

1 Kierkegaard's Life

What is truth but to live for an idea

—Søren Kierkegaard

There's no question that Kierkegaard's life had an impact on his thinking and his writing. His father's influence, his engagement to and subsequent break from his fiancée, his religious upbringing, and other factors all play an integral role in his works. In addition to a fuller understanding, such considerations often provide insight into their mistakes as well as their successes. A good understanding of Kierkegaard's life, his education, and his goals prepares you for reading and comprehending his writings.

As the Father, So the Son

Søren Kierkegaard (pronounced *Sir-ren Keer-ker-gaw*, *Keer-ker-gore*, or *Keer-ca-guard*) was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, on May 5, 1813, the youngest of seven children. His father, Michael, was poor as a child, lived in a small village, and tended sheep. Even the origin of the Kierkegaard surname came from Michael's relationship to the church. As an indentured laborer for the church (Kirke), he was provided a portion of the church's farm (Gaard) for his family's use.

When Michael was 12 years old, he was sent to live with his uncle, a prosperous tradesman. Michael received an education and established himself in trade, becoming wealthy enough to retire at the age of 40 and spend the rest of his life at leisure.

After his first wife died, Michael Kierkegaard married Anne Lund, a domestic servant who was pregnant with their first child at the time of their marriage. Anne eventually bore all seven of the Kierkegaard children. Søren Kierkegaard writes little of his mother, and little is known about her. She has been described as cheerful and motherly, as well as illiterate.

Kierkegaard's father's upbringing is significant for several reasons. Michael came from a thrifty, pious congregation, with very strict ideas of sin and suffering. Focused on this sin and suffering, Michael Kierkegaard doubted the salvation of his soul and suffered from depression. He was well read and liked to discuss spiritual matters with his son Søren. Michael's outlook on life was based on guilt, punishment, and hardship, and he reared his seven children with this same worldview.

As a child, Michael Kierkegaard had suffered cold and hardship on the farm, enough so that he cursed God. Because he had offended God, Michael believed that he had cursed his family, and his children would not live beyond the age of 34 (like Christ, who was crucified at 33). Although Michael lived to 82, only two of his seven children (one of them Søren) lived past the age of 34, and Søren Kierkegaard felt the burden of this "curse."

From his father, Søren Kierkegaard inherited his worldview, his lifelong melancholy, and his love of reading and penetrating discussion, as the following passage from Kierkegaard's journals indicates:

It was all connected with the relationship with my father, the person I have loved the most—and what does that mean? It means that he is just the person who makes one miserable—but out of love.

Kierkegaard Seeks His Path

At the age of 17, Kierkegaard enrolled in the University of Copenhagen and studied theology. He also read and studied philosophy and *aesthetics*, the branch of philosophy that deals with art and artistic judgment. Kierkegaard's first major philosophical work, *Either/Or*, deals with this topic. (You can read more about *Either/Or* in Chapter 3.)

Kierkegaard enjoyed university life, attending plays, the opera, and parties, and running up debt, which he relied on his father to repay. At least on the surface, Søren Kierkegaard appeared to enjoy the somewhat frivolous and directionless life of a permanent student.

Kierkegaard's outward life of fun hid a growing sense of dissatisfaction over the emptiness of his life. In his journals, he likens himself to the two-faced Janus—one face laughs, the other face cries. He seemed to struggle trying to find, as he wrote in his journals, "the idea I will live and die for." In an effort to find himself, Kierkegaard took a vacation to Gilleleje, a coastal resort. The following journal writing gives a glimpse of his struggle:

What I really need is to come to terms with myself about what I am to do. . . . It is a matter of understanding my destiny, of seeing what the Divinity actually wants me to do; what counts is to find a truth, which is true for me.

This desire to find his calling became even more urgent when Kierkegaard's father, Michael, died in 1838. Kierkegaard interpreted his father's death as a sacrifice. Søren Kierkegaard writes in his journals, "[H]e had died for me, so that, if possible, something might still be made of me." After his father's death, Kierkegaard returned to his studies and was awarded a degree in theology in 1840, graduating magna cum laude.

Love (Or Not) for Kierkegaard

During his years at the University of Copenhagen, Kierkegaard met and began a courtship with Regine Olsen. In 1840, they became engaged. Kierkegaard's relationship with Regine, like the one with his father, greatly influenced his outlook and writings.

Although he loved Regine deeply, Kierkegaard knew that his melancholy would adversely affect a marriage, and he didn't want to ruin Regine's happy life with his ever-present sense of sadness and gloom. (There are other interpretations of his reasons for breaking the engagement, but this is the one Kierkegaard gave and most scholars highlight.) Because he did not think he could overcome his bouts of depression, and because he also did not think that he could confide in Regine about his depression, he immediately had doubts about the engagement. He wrote in his journal:

If I had not had my *vita ante acta* [my melancholy], if I had not had my depression—marriage to her would have made me happier than I had ever dreamed of becoming. But being the person I unfortunately am, I must say that I could become happier in my unhappiness without her than with her.

Because a broken engagement at this period in Denmark could reflect unfavorably on both people, but especially the woman, Kierkegaard sought to find a way to break the engagement in such a way that the act would be blamed on him rather than her. To make it seem as though Regine was the one to break the engagement, he acted the part of a philandering bachelor. Regine saw through his actions, however, and refused to break off the engagement herself. After much heartache, Kierkegaard finally ended the engagement himself in 1841. He wrote in his journal, "And so we parted.

I spent the whole night crying on my bed. . . . I went to Berlin. I suffered greatly. I thought of her every day.”

