



# Marriage Dynamics in Old Age: A Psychological Study of Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*

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**Abstract:** Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* published in 2008 offers a vivid portrayal of late-life marriage, capturing the delicate balance between endurance and disillusionment. This paper applies Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of Integrity vs. Despair to examine the marital dynamics of three elderly couples, Henry and Olive Kitteridge, Bob and Jane Houlton, and Roger and Louise Larkin, whose lives unfold in the town of Crosby, Maine. Through close textual and psychoanalysis, the study explores how these couples confront the inevitabilities of aging, the accumulation of unspoken memories, and the renegotiation of emotional intimacy in the face of mortality. Henry's optimism contrasting with Olive's guarded introspection, Bob and Jane Houlton's emotional distance revealing unarticulated regrets, and Roger and Louise Larkin's unstable connection oscillates between passion and bitterness, is well analyzed. These graphic portraits illustrate the psychological tensions in a marriage at the juncture of life's final stage. This paper analyses the marital life of old couples within Erikson's framework highlighting marriage dynamics at old age as both a mirror of personal identity and a vessel for reconciling love.

**Keywords -** Marital dynamics, aging, emotional intimacy, integrity, despair.

## INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Strout is an acclaimed American novelist and short story writer, known for her apparent exploration of ordinary lives set against the backdrop of small-town America. Born in Portland, Maine, in 1956, Strout developed an inquisitiveness to study the complexities of human behaviour that enhanced her fiction. Her notable works like *Amy and Isabelle*, *The Burgess Boys*, *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, *Olive Kitteridge*, a sequel to this was, titled *Olive, Again*, published in 2019. Her writings often revolve around interpersonal relationships that reveal the intricacies of love and loss.

*Olive Kitteridge*, published in 2008 and awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2009, is among Strout's most notable fiction. The novel is a linked collection of thirteen stories set in the coastal town of Crosby, Maine, with the titular character, Olive Kitteridge. Through these interwoven stories, Strout sketches a society in transition and throws light on women who conceal profound vulnerabilities.

Three old couples, Henry and Olive Kitteridge, Bob and Jane Houlton, and Roger and Louise Larkin are scrutinized through the psychosocial theory of Erik Erikson. He first presented his stages of development in his 1950 book *Childhood and Society*. In this work, he introduced his psychosocial theory, describing eight stages of human growth that span an entire lifetime. This study applies Erikson's eighth stage of psychosocial development, ego integrity versus despair to examine the marital lives of the elderly characters of the novel *Olive Kitteridge*.

In late adulthood, typically sixty-five years and above, people reflect on their lives, accomplishments, regrets and guilt. If they regard their life experiences as meaningful and enterprising, they achieve ego integrity, a sense of satisfaction and readiness to face life's end. Those who feel they have fallen short may experience despair, marked by regret, bitterness culminating in fear of death.

Applied to marital relationships, this framework offers insight into how long-term partners undergo the psychological challenges of aging together. A strong, supportive marriage can create a sense of integrity, as couples take pride in the life they built, the challenges they overcame, and the memories they created. Conversely, unresolved conflicts, emotional distance, or unfulfilled expectations within the marriage may lead to regret and a sense of despair. In *Olive Kitteridge*, Strout's elderly couples serve as case studies, offering rich material for psychoanalytic interpretation within the Eriksonian model. By integrating both literary interpretation and psychological theory, the paper offers a glimpse at the complexities of late marital life.

## Henry and Olive Kitteridge: Disconnection and Endurance

Henry and Olive Kitteridge's marriage, the central characters of *Olive Kitteridge*, is marked by decades of coexisting affection and alienation. Henry, the gentle pharmacist, approaches late adult life with a quiet sense of integrity. Olive, sharp-tongued and emotionally stern, struggles more openly with despair.

The hostage scene in the hospital bathroom acts as an emotional catalyst for Olive and Henry Kitteridge, bringing long repressed marital tensions to the surface. Olive made a pointed remark about Henry's mother, saying that she had been a hellion who believed everyone unlike her was destined for hell. This remark by Olive is not only a critique of Pauline but also an indirect expression of Olive's resentment toward Henry's lifelong passivity, a grievance left unspoken for decades.

