

A Literary Analysis Of Mulberry By Paulette Boudreaux

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Mulberry and the Development of Maddy Culpepper

Set in the turbulent times in the midst of the segregated Mississippi, the captivating tale of Mulberry by Paulette Boudreaux captures the life of Maddy Culpepper, who reveals grief as seen through the eyes of an eleven-year-old. The young girl takes us through her life at the Quarters among a myriad of people, from her alcoholic father to her friend, Esther, from the members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars to the women at the jukejoint. The tale depicts the struggles of Maddy as her life crumbles after the birth of her sick youngest sister, a sister she had always longed for and for whose care Maddy's mother departs to a far-off hospital. The adversities that follow, the trials that Maddy faces to keep the vow she made to her mother to protect her three brothers and the secrets she unravels all contribute to a wonderful portrayal of Maddy's character development. Despite facing the challenges of the world at a young age and under increasing neglect from her father, Maddy emerges as a character with great strength and wisdom, hopeful of brighter days ahead. This paper aims to analyze the character development of Maddy Culpepper based on Eric Erikson's Developmental Theory and its cultural implications to establish the effect of nature vs nurture.

Psychoanalytic Approaches to Literary Analysis

Psychoanalytic analysis of literary texts has emerged as one of the central approaches in gaining an insight into the psyche of the authors, the readers to whom the work appeals, the symbolic association with text and most importantly, the development of characters by analyzing their behaviours and motivations using a psychological tool (Hossain). The basic premise of this is that the main focus for both psychology and literature are the human beings, and both aim to describe and explain human behaviours, reactions, worldviews, the trials they face, the desires they foster, their fears, as well as the conflicts they encounter as an individual and part of a society (Aras).

Multidimensional Theories of Human Development

The complexity of a human's personality cannot be elaborated with the use of a singular psychological tool. Since development is multidimensional and includes physical, cognitive and socio-emotional progress, the mere use of psychological theory cannot provide a holistic view of the

individual's personality (Staudinger and Lindenberger). It is, therefore, imperative to note the obstacles or traumas that might have occurred at any developmental stage, as well as the role of nature vs. nurture. Many psychologists, including Freud, Lacan and Jung, put forth theories of personality development, and since these stages start right from infancy, a trauma at any stage can result in a lasting impact.

Erikson's Psychosocial Theory

Another stage development theorist, Eric Erikson, adapted the psychosexual theory of Freud and presented a modified psychosocial theory of development based on eight stages. The theory also takes into consideration the cultural implications and that each stage may be resolved differently depending upon the culture in which these are approached. With each of the eight stages presenting two conflicting ideas, Erikson postulates that a successful resolution of conflict at each stage is central to the development of a specific virtue and, ultimately, individuals who are contributing members of society. In contrast, a failure to fully achieve at any stage might result in feelings of inadequacy. It is important to note that these unaccomplished stages can be resolved at a later stage in life as well (McLeod).

The Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development

The first stage of Erikson's theory is trust vs mistrust; it lasts from birth till 1½ years of age and develops the virtue of hope. The second stage, autonomy vs shame, lasts from 1½ – 3 years of age and focuses upon the virtue of will, whereas initiative vs guilt lasts from 3 – 5 years and develops a sense of purpose in the child if conflict is adequately resolved. From 5 – 12 years of age, children undergo industry vs inferiority and may develop the virtue of competency, whereas, from 12 – 18 years, the stage of identity vs role confusion takes place, resulting in the development of fidelity. The last three stages i.e., intimacy vs isolation (18 – 40 years), generativity vs stagnation (40 – 65 years) and ego integrity vs despair (65+ years) result in the development of the virtues of love, care and wisdom respectively (McLeod).

Literary Characters as Psychological Case Studies

A literary text, particularly a novel, brings to life the complex characters that are driven by various motives based on social class as they experience life while interacting with other characters within an established social structure (Abrams). For a psychological interpretation of any character, the most fruitful texts are the ones where the author does not provide an evaluation but rather presents it in a way that leaves room for analysis and explanation (Jung). The character development of Maddy Culpepper in Mulberry provides the readers with an opportunity to gain insight into her personality as her life descends into poverty, violence, and neglect. She remains resilient and finally discovers the

virtue of hope.

