

Exploring Self-Identity Crisis in Jen Wojtowicz's Picture Book: *The Boy Who Grew Flowers*

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Abstract

This study is aimed at uncover issue of identity crisis in Jen Wojtowicz's picture book The Boy who Grew Flowers focused on discovering the depictions of identity crisis and the way of the protagonist dealing with it. The objects of this study are picture book entitled The Boy who Grew Flowers (2006) by Jennifer Wojtowicz. The characters: The Bowagons, townspeople, school students, as well as parts of the picture book. Furthermore, the data were analyzed through texts and pictures by using a qualitative approach. In order to guide the study, the writer used Erikson's theory (1970). This study applies descriptive qualitative research method. In this study, the writer focuses on the protagonist who is confused and difficult to find his true self due to his different which lead him to feel unacceptable among their friends. The analysis of this study indicates that there are two essential findings that can be concluded from this study. First, there are several conditions faced by the protagonist while experiencing identity crisis, namely uniqueness and strange. Second, the way of the protagonist dealing with identity crisis is similar which is accepting his true self or self-acceptance to determine his identity and feel accepted in their society.

Keywords: *identity crisis, picture book, self-identity, self-acceptance.*

A. Introduction

Throughout life, individuals navigate various stages of development, from childhood to old age. Among these stages, adolescence is particularly crucial, marked by the exploration and establishment of one's identity. Erik Erikson, a renowned developmental psychologist, introduced the concept of identity crisis, emphasizing the significance of achieving a coherent sense of self during adolescence. Identity encompasses an individual's experiences, relationships, beliefs, values, and memories, forming the bedrock of their subjective self-image.

Identity crisis, as posited by Erikson, entails a period of internal conflict wherein individuals question their identity and place in the world. This phenomenon arises from the myriad physical, sexual, and social demands exerted during adolescence.

Successful resolution of this crisis hinges upon developing a sense of continuity between one's past and future selves.

The process of identity formation is dynamic, continuously evolving in response to new circumstances, challenges, and life experiences. However, identity crises can emerge at any stage of life, precipitated by factors such as relationship strain, trauma, loss, or significant life transitions. While questioning one's existence and significance is a natural part of self-reflection, prolonged identity crises can profoundly impact an individual's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

The choice of this topic stems from its pervasive relevance and societal significance. Many individuals grapple with identity-related challenges, yet awareness and understanding of identity crises remain limited. Failure to address self-identity crises can have detrimental consequences, underscoring the importance of delving deeper into this issue.

Real-life examples, such as Dorce Gamalama's gender identity journey in Indonesia, exemplify the profound impact of identity crises on individuals' lives. Dorce's transformation from male to female underscores the complexities of gender identity and the far-reaching effects of early-life trauma.

Moreover, self-identity crisis is not confined to real-life scenarios but also permeates literature, including children's picture books. These books serve as accessible platforms for exploring complex themes, making them invaluable resources for addressing identity-related issues from a young age. "The Boy who Grew Flowers" by Jennifer Wojtowicz is one such picture book that delves into self-identity crisis through the story of Rink Bowagon, a boy with a peculiar botanical secret.

Given the compelling narrative and thematic depth of "The Boy who Grew Flowers," the writer is motivated to investigate the causes, impacts, and coping mechanisms associated with self-identity crises. By examining this picture book, the study aims to shed light on the multifaceted nature of identity-related challenges and contribute to broader discussions on identity development and resilience across the lifespan.

B. Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach to facilitate data collection and analysis of "The Boy who Grew Flowers" picture book. Qualitative research offers a method for comprehensively understanding and exploring social phenomena as depicted in narrative form. Data from the picture book were compiled into descriptive essays and illustrations, devoid of numerical data, to elucidate the underlying themes and motivations portrayed in the story. Qualitative research, as elucidated by Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen (2010), emphasizes the use of words and visuals over numerical data,

making it suitable for this study. The primary data source for this study is the picture book titled "The Boy who Grew Flowers" by Jen Wojtowicz, published in 2006. Data were extracted from both the narrative and illustrative elements of the book, focusing on the portrayal of self-identity crisis within the story. Data collection proceeded through several systematic steps. Initially, the picture book was read repeatedly to gain a thorough understanding of the themes explored. Subsequently, specific instances related to self-identity crisis within the narrative were identified and annotated. These annotations were informed by relevant theories on self-identity crisis. Finally, the collected data were organized and analyzed in accordance with the study's objectives. The gathered data underwent analysis employing Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, with a particular focus on identifying instances of self-identity crisis depicted in the narrative and illustrative components of the picture book. Extracted data, comprising both textual quotations and visual representations, were categorized based on the protagonist's experiences and characteristics. The analysis aimed to discern patterns and themes related to identity crisis versus role confusion, thereby elucidating the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and growth. Findings were synthesized into cohesive essays to facilitate interpretation and discussion.