Henry countered by accusing Olive of driving Christopher away, insisting that their son had left because she had always suffocated him. According to Erikson, these kinds of accusations mark a moment of despair, an awareness of irretrievable damage in family relationships.

Henry's capacity for integrity is rooted in his acceptance of life's compromises. In the chapter titled "Pharmacy," Henry's longing for warmth and simplicity through his friendship with Denise is evident. But, when tempted to escape emotionally, Henry remains committed to Olive. He felt that leaving Olive would be unimaginable, as it would be like leaving a part of himself. This loyalty, despite marital strain, signals Henry's slow progress toward integrity finding value in consistency even in a flawed relationship.

"She was a difficult woman, but he had loved her" (Strout 25). Even as Olive's temper hurts him, Henry remains caring and connected particularly in his fondness toward their son, Christopher, and his genuine compassion for others. His willingness to accept Olive as she is without the illusion that she might change reflects Erikson's idea of embracing one's life in its entirety.

Olive, by contrast, often depicts the pull toward despair. In the chapter "A Little Burst," after a distressing wedding reception for Christopher, she feels alienated from both her son and Henry: "She saw with a swoop of despair that she had been fooling herself for years" (74).

Olive's sternness masks a deep-rooted fear of emotional abandonment, which manifests in cutting remarks and an inability to sustain emotional intimacy. But moments of integrity surface occasionally; in the chapter "River," Olive recognizes her enduring attachment to Henry after his death, admitting, "She missed him terribly, missed his kindness" (269).

Henry's stroke forces Olive into a solitary form of marital loyalty. She recalls irritations that have turned into cherished memories: "She had hated that he was always so thoughtful... And now she missed it." (270).

Here, grief becomes a bridge from regret toward integrity, as Olive acknowledges Henry's virtues and her own emotional shortcomings. This softening illustrates a gradual acceptance of her strained marital life, culminating in her final confession:

"You were a good man, Henry Kitteridge." Though tinged with regret for past emotional distance, this statement indicates a movement toward integrity, an acknowledgment that, despite imperfections, their life together had meaning.

Through Henry's quiet acceptance and Olive's oscillation between resistance and longing, Strout presents a marriage negotiating the final psychosocial task of life. Henry achieves a measured integrity; Olive, though often engulfed in regret, is not without moments of reconciliation suggesting that elderly marital life is an ongoing, unfinished battle between the two poles of Erikson's theory.

## Bob and Jane Houlton: The Burden of Unspoken Truths

In *Olive Kitteridge*, Bob and Jane Houlton embody the emotionally restrained late-life marriage. Jane's discovery of a past secret of Bob and her response provides a view into late adulthood's psychosocial challenges.

Bob and Jane Houlton's late-life marriage, depicted in the chapter "Winter Concert," is sustained in politeness covering deep emotional distance. The couple presents a composed, socially engaged life outwardly, but beneath the nobility lies a marriage filled by avoidance and unspoken dissatisfaction. Their marriage, in Erikson's terms, is caught in the delicate balance between integrity, accepting one's past life and despair, feeling trapped by what cannot be reversed.

On their way home from a church concert, Jane confronts Bob: "They said they saw you in Miami once. You never told me that." (234). His response was as follows: "I didn't want to hurt you. It didn't mean anything." (234). This moment proves the tension between despair and integrity. The revelation of Bob's secret trip signifies a rupture, a hidden part of his past and can evoke despair in Jane, challenging foundational trust in marriage.

Despite the betrayal, Jane's reaction is composed: "She reached and touched his shoulder." (234). And later, her internal thought is revealed by Strout in the following line: "They're all each other has left." (235).

There's no explosive confrontation or demand for justification. Instead, Jane remains present, choosing a continuation of marital life over rupture. Her gesture signifies a move toward integrity, accepting imperfections for preserving the marital bond forged over decades. "They had been married for years and could sit through an entire evening without speaking" (177). This muted coexistence may suggest contentment, but the text reveals an emotional disconnection that moves toward despair. Bob seems alienated rather than fulfilled, carrying himself "with the posture of a man who had long ago accepted disappointment" (179).

