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ELLA DURRAN'S SELF-FORMATION IN JULIA WHELAN'S MY OXFORD YEAR

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Abstract. This article analyzes the self-formation of Ella Durran in Julia Whelan's My Oxford Year (2018) through Anthony Giddens' Reflexive Project of the Self. Using Giddens' framework from Modernity and Self-Identity (2020), the study examines how Ella constructs, disrupts, and revises her self-narrative through romantic experience. The study addresses three research questions: (1) How does romantic love initiate Ella Durran's self-formation? (2) How does suffering through love deepen Ella's personal growth? (3) How does love's loss complete Ella's transformation into a fully formed self? Giddens argues that in late modernity the self is not a fixed entity but an ongoing reflexive project, sustained through a continuously revised biographical narrative. The qualitative close reading and thematic coding of the primary text reveal that Ella's trajectory follows three interlocking phases of self-formation. In the first phase, her encounter with Jamie Davenport functions as a fateful moment that disrupts her defended, future-oriented identity. In the second phase, loving Jamie through his terminal illness generates existential confrontation with risk and mortality, producing the forms of self-knowledge that Giddens identifies as products of genuine reflexivity. In the third phase, her confrontation with the certainty of loss and her active decision to stay in Oxford constitute the reconstruction of a new self-narrative grounded in lived experience rather than inherited planning. The findings demonstrate that My Oxford Year enacts Giddens' reflexive model with formal coherence.

Keywords: Reflexive Project of the Self, self-formation, Giddens, My Oxford Year, identity, biographical narrative, fateful moments

INTRODUCTION

Questions of how individual identity is formed, disrupted, and reconstructed have long occupied literary and social thinkers alike. In contemporary fiction, these questions take on particular urgency because modern characters, unlike their pre-modern counterparts, can no longer rely on inherited social roles, traditions, or fixed community norms to provide them with a stable sense of who they are. Instead, the modern individual must construct identity actively, through experience, through choice, and through the ongoing revision of the story they tell about themselves. This condition of identity-as-project is precisely what Anthony Giddens, in Modernity and Self-Identity (2020), identifies as the defining feature of selfhood in late modernity.

Giddens argues that in late modern societies the self becomes a reflexive project: an ongoing, self-conscious process of identity construction through which the individual sustains a coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narrative. The self is not something given in advance or inherited from one's family or community. It is something that must be reflexively made, sustained, and revised in response to experience, disruption, and change. This means that identity formation is never finished. It is a trajectory, a movement from past through present toward an anticipated future, in which each new experience has the potential to revise and deepen the individual's sense of who they are.

My Oxford Year (2018), by Julia Whelan, provides an exceptionally rich site for the application of Giddens' framework. The novel tells the story of Ella Durran, a twenty-three-year-old American Rhodes Scholar who arrives at the University of Oxford with a precisely planned identity and life trajectory. She is, in her own words, an 'achievement machine' (Whelan, 2018: 8), organized entirely around a future-oriented plan. The encounter with Jamie Davenport, and the love, suffering, and loss that follow, functions as the series of fateful moments that disrupts this defended narrative and sets Ella on the path of genuine self-formation. This thesis reads this trajectory as an enactment of Giddens' reflexive model of self-formation.

This study is important for three reasons. First, there are no existing literary studies that apply Giddens' theory of the reflexive project of the self to My Oxford Year. Second, this study demonstrates how Giddens' sociological framework can illuminate the developmental dynamics of contemporary popular fiction. Third, this research contributes to an understanding of how popular romance fiction engages with serious questions about identity, agency, and self-construction in late modernity.

This study is focused on three research questions: (1) How does romantic love initiate Ella Durran's self-formation in Julia Whelan's My Oxford Year? (2) How does suffering through love deepen Ella's personal growth? (3) How does love's loss complete Ella's transformation into a fully formed self?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several previous studies related to literary analysis have been conducted by researchers from Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya. Sugianto and Pramesti (2025) examined Jason Reynolds' Long Way Down through Young Adult literature genre criticism, identifying themes of identity, grief, and personal development. Wahyu Ningsih and Supsiadji (2023) applied C.S. Lewis' theory of love to Sally Rooney's Normal People, identifying types of love and their emotional influence. Shelah and Marsih (2022) analyzed defense mechanisms in Anna Todd's After using Freudian psychoanalysis. Although these studies address character development and emotional experience, none applies Giddens' theory of the Reflexive Project of the Self as the main analytical framework.

Anthony Giddens' concept of the Reflexive Project of the Self is one of the most influential accounts of personal identity in late modern societies. In Modernity and Self-Identity (Giddens, 2020), Giddens argues that the self must be actively and continuously constructed by the individual through reflexive engagement with experience. The central concept is the reflexive project of the self, defined as consisting of 'the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives' (Giddens, 2020: 5). Identity is not given but must be worked on, sustained, and developed through ongoing effort.