C. Findings and Discussion

The Boy who Grew Flowers by Jen Wojtowicz's picture book is a story of an unusual boy named Rink Bowagon who lives on top of Lonesome Mountain that is confused about himself and is struggle about his uniqueness that is different from other children because he sprouted flowers all over his body every full moon. When a new girl, Angelina, moves to town, Rink's life truly begins to grow. Their friendship quickly transpires, and for the first time, Rink is no longer an outcast. In this chapter, there are two parts which are analyzed. The first part is the depiction of identity crisis in *The Boy who Grew Flowers* by Jen Wojtowicz through the story and pictures in the book. The second one is about how the protagonist deals with identity crisis in the picture book. The writer obtains the data textually and visually from both the story and pictures in analyzing the topic from the picture book.

1. Identity Crisis Experienced by the Main Character

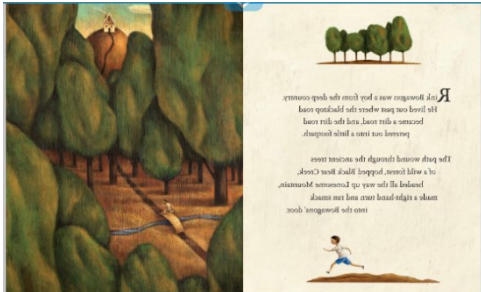
Identity crisis is depicted through some actions and behaviors from the pictures and stories which lead the protagonists to be more helpless and clueless in forming their identity. There are several conditions depicted in *The Boy who Grew Flowers* by Jen Wojtowicz which can be implied as identity crisis, as follow:

1.1. Being Isolated

Rink almost never made interaction with anyone except their family members (but we can see at next page that he also didn't make interaction with his family member excepts his mom). He and his family lived on the top of Lonesome Mountain, away from the crowd, away from people, there's no neighbor, no one to talk to. The Bowagon are the only folks who lived on there, that can be indicates his family is an

antisocial and that makes him experiences identity crisis, as exposed from the following picture:

Datum 1. *The Boy who Grew Flowers* page 3-4



Rink Bowagon was a boy from the deep country.

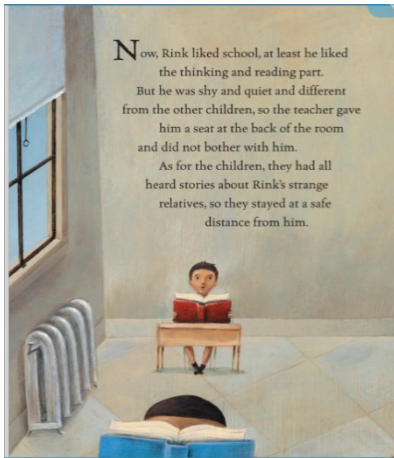
He lived out past where the blacktop road became a dirt road, and the dirt road petered out into a little footpath.

The path wound through the ancient trees of a wild forest, hopped Black Bear Creek, headed all the way up Lonesome Mountain, made a right-hand turn and ran smack into the Bowagons' door. (Wojtowicz, 2006, p. 3)

The illustration and the text above show how far and isolated the Bowagons' house. The pictures show a boy who ran alone through a wild forest with the ancient trees around to reach the only one house on the Lonesome Mountain. It is Rink Bowagon who ran because his house was high up in the mountain and through dangerous forests so he has to get his house before it got dark. In the picture above, his house is the only house in there, there are no neighbors. His house is very far from the townspeople because his family is kind a strange folk, so that makes them isolated. To proves how isolated they are, the road to their house is just a little footpath surrounded by wild forest, it mentions on the passage "*He lived out past where the blacktop road became a dirt road, and the dirt road petered out into a little footpath. The path wound through the ancient trees of a wild forest...*".

The color of the sky tends to be orange, represents twilight, the change from day to night. Rink's house is very isolated. The image of the tall trees with dark green leaves shows how isolated the Rink family home is. The lack of light exposure in the image could also mean that there was no lighting on the road leading to his house, so it was very dangerous for someone to go there when it was dark so Rink had to run through the small, dark road surrounded by large trees.

