates Max's feelings of inferiority and his subordinate position to the Graces is the description of his weeks with Chloe as being "enraptured humiliations" and how she "would hardly deign to notice my presence" (122). Erikson points out that the industry versus inferiority stage can be summed up as "I am what I learn" (Identity and the Life Cycle 87). This fourth stage in the life cycle "is socially a most decisive stage" and when a child begins to define himself based on his place in the social hierarchy instead of "his wish and will to learn...lasting harm may ensue for the sense of identity" (Identity and the Life Cycle 93). In Max's case the outcome of the preteen psychosocial crisis stage of inferiority versus industry is likely to be negative and its corresponding value or virtue, competence, not realised mainly as he has been confronted with two major issues, namely, the trauma of the twins drowning, and his feelings of inferiority in the social hierarchy.

According to Erikson, the identity versus identity/role confusion developmental stage at adolescence "is more than the sum of childhood identifications...It is the inner capital accrued from all those experiences of each successive stage" (Identity and the Life Cycle 94). As discussed, Max has not been able to achieve the benefits of the positive values from the earlier psychosocial crisis stages. As a result, Max is not poised to negotiate the transition from childhood to adulthood. Erikson uses a key term moratorium to signify the psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood (Childhood and Society 263) which refers to a suspension of identity formation in order for the teenager to explore the options for the future. The situation for Max throughout this important formative stage is difficult; it consists of moving from place to place as his mother searches for employment, being cramped into the same room witnessing his mother's desperation "[he] lay and listened in helpless anger...Every other night it seemed, I

would wake to hear her as she wept” (146). The articulation of his “helpless anger” feelings suggests that Max has not had any scope to rebel as a teenager which is part of the process of forming his own identity, due to his mother’s desperate situation. “In their search for a new sense of continuity and sameness, adolescents have to re-fight many of the battles of earlier years, even though to do so they must artificially appoint perfectly well-meaning people to play the role of adversaries” (Childhood and Society 261). The nomadic existence that Max and his mother led also prevented Max from being able to spend time with his peers, a recognised forum for exploring the establishment of one’s identity. A predominant concern among adolescents is their image “they are sometimes morbidly, often curiously, preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others.” (97) Max, already prone to feelings of inferiority at pre-adolescence is subject to these inadequate feelings being even more pronounced at this stage as his parents’ separation is the cause of being demoted on the social ladder. Another important factor is the searching for an occupational role in life “In general it is primarily the inability to settle on an occupational identity which disturbs young people.” (Identity and Life Cycle 97). There is no specific mention of Max acquiring a qualification in late adolescence and the extent of his education sounds limited when he relates that his mother had “to find work to support us and pay for my education, such as it was.” (145). The unlikelihood of Max achieving in the sphere of school/working life, and his poor social circumstances have an impact on his identity and tip the balance of the outcome of this stage to that of a state of role confusion.

The ego values gained in childhood and adolescence (in capital letters) in Chart 2 Psychosocial Crises below, provide an overview of the progression involved in the formation of personality in Eriksonian terms. However, Max is ill-equipped

Source: Erikson, Erik. *The Life Cycle Completed Extended version with New Chapters on the Ninth Stage of Development*. New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1997.

Three stages of adulthood remain on the trajectory of the Eriksonian developmental cycle. In order to acquire love, the syntonic (or positive) trait from the intimacy vs. isolation stage (between the ages of 19 to 40) the earlier psychosocial crises should not have been hampered by major issues. At some level, Max understands that his earlier crises have not been resolved, as he comments, in retrospect, on being a boy “We never grow up. I never did anyway” (56). Max also discloses a symbolic dream in relation to his identity where he tries in vain to write his own will on a typewriter that is missing the I, both capital and lower case (52). Essentially, being so unaware of himself he admits “I know so little of myself, how should I think to know another” (159) and conveniently Anna did not demand any more of the relationship “More what we wished was exactly that, not to know each other” (159).