A foundational concept in Giddens' framework is ontological security: the sense of continuity and order in events that sustains a stable sense of self. This security is always under threat from existential anxiety—the anxiety that arises when the individual confronts the fundamental uncertainties of modern life. In The Transformation of Intimacy (2020), Giddens argues that romantic relationships have become central to the reflexive project of the self. The pure relationship, entered into for its own sake through mutual disclosure and emotional openness, is one of the primary arenas in which the reflexive self is formed and tested. Perhaps the most directly applicable concept is that of fateful moments: moments in an individual's life when they face decisions that are particularly consequential for their future and demand reflexive revision of identity.

Contemporary research supports the connection Giddens draws between confrontation with mortality and the deepening of self-knowledge. Gaur (2025) demonstrates that individuals who engage fully with the existential dimensions of loss show significantly greater development of self-understanding than those who avoid such engagement. Birindelli (2023) demonstrates that Giddens' framework provides powerful tools for understanding how individuals construct and revise their self-narratives in transformative environments. Bühler and Dunlop (2019) argue that romantic relationships function as privileged narrative contexts in which the self is most intensely formed and revised. These frameworks collectively support the analysis of Ella's self-formation through love, suffering, and loss in this study.

METHOD

This study uses qualitative research. Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions that explore a social or human problem, building a holistic picture and analyzing words (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The approach used is an intrinsic and extrinsic literary approach. The intrinsic approach focuses on literary elements within the text, such as character, plot, and theme. The extrinsic approach examines factors outside the literary work that influence its meaning.

The primary theoretical lens is Anthony Giddens' Reflexive Project of the Self, drawing on Modernity and Self-Identity (Giddens, 2020) and The Transformation of Intimacy (Giddens, 2020). Giddens' framework is applied not as a sociological tool for studying actual individuals but as a theoretical lens for reading fictional characters and their developmental trajectories. The source of data is the novel My Oxford Year by Julia Whelan (2018). The research instrument is the writer himself, by reading and understanding the primary text and theoretical references.

Data collection involves: (1) reading the novel thoroughly several times; (2) identifying specific passages, scenes, dialogue exchanges, and narrative moments that bear directly on the three research questions; (3) selecting and coding the data with page references and notations of relevance. Data analysis involves: (1) organizing textual data through thematic coding according to the three research questions; (2) close reading of each coded passage with attention to language, imagery, and narrative positioning; (3) interpreting the passages in light of Giddens' theoretical framework; (4) drawing conclusions that synthesize the findings into the thesis argument.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Romantic Love as the Initiator of Ella Durran's Self-Formation

Ella Durran arrives at Oxford with a coherent but defended biographical narrative. She describes herself as an 'achievement machine making everyone around me vaguely uncomfortable' (Whelan, 2018: 8). Her identity is organized entirely around a future-oriented plan she has been executing since the age of thirteen, a plan built following the death of her father, making it an emotional defense against vulnerability rather than merely a career strategy. She announces upon arrival that she 'already have my December itinerary all planned' (Whelan, 2018: 7), revealing a self unable to inhabit the present without a map. In Giddens' terms, this is the colonization of the future: a defensive mode that protects the individual from disruption but prevents authentic self-knowledge.

The fateful encounter with Jamie Davenport initiates the disruption of this defended narrative. Jamie's classroom declaration that 'poetry teaches us how to feel' (Whelan, 2018: 37) directly contradicts Ella's worldview, identifying him as the privileged other whose different way of being will challenge and ultimately transform her identity. The

first moment of involuntary eye contact—'bam, his eyes lock with mine and there's a whisper of hesitation in his voice, like the momentary skip of an old record' (Whelan, 2018: 34)—marks the beginning of the disruption of her defended identity.

Through the pure relationship that develops, Ella undergoes a process of mutual disclosure that transforms her value system. By the point of the career promotion revelation—'I never had the urge, not once, at any point in the evening, to tell anyone. It was irrelevant before I decided it was irrelevant' (Whelan, 2018: 116)—love's bestowal has quietly replaced her old value system. The temporal reorientation is confirmed when she accepts Jamie's suggestion to let the punt drift with no destination, surrendering, for the first time, to the present moment. Her understated acknowledgment 'things changed. I changed' (Whelan, 2018: 116) carries the full weight of the initiation phase.

B. Suffering Through Love as the Deepening of Personal Growth

The second phase of Ella's self-formation is initiated by the discovery that Jamie has multiple myeloma, a blood cancer that has returned while Ella has been falling in love with him. The day Ella arrived in Oxford was the same day Jamie found out the cancer had come back (Whelan, 2018: 122). This revelation retroactively reframes every moment of their love story and establishes the specific form Ella's productive suffering will take: not just loving, but loving someone who is dying.