Datum 2. *The Boy who Grew Flowers* page 9



Now, Rink liked school, at least he liked the thinking and reading part. But he was shy and quiet and different from the other children, so the teacher gave him a seat at the back of the room and did not bother with him. As for the children, they had all heard stories about Rink's strange relatives, so they stayed at a safe distance from him. (Wojtowicz, 2006, p. 9)

The picture shows a boy who seat at the back of the room holding a red-cover book can be recognized as Rink, its mention that Rink was shy and quiet, different from other children. It means that the other children are cheering and playful kids, different from Rink who is quiet. It clearly implied that he has a kind of social disorder, he is not confident and difficult to interact with other children, so he has no friends. The picture takes place in a classroom, other children are seen covering their face with a book except Rink, who is holding a book with his eyes glancing up and his facial expression shows that he is thinking about something. It also mentions in the picture book that he like the thinking and reading part. “*Now, Rink liked school, at least he liked the thinking and reading part.*”.

Datum 3. *The Boy who Grew Flowers* page 10



Then Angelina Quiz came along,
a girl whose family was in the
ballroom dancing business and
had just moved from Tuscaloosa.
She was what some would call
a plain girl. She had an easy
manner, a luminous smile, and her
right leg was shorter than her
left by an inch. She always wore
a flower behind her right ear.
Rink liked her straight away.

Then Angelina Quiz came along, a girl whose family was in the ballroom dancing business and had just moved from Tuscaloosa.

She was what some would call a plain girl. She had an easy manner, a luminous smile, and her right leg was shorter than her left by an inch. She always wore a flower behind her right ear. Rink liked her straight away. (Wojtowicz, 2006, p. 10)

Still in the classroom, the text above is show that is a girl who wore a flower behind her right ear named Angelina Quiz in appearance. The picture of the girl is made large in order to clearly see how she looks and also can be interpreted that this girl stands out. Her family background is briefly described from the passage “*a girl whose family was in the ballroom dancing business and had just moved from Tuscaloosa.*”. The girl is a new student in the class, from the text above we can infer that this girl is pretty and Rink likes her. However, this girl has a flaw that her legs are not symmetrical, it proves from the passage “*her right leg was shorter than her left by an inch*”, this results in her not being able to walk straight. Angelina, is the person who later changes Rink’s personality and his whole life.

Datum 4. *The Boy who Grew Flowers* page 13-14



One afternoon, the teacher announced that the school dance would be held that Saturday night at the church hall. Several of her classmates asked Angelina to go, but she smiled bravely and shook her head.

"I wouldn't be much of a dancing partner!" she laughed. Rink was struck by the wistful note he heard in her voice. "She comes from a dancing family," he thought. "I bet she loves music. I bet she'd really like to go to that dance!" The minute the teacher's back was turned, Rink slipped out the door. No one noticed except Angelina, who glanced back at his empty chair every now and then. She was amazed at how his absence could take the shine off such a pretty, sunny day.

One afternoon, the teacher announced that the school dance would be held that Saturday night at the church hall. Several of her classmates asked Angelina to go, but she smiled bravely and shook her head. (Wojtowicz, 2006, p. 13)

The picture above shows a woman in a black dress with her hair in a bun pasting a dance party announcement on a blackboard. The text above says that the woman is a teacher in Angelina and Rink's class who is posting a school dance announcement

that will be held on Saturday Night. As we know that Angelina's legs are different in length from one another, it will be difficult for her to become a dance partner even though she really wants to do it.

"I wouldn't be much of a dancing partner." She laughed.

Rink was struck by the wistful note he heard in her voice.

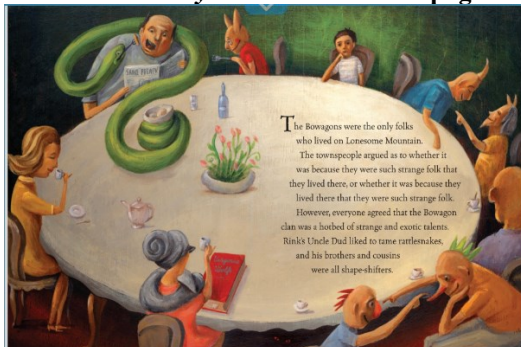
"She comes from a dancing family," he thought. "I bet she'd really like to go to that dance." The minute the teacher's back was turned, Rink slipped out the door. No one noticed except Angelina, who glanced back at his empty chair every now and then. She was amazed at how his absence could take the shine off such a pretty, sunny day. (Wojtowicz, 2006, p. 14)

When her classmate asked her to join the dance party, she shows her insecurity by shook her head and gave her answer on the quotation "*"I wouldn't be much of a dancing partner." She laughed"*". The picture took place in a classroom, showing the teacher who announced school dance party and there is Rink who slipped out the door without no one noticed. It mentions from the picture "*The minute the teacher's back was turned, Rink slipped out the door. No one noticed except Angelina"*". (Wojtowicz, 2006, p. 14) can be implied that no one cares about his absence because no one noticed him when the door itself is only about one step away from the teacher who was explaining the school dance party. It proves that he is considered nothing by his friend. The sky behind the door is bright depicts that Rink turning a new stage of life. After met Angelina, his sky will always bright, it can be implied that he becomes happier person.