The penultimate stage is generativity versus stagnation, the longest period in the life span from 40 to 65 years of age, when it is harder to overcome deficits in the preceding psychosocial crises. Success at this stage of midlife is characterised in adults by contributing to society and leaving a legacy for the next generation. Max is neither productive in his relationships nor in his working life. He readily admits to being a dilettante, with the lack of commitment that involves, and moreover expects his daughter to outperform his mediocre contribution to life “Much is demanded of the dilettante’s offspring” (130). A solipsist, Max admits how “shallowly” (159) he knew Anna “Was I too lazy, too inattentive, too self-absorbed? Yes, all of those things” (159). His daughter refuses to “indulge [Max’s] foibles and

excess as others do” (37) who know him less and fear him more, suggesting that their relationship is unsatisfactory. In relation to work, Max has been writing a monograph on Bonnard with little result “a modest project in which I have been mired for more years than I care to compute.” (30). The years have taken their toll on Max and the loss of his wife and “the plague year” (18), as he painfully describes the duration of her illness, are not easy to surmount. Lacking a stable foundation in the seven stages leading up to the last and final stage threatens the likelihood of a successful resolution for Max. The next section will highlight obstacles such as the return of repressed traumas from Max’s childhood, the negative effect of his self-image, guilt, the effects of ageing and the use of alcohol as a maladaptive (redundant) coping device that challenge the possibilities of him being in a position to conduct a successful life review, the definition of which will be elaborated upon in the next section.

Time Heals No Wounds: Life Review in Max’s Final Stage Integrity versus Despair

Contrary to the idiom time heals all wounds, unresolved traumas do not dissipate, but instead resurface again, particularly in the latter stages of life, and need to be confronted:

Early childhood anxieties are closely related to the themes and anxieties of later life and before the patient can reach the stage of being able to work maturely through the psychotraumatic experiences, it is necessary to contextualise the early childhood anxieties and restore the patient’s damaged sense of security (Hunt et al. 30).

Max is aware that he is beset and preoccupied by the past, and expresses the part it plays in his psyche following a recollection of Chloe and the Graces as “the past beats inside me like a second heart” (10). He admits that it has such an overwhelming effect on him that the past, at times, has the potential that “one might be annihilated by it.” (35). However, the past is also described by Max as a “retreat”, in preference to his present circumstances, grief ridden and a victim of an unprocessed trauma from his childhood, he goes there in an attempt to ward off the “cold present and the colder future” (45).

Significantly, Max returns to the site of his childhood trauma to salvage meaning from the past and embark on the process of carrying out his life review. The Cedars, previously the summer house that the Graces rented, now run by Rose, presently referred to as Miss Vavasour, is where Max seeks refuge. Max is guided there by a dream and initially feels a “happy lightness” (20). He grapples with his life review but has a lot to overcome from his past. The difficulties are mainly two-fold. Firstly, the problems outlined in the first section point to difficulties at each of the psychosocial crisis stages and do not equip Max to handle his life, especially without the anchor of Anna who granted him the freedom to “*Be anyone you like...* That was the pact we made, that we would relieve each other of the burden of being the people who everyone else told us we were” (160). Secondly, many of the memories which Max returns to are not positive and although happy memories of ice-cream at the café, visits to the beach and his first summer with Anna exist, many memories overshadow these.

The enhancing memories of time spent with his childhood friends Chloe and Myles are offset by Chloe’s condescending and nonchalant attitude towards Max “she accepted me as a suppliant at her shrine with disconcerting complacency (122).

Max is aware, that in the lover/loved binary where he stands with Chloe “there is always a lover and a loved, and knew which one, in this case, I would be (122). Chloe’s treatment of him presumably affects his already fragile self-confidence due to his acute awareness of his inferior social standing, and the efforts he makes to keep up with the Graces, which he describes mockingly, but tellingly as “hard going, scaling those Olympian heights” (154). Depressing thoughts of Anna at the hospital when Max feels the emotional distance between them as being the greatest merge with memories of “Chloe, her cruelty” (136). Further details of his mental state are revealed when he describes a disembodied image of himself as a “sort of large dark simian something slumped there at the table, or not a something but a nothing, rather, a hole in the room, a palpable absence, a darkness visible.” (143).

The dreary existence at the Cedars is a hindrance to lifting Max’s dark mood. The food is haphazard and tasteless as Max complains “Anything might appear on the table, and does”. Breakfast kippers can be served at dinner and dessert consists of “tinned pears in a gritty grey lukewarm sauce” (143). The after dinner ritual involves watching old comedy shows with the only other guest, the Colonel, where the canned audiences do all the laughing. Worst of all, the television room reminds him of the temporary accommodation that he and his mother were forced to share during his teenage years (145).

Added to Max’s negative self-image is the further problematic dimension of the physical effects of ageing and the cruelty of being “elbowed aside by a parody of” himself (94) bereft of the once “silky” eyelashes and eyes replete now with “whites all craquelured over with those tiny bright-red veins and the moist lower lids inflamed and hanging” (96). Another example of Max’s low self-esteem is referenced when Max admits how he feels when others are disapproving “I will not

deny it, I was always ashamed of my origins, and even still it requires only an arch glance or a condescending word from the likes of Bun” to send him retreating into his shell “quivering inwardly in indignation and hot resentment” (153).