Ella's instinctive response—'Why do you have your hair? . . . Why aren't you more ill? Why didn't I notice?' (Whelan, 2018: 119)—reveals the defended, rational self trying to categorize a reality that exceeds categorization. Jamie's counter-request—to 'attempt a modicum of gentleness' (Whelan, 2018: 119)—is an invitation to a different kind of engagement entirely, formally initiating the second phase of her development. The deepening of self-knowledge through suffering is demonstrated at Jamie's hospital bedside: 'Looking at him, eyes closed, head tipped back, tube down his throat, breathing artificially, I can't believe it's only been six months since I first met him . . . Eyes, it suddenly occurs to me, I might never see again' (Whelan, 2018: 275). Suffering has produced moral and emotional knowledge: she now knows, viscerally, what constitutes the substance of a life.

The deepest fruit of this productive suffering comes in the car park revelation: 'It occurs to me now, in this blisteringly cold hospital car park on the outskirts of Glasgow, Scotland, that being called upon to do something because you're good at it is not the same thing as having a calling. My calling is education, not politics. Politics was my father's calling' (Whelan, 2018: 279). This distinction between being good at something and being called to it is not a rational conclusion—it is knowledge that only suffering could produce, confirming Gaur's (2025) finding that existential engagement with mortality generates forms of self-knowledge unavailable through rational planning.

C. Love's Loss and the Completion of Self-Formation

The third phase of Ella's self-formation corresponds to what Giddens identifies as the most demanding form of reflexive self-engagement: the reconstruction of the narrative self in response to profound loss. The novel presents Ella with anticipated and certain loss—the knowledge that Jamie will die and that she must decide who she is in the full awareness of this knowledge (Whelan, 2018). This is a more demanding developmental challenge because she cannot defer the reckoning.

The depth of what love has constituted is revealed in Ella's description of anticipated departure: 'When I think of leaving on June 11, it feels as if I'm preparing to amputate an essential part of me' (Whelan, 2018: 275). She does not describe the pain of missing someone—she describes the pain of losing a part of herself that only came into existence through loving Jamie. Antonia's observation that Ella's decision to stay 'might not have been entirely about you' (Whelan, 2018: 289) reframes the choice as the statement of a person who now knows who she is and what she is for. Ella's response to Gavin—'No. This is about a girl. This is about a girl choosing her life' (Whelan, 2018: 116)—is the novel's most direct statement of completed development.

The waterfall scene provides the novel's central image of acceptance: 'He dove in and out of the water like a dolphin . . . That day, that image, the waterfall as a curtain between life and the after, became my metaphor' (Whelan, 2018: 315). The ability to make meaning from the confrontation with loss is the mark of a fully formed self. The novel's final lines complete the developmental arc: 'I came to Oxford looking for a Once-in-a-Lifetime Experience. I chose to experience a lifetime . . . We were never forever, Jamie and I. Nothing is in this life. But if you love someone, and are loved by someone, you might find forever after. Whatever and wherever that is' (Whelan, 2018: 319–320). The acceptance that 'nothing is forever' is not resignation but hard-won wisdom—the 'full plenitude of a mature consciousness' that Moretti identifies as the Bildungsroman's endpoint.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the three analyses above demonstrate that My Oxford Year enacts Anthony Giddens' model of the Reflexive Project of the Self with formal coherence and psychological precision. The novel traces Ella Durran's self-formation through all three phases that Giddens' framework identifies. The first phase, the initiation of self-formation through romantic love, is carried out through the fateful encounter with Jamie Davenport, which disrupts Ella's defended, future-oriented biographical narrative and opens her to genuine reflexive engagement. The second phase, the deepening of self-knowledge through suffering, is carried out through Ella's experience of loving Jamie through his terminal illness, which generates the existential disruption and ontological confrontation that produce genuine self-knowledge. The third phase, the completion of self-formation through the reconstruction of biographical narrative, is carried out through Ella's

confrontation with the certainty of Jamie's impermanence and her active decision to author a new life-story grounded in authentic experience rather than inherited planning.

The novel's most significant achievement, in terms of Giddens' framework, is the precision with which it traces the movement from the colonization of the future to genuine reflexive self-formation. Giddens' framework, applied to My Oxford Year, also reveals that the novel is not simply a romance. It is a literary enactment of what Giddens identifies as the central challenge of identity formation in late modernity: the challenge of moving from the defensive maintenance of a prior self-narrative toward the genuinely reflexive construction of an authentic one. This study provides the first sustained analysis of the novel through this framework and demonstrates that contemporary popular fiction is capable of engaging seriously and precisely with the fundamental questions of modern selfhood that social theory addresses.

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