1.2. Different from Other

There are several factors that make Rink being an insecure child, one of it is that he is different from other children because he sprouts flowers from his body during the full moon, while others does not. He and his family (The Bowagon) as seen as strange by the townspeople because they have their own quirks. They are not interested in interacting with people, so they build house on top of Lonesome Mountain which is the only one house in there with no neighbors and far from the crowd. They isolated themselves for a reason, but it was probably because they had some kind of social disorder.

Datum 5. *The Boy who Grew Flowers* page 5-6



The Bowagons were the only folks who lived on Lonesome Mountain.

The townspeople argued as to whether it was because they were such strange folk that they lived there, or whether it was because they lived there that they were such strange folk. However, everyone agreed that the Bowagon clan was a hotbed of strange and exotic talents. Rink's Uncle Dad liked to raise rattlesnakes, and his brothers and cousins were all shape-shifters.

Rink's Uncle Dud liked to tame rattlesnakes, and his brothers and cousins were all shape-shifters. (Wojtowicz, 2006, p. 6)

The picture above show The Bowagon (Rink's family clan name) enjoys tea time/family time but Rink himself didn't make any interaction with others. The picture also shows the strange look of Bowagon's family member. Dark colors in the background depicts their strange life that full of mystery and bleakness, evident by their looks and shape. Snake also symbolize as evil instinct. Only Rink who had different background color as green that can be symbolize life and hope. He is the only one person who looks normal in the table.

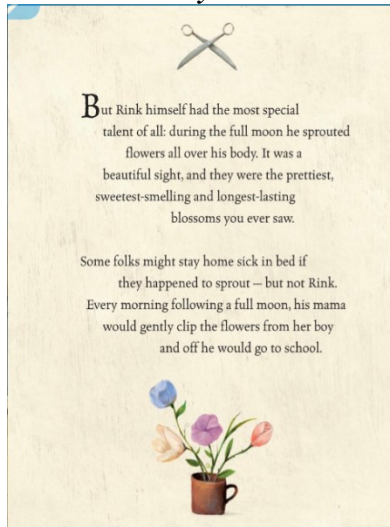
The townspeople's opinion corroborates the Bowagon's alleged strange life as mentioned in the picture book *"The townspeople argued as to whether it was because they were such strange folk that they lived there, or whether it was because they lived there that they were such strange folk. However, everyone agreed that the Bowagon clan was a hotbed of strange and exotic talents."* (Wojtowicz, 2006, p. 8). Rink is seen sitting on his chin, as if he was thinking about something. Everyone looks happy with smile on their face except Rink, he looks confused and lonely.

Datum 6. *The Boy who Grew Flowers* page 7



It was full moon outside the door. It is shown with a big yellow circle that indicates a full moon. Inside the house, there is someone sitting on the green sofa holding a book with blue and yellow flowers pictures while enjoying snacks on the plate and a cup of warm drink, the white lines on top of a cup indicated that the drink is warm. Even though the sky color outside is blue, the time setting on this page is at night because of the full moon and the lights on inside the house. He is holding a book with pictures of flowers in different colors. The flower on the right page is yellow while the left page is blue. The two flowers images are different in color and shape from those growing on his body. It can be means that he confused to maintain his true color/true identity, flowers are possible metaphors to describe the diversity of someone's characters.

Datum 7. *The Boy who Grew Flowers* page 8



But Rink himself had the most special talent of all: during the full moon he sprouted flowers all over his body. It was a beautiful sight, and they were the prettiest, sweetest-smelling and longest-lasting blossoms you ever saw.