The painful recollection of Anna’s imminent departure from life is the catalyst that propels Max into articulating the twins’ drowning for the first time. The narrative moves seamlessly from very end of Anna’s life at the nursing home to a detailed account of the events leading up to the tragic loss of the twins, and describes how they walk in unison into the sea on that fateful day. Working through the trauma from his childhood is a pivotal point in Max’s life review, and the retelling of a suppressed trauma is instrumental in coming to terms with the pain and damage caused.

However, Max’s progress with his life review is compromised following a recurrent dream in which he struggles through the sand to carry the news of Chloe and Myles’ death to their parents, which will subsequently be discussed. Memories of Anna’s illness and end come flooding back “the hushed wards, the waiting room, and then the last room of all” (183). This occurred on a night when his loneliness felt so palpable “as if there were no one, not even myself” and even the sea has deserted him, uncannily silent while “on other nights [the sea] rumbles and growls” (182). Max is in such emotional turmoil that it goes beyond the rational, entreating Anna to “Send back your ghost. Torment me if you like. Rattle your chains, drag your cements across the floor, keen like a banshee, anything. I would have a ghost” and extricate him from the misery of being the surviving spouse left to tackle the world alone (183). A call for alcohol and his “big baby’s bottle. My soother” ensues and his despair leads him to a drunken suicide attempt (183).

The protagonist's state of mind and chances of attaining ego integrity in his life review are exacerbated by Max's attempts to drown his sorrows in alcohol. Max is aware that drinking excessively provides him only with "a brief respite of drink-induced oblivion" (149) but still drinks to excess "most nights" (148), indicating self-destructive behaviour. Scholars such as Kathleen Costello-Sullivan have earmarked Max as being a "rampant alcoholic" and in a similar fashion to the protagonist in *Shroud*, Banville's novel prior to *The Sea*, Max also suffers from alcohol poisoning at the end of novel (351).

Depressed and with low self-esteem as a consequence of developmental issues at each of the Erikson's psychosocial developmental junctures and unresolved past traumas, Max is ill-equipped to tackle Erikson's last and final stage, the crisis of ego integrity versus despair. The crisis is indicative of a pattern where elderly people approaching the end of life examine the trajectory of their lives, sifting through the good and the bad and attempting to extract meaning from it. The process, if successful, can be described as follows:

While attempting to resolve this crisis the older person engages in evaluation of accomplishments and failures over the life-span and of changes in physical and psychological attributes and capacities, and in this evaluative process an integrated sense of self begins to emerge. (Sherman 41).

Reminiscence is regarded as being instrumental for self-esteem and morale "in the face of threats of assaults on the person's self-image" (Sherman 33). However, if reminiscence is reparative in nature it can be very damaging. Reparative reminiscence, as its name suggests, refers to making amends or reparations and is accompanied by guilt and a need for expiation:

Despite the painful feelings associated with the memory or the situation, people who exhibit this type of reminiscing are unsuccessful in suppressing their memories and they reminisce a lot. Robert Butler (1963, 1980-91), who generally viewed reminiscence as a positive force and an untapped resource in old age, warned that morbid and obsessional rumination about the same issue, if not handled by an experienced practitioner, could lead to a panic state or an outright clinical depression. (Sherman 37).

Max has been plagued by such a reparative type of reminiscence. It emerges in the latter stages of the novel that he is wracked with guilt as he attributes the tragic drowning of his childhood friends, Chloe and Max, to the fact that he divulged snippets of an overheard conversation to the twins. Max deems the twins drowning to be “in some way a consequence of the uncovering of Rose’s secret passion” (174). The content of the conversation between Rose, the twins’ governess, and Mrs Grace was mistakenly assumed by Max to be a profession of Rose’s love for Mr. Grace, whereas it transpires later that it was Rose professing her love for Mrs. Grace. Thus, Max has been carrying around the awful guilt for half a century that his words, informing Chloe of Rose’s purported love for their father, were the cause behind the twins’ apparent decision to end their lives.