Maddy's Early Developmental Crises

By eleven years old, ideally, a child should have resolved the crises occurring at trust vs mistrust, autonomy vs shame and initiative vs guilt, while industry vs inferiority is thought to be near the end of its completion. In the case of Maddy, however, it seems that each virtue is not “integrated and internalized in her self-image” as she moves on to the next stage (Scheck). At the beginning of the novel, Maddy's association with her favourite mulberry tree is revealed, and she feels that atop this tree, with its strong trunk, her world becomes uncomplicated. For an eleven-year-old, feeling uncertainty about the world around her and seeking refuge and protection within the branches of a tree depicts unresolved conflicts of trust vs mistrust stage, resulting in suspicion, fear and anxiety. Her anxiousness is revealed later as well; one night, awoken by her parent's hushed voices, she experienced extreme dread, and her instant thought was to “find a hiding place” (Boudreaux 4). This anxiety shows up later in the story on a number of occasions as well, and something as simple as the teacher telling Maddy to meet her after class triggered it, causing her to lose concentration and her stomach cramping up. She associated a deep sadness with autumn as it meant that her beloved mulberry tree would change colour and lose its leaves and also that her best friend would depart. Even in times of extreme panic and fear, the tree felt familiar and brought her peace, “I was crying by the time I got to my mulberry tree. I climbed, soothed by the familiar notches..., I caught my breath and the world seemed cautiously peaceful” (Boudreaux 77).

Shame and Guilt in Maddy's Character

The themes of shame and guilt are quite prominent in Maddy's character as, on numerous occasions, she experienced these emotions. She felt “a sharp pinch of indignation and shame” when her mother called her lazy for failing her spelling test and was quite hurt by her remark (Boudreaux 2). As the theory of development postulates that overly criticized and controlled parenting leads to the child internalizing shame and doubt, the same is seen in Maddy's life through a reflection on various past incidents (Scheck). As a child, her mother had forbidden her from roaming around the Harvest Quarters and not to wander farther than number 5, and once, when she had meandered to 7 Harvest Quarters, her mother had whipped her with a thin switch. Recalling that incident, she felt a strange disbelief that a mother could direct such an anger towards her child. Her mother had also instructed her strictly to stay away from the creek that ran through the woods. Shame and guilt had become such a significant emotion in her life that even when a man tried to molest her, the thought that preoccupied her was, “Why had he come in there? What had I done wrong?” (Boudreaux 139)

Initiative Guilt and Parental Response

According to Erikson's theory, during the initiative vs guilt stage, children display increased curiosity and ask many questions, which, if dealt with as a nuisance, lead to the child developing feelings of guilt (McLeod). Maddy was snubbed from asking questions as her mother closed her mouth around certain secrets and warned her to move on to some other topics. Similarly, she had learned not to ask questions from her father as he used to say that it's "bad manners to question adults" (Boudreaux 28).

Premature Responsibility and Family Expectations

At age eleven, when Maddy's mother had to depart to a far-off hospital to take care of her newborn sister, Maddy promised to ensure the safety of her three brothers – a vow her mother took from her. Analyzing this increased responsibility and the arising conflict further highlights the character's development and sheds light on the internal battles of her emotions. At developmental stage of *industry vs inferiority*, children experience an increased need to be productive and to learn and demonstrate new skill so that they can play their part in the adult world, also at this stage play becomes a means of escaping reality (Scheck). For Erikson this "sense of industry", can either develop confidence and competence or lead to a negative self-esteem depending upon the role played by parents and teachers (Erikson 125; McLeod).

Parental Criticism and Feelings of Inferiority

The conflicts at this stage for Maddy arose from the criticism that she received from her parents; she tried to please her mother once by waking up early and setting out bowls and milk for breakfast; however, her efforts went unnoticed as her mother was preoccupied with the baby. Even despite her best efforts to cope with the demands of the adult world with no support from her father, she saw only disappointment and aggravation on her mother's face. Statements like, "You just don't know how not to shame me" and that there is no room in the world for a "lazy coloured girl" were a cause of conflict for Maddy (Boudreaux 19). With no idea what any of it meant, all she did was apologize and internalize guilt.

Adaptation Competence and Personal Agency

However, as the story progressed, Maddy strived to adapt to the ways that would make her competent at this new role; she went out in the middle of the night to look for her father, she stole money from her drunk father's wallet and saved it to ensure that she and her brothers would never have to go hungry again and also wrapped some food in her napkin at the Christmas party to save for later, she borrowed an oil lamp from her neighbour, Ma Parker, to ensure that she and her brothers

don't have to spend the night alone in the dark, she visited the county relief centre with her brother to collect free commodities and also learned to work as a team and she responsibility with her brother Roy Anthony.

Family Violence and Protective Responsibility

Her father's increasing violence towards her brothers instilled a deep sense of protectiveness in her, and even though she had feelings of resentment towards her mother for putting this responsibility on her, she vowed to be strong for her brothers. She developed competence and handled each difficulty that occurred in the best possible way; she kept herself safe from being molested and escaped the juke joint alone with her brothers. She protected herself and her brothers from the neighbourhood boys by threatening them with a knife, and she ensured that no harm came to her brothers when there was a fire at their house. Although the play is an important escape for children at this stage, Maddy hardly has any time for it, and ultimately, she loses interest in the joy of playing.