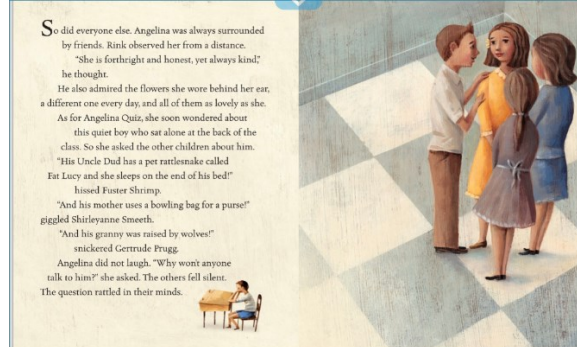
Some folks might stay home sick in bed if they happened to sprout – but not Rink. Every morning following a full moon, his mama would gently clip the flowers from her boy and off he would go to school. (Wojtowicz, 2006, p. 8)

Someone sitting on the sofa growing flowers from his arms and above his head in page 7 is Rink, it is proven in the passage *"But Rink himself had the most special talent of all: during the full moon he sprouted flowers all over his body."* He grew flowers from his body, something that no one else had, this uniqueness made him different from other children. The picture above also shows open scissor and flowers of different colors in a pot, showing that the flowers that grew from Rink's body during the full moon, were cut using scissors by her mother the next day and stored in a pot because it's pretty and awesome. It is proven by the passage *"It was a beautiful sight, and they were the prettiest, sweetest-smelling and longest-lasting blossoms you ever saw."*

The passage *"Some folks might stay home sick in bed if they happened to sprout – but not Rink. Every morning following a full moon, his mama would gently clip the flowers from her boy and off he would go to school."* proves that Rink is a diligent student, his flaw does not stop him from going to school. His mom hides this uniqueness to protect her boy from being bullied by other children for being different, and to maintain his confidence. Rink's face and looks hidden behind the sofa can also indicates that he is not confident as if he tries to hide his biggest flaw.

1.3. Being Outcast

Datum 8. *The Boy who Grew Flowers* page 11-12



So did everyone else. Angelina was always surrounded by friend. Rink observed her from a distance.

"She is forthright and honest, yet always kind," he thought.

He also admired the flowers she wore behind her ear, a different one every day, and all of them as lovely as she.

As for Angelina Quiz, she soon wondered about this quiet boy who sat alone at the back of the class. So she asked the other children about him.

"His Uncle Dud has a pet rattlesnake called Fat Lucy and she sleeps on the end of his bed!" hisses Fuster Shrimp.

"And his mother uses a bowling bag for a purse!" giggled Shirleyanne Smeeth.

"And his granny was raised by wolves!" snickered Gertrude Prugg.

Angelina did not laugh. "Why won't anyone talk to him?" she asked. The others fell silent. The question rattled in their minds. (Wojtowicz, 2006, p. 11)

The picture above shows four children standing in the corner of a room with black and white square floor, making conversation about the quite boy in their class named Rink. The girl who wears yellow dress is Angelina, it can be seen from the picture that there is a flower behind her right ear. There is a picture of a boy sitting alone at his desk which can be recognize as Rink because he always alone all the time. The different pictures size can be symbolized that Rink is underestimated by other children. It weakens his confidence so that he is always alone at his desk without any interaction with others.

The other children like to gossip about Rink's family to mock him. It is evident by how they described Rink to Angelina when she asked about him. "*His Uncle Dud has a pet rattlesnake called Fat Lucy and she sleeps on the end of his bed!*" hisses Fuster Shrimp. "*And his mother uses a bowling bag for a purse!*" giggled Shirleyanne Smeeth. "*And his granny was raised by wolves!*" snickered Gertrude Prugg. Neither of them wants to talk to Rink, it is proven by the quotation "*Why won't anyone talk to him?*" she asked. *The others fell silent. The question rattled in their minds.*

D. Conclusion

"*The Boy who Grew Flowers*" by Jen Wojtowicz delivers a poignant message of self-discovery and acceptance, embodied through the journey of Rink, an

extraordinary boy who grows flowers all over his body. The narrative highlights Rink's struggle with identity crisis, stemming from his uniqueness and consequent isolation from his peers. However, through his interactions with a new classmate, Angelina, Rink begins to navigate friendship, compassion, and even love, emotions previously foreign to him. The protagonist's path to self-acceptance is depicted as a gradual process, marked by moments of revelation and connection. Ultimately, Rink finds solace in embracing his true self, a pivotal step towards gaining acceptance from others and finding his place in society. His journey underscores the importance of significant relationships in fostering self-awareness and overcoming identity crisis. Moreover, Rink's self-acceptance is facilitated by his newfound ability to engage with his surroundings, express himself openly, and cultivate meaningful connections. Angelina's role as a supportive friend further reinforces the notion that meaningful relationships play a crucial role in one's journey towards self-acceptance. In essence, "The Boy who Grew Flowers" serves as a poignant portrayal of the complexities of identity and the transformative power of acceptance, both from within and from the world around us. Through Rink's story, readers are reminded of the importance of embracing individuality and forging connections that nurture authenticity and self-discovery.

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