One of the key sources of reparative reminiscing and emotional quagmire in Max’s life is the dream, which comes back frequently, when he bears the tragic news of the twins drowning to Mr and Mrs Grace. Max describes the way to the Grace’s home in his dreams as being “back there again, wading through that sand that grows ever more resistant, so that it seems that my feet themselves are made of some massy, crumbling stuff” (The Sea 182). The fact that this retelling of the dream

contains an embodied description of his feet equates almost as an enactment of the original trauma. This is regarded as a post-traumatic re-experiencing and is a key symptom of severe distress resulting from earlier psychotraumatic experiences (Hunt et al 29). There is a close link between early childhood anxieties and the “themes and anxieties of later life and before the patient can reach the stage of being able to work maturely through the psychotraumatic experiences, it is necessary to contextualise the early childhood anxieties and restore the patient’s damaged sense of security” (Hunt et al. 20).

Another clear example of a reparative reminiscing is sparked off by Anna suddenly beginning to talk about his mother in the nursing home “the figures of the far past come back at the end, wanting their due” (155). Max’s past and the tenuous relationship with his mother is revealed in the description of how his mother “ostentatiously” stubs out each cigarette after two or three puffs “showing me what she thought of my peace offerings” (155) indicating that Max is guilty of something. More details emerge when Max’s mother makes a disparaging comment about her son, comparing him to the masturbating baboon at the zoo. The last details of this reminiscing describe his mother’s demise in a tragic-comic fashion sitting on a bench by the canal with pigeons scrambling for the crusts she had left and a tramp offering her “a swig from his bottle...not noticing that she was dead” (156). After recalling the miserable memories of his mother, and of Anna at the nursing home, Max expresses his thoughts as “the chambers of horror in my head” (157), and these are most likely derived from guilty feelings. Another instance earlier in the book of potential feelings of guilt can be gleaned from the comment Max’s mother makes after his father’s departure for England, “I suppose you will be the next to betray me.” and Max’s tentative admission, “As I suppose I was” (79). Critics have

overlooked the relationship with his mother, partly as these are overshadowed by descriptions of how Max and his mother's existence moving from lodging house to lodging house affected their lives, and partly as the desertion of Max's father dominates the analysis. However as the examples above show, the strain in the mother-son relationship affected not only the material aspect of their lives. The presence of these reparative reminiscences and the absence of enhancing forms of reminiscence especially at the close of the novel are poignant.

Erikson's definition of the attainment of integrity at the last psychosocial stage in old age does not seem to be reached:

acceptance of one's one and only life cycle and of the people who have become significant to it as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions. It thus means a new different love of one's parents, free of this wish that they should have been different (Identity Youth and Crisis 139).

The new relationship with one's parents does not reflect Max's feelings in relation to his father which echo an absence rather than an acceptance, these "provoke in me a confusion of feelings that includes a sticky sort of sadness, anger or its after-shock, and a curious yearning that is like nostalgia, a nostalgia for somewhere I have never been to" (147). Max, while reminiscing about his parents has not reconciled with them or shown an acceptance of them; he comments on "my shaming parents...my fat little bare-faced mother and my father whose body might have been made of lard" (28). Max expresses a longing, albeit unrealistic, to have been an old seafarer "dozing by the fire... landlubbered at last" (4) while a winter gale rages outside "Oh, to have been him. To have been him." (4), presumably in preference to his present predicament and that of the bereaved spouse.

Near the conclusion of the novel, Max feels outmanoeuvred when the news of his daughter Claire's engagement to Jerome is announced following Max's alcohol binge "every further moment consolidates her victory over me. This is how, in a twinkling, these things are won and lost. Read Maistre on warfare" (191). Banville uses comic irony in a statement about Max's future "life is pregnant with possibilities" (192) which is contradicted by the following sentence where he fears his autonomy will be withdrawn "I suppose I shall not be allowed to sell the house, either" (192).

The ending of the novel has baffled readers and it is likely that Banville intended to raise more questions than answers. The description of the narrator following the "smooth rolling swell that seemed to come up from the deeps...lifted briefly and carried a little way toward the shore as if nothing had happened" (195). The words "briefly" and "little" suggest that no major life review progress has been made, especially as the episode has a surreal quality and is summed up as being "just another of the great world's shrugs of indifference" (195). A few pages before this ending Max is being sent home to be cared for by his daughter under doctor's orders to withhold all "alcoholic stimulants" (191). Max waxes lyrically about retiring to a monastery and "can see [himself] in my cell, long bearded, with quill pen and hat and docile lion...and hovering above my brow the dove refulgent." (192). However, Max does not seem to be monastery material. Miss Vavasour/Rosie smiles and observes that Max is not "a man to be forced into anything" (192) when he tells her he is leaving the Cedars involuntarily. Ultimately, Banville teases our readerly expectations as Rudiger Imhof comments "*The Sea* is a novel that is likely to leave many a reader at sea...What does it add up to, if add up it does?" (165).