Peer Relationships and Social Development

During the stage of industry vs inferiority, the peer group of a child gains much importance in their lives; Maddy's friend Esther also became quite admirable to her (McLeod). They shared secrets, explored the areas of the Quarters forbidden by Maddy's mother and lied to her parents fearlessly. Maddy idealized Esther and tried acting more like her, copying her pigeon-toed gait, unplaiting her hair, adopting her speech pattern and even modelling the kind of detachment she often saw in Esther. Even when she knew that Esther was lying to her, she couldn't confront her owing to the fear of losing her. However, once Maddy sees Esther's relationship with her mother, she feels conflicted, and Esther's image crashes. All Maddy could feel after that was being sorry for her, and she internalized embarrassment at the hatred she saw in Esther's mother's eyes.

Identity Formation and Maturation

Erikson viewed identity development as an outline for overall maturation, and it is, therefore, not the person who can control the timing of this process. For Erikson, a young person does not actively drive their identity development. It is a process where the outcome is based on a person's interactions with their social, historical and cultural aspects; it is biologically driven and impacted by one's socio-cultural status (Erikson; Brittian). Belonging to a black family and suffering the harshest realities of increasing poverty, Maddy did not have the luxury of remaining a child, and she strived to develop a sense of self-identity. Rather than approaching the stage of *identity vs role confusion* after the designated age of 12 years old, she struggled with it throughout her life and was continuously reminded to act like a big Negro girl and not a child.

Gender Race and Class Expectations

“Maddy, girl, you got to act more grown now”, her parents often said to her, reinforcing the socio-cultural expectations from a girl of her status (Boudreaux 20). She felt conflicted by the role expectations her parents had from her as she was constantly reminded that she was old enough to keep the house clean, also she should be cooking for the family since she was nearly a grown up now and that being a girl it was her duty to make better use of herself. She felt her world shattered when her father forced her to grow up, revealing to her that Santa Claus wasn’t real, so she had to accompany her father to buy Christmas gifts for her brothers. Maddy struggled with identity development, and the circumstances of the time she was living in were of much significance to her. In 1960, the segregation of society along racial lines proved to be a time of great turbulence.

Political Awareness and Civil Rights

In 1963, with the [assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy](#), their teacher told them about the role he was playing for Negro equality, and that was the reason he got killed. Maddy’s reaction to this information was also that of shame; she felt ashamed that she belonged to a societal group that attracted so much hate. Up until then, she had not paid much heed to the COLOURED ONLY signs she often saw, segregating the whites and the blacks, but the events of 1963 made her reflect on the discriminating society. She recalled how a white man once spit in their direction; she thought of how her mother could be at home if they had nurses in the hospital to take care of the Negro babies. Maddy’s mother tried to teach them the dignity of character and that people are not defined by their skin colour; however, wearing the hand-me-downs of rich white children and knowing that they would even let a sick black child die instead of providing nurses caused Maddy to feel shame at her identity.

Poverty Humiliation and Social Exclusion

She felt humiliated at belonging to a poor family and couldn’t hold her teacher’s gaze when she informed her that they were eligible for free lunches and commodities. She felt embarrassed when all their belongings were thrown out in the street due to non-payment of rent. She felt a stab of pain when she could not bring candies to school for her birthday and was thankful that no one wished her. The thought of answering the questions of her classmates made her cringe with shame. She heard the whispers of the neighbourhood after the fire at their house and thought that it was pitiful that their family was singled out because of this incident. Living with Mrs. Keyes, being well-fed and clean, she even wished that her father would not return.

Trauma and Emotional Conflict

The severe life circumstances of Maddy's life consumed her, and she felt emotions so strong that she herself could not comprehend: a powerful hatred towards her father, resentment towards her mother, the shame of being poor, the guilt at nearly getting molested and above all, rage. She felt angry at her situation, and when their house caught fire, she imagined that it was her own fury that had taken life and become a fire-breathing dragon. She even felt pleasure in seeing that hateful house wrapped up in flames. She simultaneously felt "elation, sadness and shame" (Boudreaux 165). Despite these confusing emotions, she often found some solace in reflecting upon her past, recalling the good times when her father played the harmonica, and she danced with him when her mother would show them the family album and of the Christmases they enjoyed as a family. After the fire, the possessions that she took with her were her father's harmonica box and a few cosmetic items of her mother – she also once retrieved a tiger-striped marble from the dirt and added it to this collection – an assortment of things that reminded her of a happier time and the leisure of play.

Conclusion on Maddy's Psychosocial Development

The overall character development of Maddy in light of Erikson's theory shows that her life circumstances, the societal structure and the economic status of her family played a significant role in the crisis she faced and the feelings she internalized. Though Maddy faced struggles no young child should, the return of her mother at the end of the story brought her hope. Discovering a new family home, learning about her father's past and meeting her elder brother gave her optimism about the future, and she finally ascent to the top of her brother's willow tree where there were no dead siblings, no mother who would abandon her and no younger brothers to care for, and she finally thought that "down there is not my world, this up here is mine" (Boudreaux 289).

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