Jane's perspective is noted with subtle regret, though she avoids direct confrontation with the realities of her marriage. After observing another couple's lively interaction, she feels "a little pang... something she could not name" (182). This moment points toward Erikson's notion of despair as the revelation of Bob's past crushes the remaining trust and love, leading to bitterness or separation, leading to the recognition that certain emotional experiences are irretrievably lost. But their marriage, however muted, also depicts a form of integrity because Jane's compassionate approach, shows she values their marital life more than she holds onto the hurt.



## Roger and Louise Larkin: Fragility of Late-Life Bonds

In the novel, the Larkins are introduced as an elderly couple spending their later years in affluence and comfort. However, beneath the polished surface of retirement life lies a deep divergence in their emotional responses to aging.

Louise is portrayed as the more socially engaged partner. She speaks of their travels and friendships. Louise reflected on their life together with satisfaction, telling Roger that they had a good run and that she would not change much, even if she could. This sentiment reflects integrity, the capacity to look back on one's life with a sense of completeness and minimal regret.

Louise seems to focus on the life they have built rather than on what might have been. Roger, however, depicts a subtle undercurrent of despair. While Roger took part in social events, he occasionally expressed feelings of futility and self-doubt, wondering what it had all been for, the work, the years and noting that they were now just waiting. This line captures the existential anxiety that can emerge in late life when one questions the meaning of past choices.

At a dinner scene, Louise reaches for Roger's hand as the conversation turns to illness and death: "Her hand covered his, and for a moment he let it stay there." This brief gesture suggests that even in the face of despair, the physical and emotional presence of a long-term partner can temper the loneliness of mortality. The couple's dynamic shows that integrity and despair can coexist within the same marriage, one partner anchoring the other in acceptance, even as doubts persist. According to Erikson, Louise leans toward integrity, drawing meaning from their cherished experiences, while Roger struggles with despair, haunted by existential incompleteness.

The novel highlights their physical and emotional separation. Roger is described as "slumped in his chair, eyes on the television, barely registering her presence" (221), a posture that speaks to years of disengagement. Louise, for her part, navigates her day "with the deliberate care of someone avoiding an argument" (223). This mutual avoidance indicates that they are neither openly hostile nor warmly connected.

Moments of reflection hint at Louise's thoughts. When she thinks of earlier years, she recalls "a time when she had imagined more" (225), a phrase heavy with deferred hopes. Roger, too, in a rare glance at Louise, he registers "the lines in her face that he did not remember arriving" (227). These glimpses signal an uneasy recognition of time's passage, evidence of Erikson's despair, where individuals measure the gap between what was desired and what has been achieved.

However, the Larkins remain together, suggesting a quiet form of integrity grounded in endurance. While affection may have diminished, the preservation of their marital life, complete with its routines and rituals, reflects a commitment. Strout's portrayal thus captures a marriage in which the equilibrium between integrity and despair is maintained.

## SUMMATION

Through the psychosocial theory of Erikson, revolving on Integrity vs. Despair, the marriages in *Olive Kitteridge* offer a vivid portrait of elderly partnership. Henry and Olive's union focusses the tension between love's endurance and the depressive effects of emotional distance. Bob and Jane Houlton's relationship demonstrates the quiet endurance of routine in the absence of passion; and Roger and Louise Larkin's bond exemplifies the possibility of strength through grief and mutual support.

Strout's writing suggests that the late-life marital journey is less about achieving a definitive state of happiness or regret and more about the ongoing capacity to make peace with one's past. Integrity, in this sense, becomes an evolving practice, an act of reframing disappointments, cherishing moments of connection, and accepting the imperfect nature of long-term companionship. Despair emerges when individuals fixate on failures without allowing for emotional reconciliation.

Penultimately, this paper affirms that in old age, marriage serves as both a mirror and a container for one's psychosocial state. It reflects the accumulated patterns of a lifetime, tenderness, resentment or withdrawal and shapes the way partners face the final developmental task. Strout's couples remind us that while love may not erase regret, it can coexist with it, offering a form of integrity grounded not in perfection, but in enduring human connection.

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