From an Eriksonian perspective, Sherman notes that the ego integrity versus despair stage “seems to infer a dichotomy” – a positive or syntonetic state of ego integrity or a negative dystonic stage of despair (45). However, studies show a different scenario and Sherman identifies four different ego-integrity statuses, namely, integrity-achieving, dissonant (in crisis), foreclosed (avoiding crisis) and despairing. Given that Max is recovering from a suicide attempt, he could either be classified as being in the dissonant (in crisis) or despairing stage. Whether Max reaches the dystonic state despair defined by Erikson as “the feeling that the time is now short, too short for the attempt to start another life and to try out alternate roads” is inconclusive (Identity Youth and Crisis 140). However, the odds are stacked against Max, as his formative years lacked the development of syntonetic traits and coupled with feelings of guilt, affect his ability to cope with bereavement, ageing and the encroachment of the end of life.

Figuratively Max is at sea, not having made it safely to land yet.

Conclusion

The quote “the figures of the far past come back at the end, wanting their due” encapsulates the grip that the past commands on suppressed traumas and fraught relationships in the novel (155). By examining the psychosocial crises at key points in Max’s life, it has been possible to yield an understanding of how Max’s identity has been shaped from an Eriksonian reading of *The Sea*. The first section of this essay has showed how unresolved crises have impacted on the formation of his identity, with the ratio of dystonic traits at each psychosocial crisis stage outnumbering the positive traits. The significance of the negative outcome at the adolescence stage of identity versus identity/role confusion is especially important

as the crisis is more pronounced at this stage and a successful result paves the way for the future. Erikson's theory with its focus on the social context of development as opposed to Freud's psychosexual approach, is useful for gaining insights into character development across a life span as Erikson explains:

an individual life cycle cannot be adequately understood apart from the social context in which it comes to fruition. Individual and society are intricately woven, dynamically interrelated in continual exchange” (The Life Cycle Completed 114).

As raised in this essay, children are more prone to the damage caused by trauma than adults as their personalities are still forming. Max is burdened with the trauma of witnessing his childhood friends drown at a crucial stage in his development straddling the late childhood stage of industry versus inferiority and the adolescent stage identity versus identity/role confusion. The trauma and other factors such as Max's admission of being ashamed of his origins, have a lasting impact on his development. *The Sea* captures Max's image of himself symbolically in a dream lacking “the word *I*. The letter *I*, that is, small and large” (52) reflecting his feeling of being “a distinct on-one” (160).

In the second section, the return to the Cedars prompts the process of the life review. Enhancing memories of the summer he met his beloved Anna, time spent with Chloe and Myles, ice creams and swimming are soon marred by reparative reminiscing. Guilty feelings are awakened regarding his strained relationship with his mother and he realises how “ineptly” he knew his wife (159). These examples show how Max's relationship with the four females closest to him, his mother, Chloe, Anna and his daughter Claire are lacking and distanced in one way or another. At the end of the novel, he ransacks his conscience asking if his

divulging of the conversation between Rosie and Mrs. Grace caused the twins to wade into the sea. Following this, Max's state of mind deteriorates, and he resorts to entreating Anna to come back and torment him as a ghost. A suicide attempt ensues post-life review which indicates that there is too much to overcome from the past.

As shown, Max is faced with many hurdles including the unresolved psychosocial crises that impinge on his development, the trauma of the drowning of the twins, the loss of Anna, aging, feelings of guilt and the reparative reminiscences that haunt him as a result. These factors pose challenges even when faced one by one, but cumulatively they seriously compromise the hope of achieving success in the Eriksonian ego-integrity versus despair stage. Erikson attributes much of the despair of the old to "a continuing sense of stagnation" (The Life Cycle Completed 63). As discussed at the end of the first section, the outcome from the generativity versus stagnation stage did not reap rewards for Max as neither his working life nor his relationships were particularly fruitful. Max may well not just be mourning for his wife, but as Erikson puts it for "time forfeited...initiative lost, intimacy missed, generativity neglected – not to speak of identity potentials bypassed or, indeed, an all too limiting identity lived" (The Life Cycle Completed 63). It is hard to pinpoint if Max has reached the final stage of despair as outlined at the end of the second section in the assessment of Sherman's four ego-integrity statuses, but the danger is lurking.

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