His relationship with Regine affected Kierkegaard, not only personally, but philosophically. Themes relating to his decision and sacrifice are prevalent in his work. Regine later became engaged and married Fredrich Schlegel in 1847. Kierkegaard changed the ending to *The Repetition*, the book he was about to publish when he heard about the engagement. In the original manuscript, the hero is distraught after his loved one becomes engaged to another and commits suicide. The new conclusion has the hero taking a different approach to the news; he feels a release from the burden and proclaims his joy:

I am myself again; the machinery has been started up. Cut are the meshes I was ensnared in; broken is the spell that had me bewitched. . . . I belong to the idea. When it beckons me, I follow it and when it makes an appointment I wait days and nights; there none calls me to dinner, there none waits with supper. When the idea calls I leave everything; or rather, I have nothing to leave; I betray no one, I grieve no one by being true. . . . When I return home, no one reads in my look; no one questions my appearance; no one demands of my manner an explanation. . . . The cup of intoxication is handed back to me. Already I breathe in its fragrance; already I sense its effervescent music. . . . Long live the flight of thought; long live danger in the service of the idea . . . long live the dance in the whirl of the infinite . . . long live the wave that hurls me up above the stars.

Kierkegaard Publishes Profusely

His broken engagement to Regine was a turning point in Kierkegaard's life; it was the beginning of Kierkegaard's extensive writing career. Kierkegaard threw himself into his work and throughout his life enjoyed a monastic devotion to his calling. His lack of any close, personal relationships with women enabled him to admire and idealize them from afar. He lived as a wealthy bachelor off of the inheritance he received from his father. Although he received income from his writing, his financial security was never an issue, and it's unlikely that financial success was what drove him to publish so prodigiously in his short life.

Although Kierkegaard had considered and prepared for a career in the ministry, he was never ordained. (His elder brother followed a similar course of studies and did become an ordained minister. He was the only sibling

other than Søren who lived past the age of 34.) He did preach sermons and play an active role in criticizing and seeking to reform the Christian Church, especially and more directly in his later life.

Kierkegaard had a unique publishing tactic; he wrote and published under various pseudonyms, in addition to publishing under his own name. It wasn't anonymity that drove his decision, but instead a unique literary strategy that he used to further his messages. (You can read more about his use of pseudonyms in Chapter 2.)

In addition to his philosophy and religious writings, Kierkegaard also wrote literary criticism, sermons, and reviews.

During his lifetime, Kierkegaard wrote profusely, sometimes publishing two works within a few weeks of each other. Chapter 2 covers the writing, publication, and reception of Kierkegaard's works.

Kierkegaard Takes On . . .

Kierkegaard spent his entire life in Copenhagen. He traveled outside Denmark to Berlin only a few times. He mostly attended the theater, wrote, and walked about the city.

Two significant life events worth noting include his tangle with the press (often referred to as the *Corsair* Affair in writings about Kierkegaard); this event happened at the start of his writing career. The other event, a direct attack on the Church, occurred at the end of his life.

The Press

Even though Kierkegaard wrote under a pseudonym and didn't come out officially with his authorship until later in his career, his identity as the author of the works he published was well known in the literary circles of the time. In 1845, a highly regarded critic, P. L. Møller, wrote a review of Kierkegaard's works. Although most of the review was positive, Møller did write some scathing remarks—remarks that were more of a personal comment on Kierkegaard's life and engagement fiasco than a critique of his writing.

Kierkegaard knew and probably disliked Møller even before the review, but after the review he was angry. He knew that Møller wrote for *The Corsair*, a satirical weekly paper that ridiculed popular people in Copenhagen, and he retaliated by revealing Møller's connection to *The Corsair*. He also challenged *The Corsair* to include him in its selection of victims for ridicule.

Although he probably didn't intend for this challenge to be taken literally, it was.

The editor of *The Corsair* responded and what followed was a long and bitter attack on Kierkegaard and his personal habits. Prior to this, Kierkegaard liked to walk around Copenhagen and talked frequently with common people he met. He was also generous to beggars. After the pieces appeared in *The Corsair*, people ridiculed him on the street, and he didn't feel comfortable walking around. "Even the butcher's boy almost thinks himself justified in being offensive to me at the behest of *The Corsair*," he wrote in his journals. In addition to his friendly and generous nature, Kierkegaard had a crooked and sway back; his legs were thin, and he walked strangely. In the satire, he was drawn in various caricatures, picking on his physical problems. Kierkegaard was humiliated by these publications, and he suffered greatly.

The *Corsair* Affair had a direct effect on Kierkegaard's writing. In his personal journal writings and his philosophical work, the role of suffering in one's life is a key theme.

The Danish People's Church

One other life event worth mentioning is the pamphlet attack he led near the end of his life against the Church.

The Lutheran Church in Denmark was a State Church; being a citizen of Denmark also meant enrollment into the Lutheran Church. Kierkegaard was incensed by the lack of involvement it took to be a Christian, and he felt that "Official Christianity" or "Christendom" had departed so far from the New Testament teachings that it needed to be torn down and rebuilt. It's important to note that Kierkegaard was a believer; he was not attacking the teachings of Christianity, but the official way it was sanctioned and carried out by the Lutheran Church at the time. His feelings about the church came to a head after the death of a prominent bishop, J. P. Mynster.

Mynster was a friend of Kierkegaard's father, so Kierkegaard knew him personally. Despite the connection to his father, Kierkegaard's opinion of Mynster grew less favorable. Basically, Kierkegaard thought the bishop lived a life that was too comfortable, too materialistic, too urbane—a contrast to living with real Christian values.

When the popular bishop died, H. L. Martensen, a professor of theology and one of Kierkegaard's professors, wrote and published a memorial sermon. In this sermon, Martensen referred to Mynster as one of the true

witnesses of the Christian Church. Kierkegaard used this expression (true witness, a witness to the truth) to describe the true Christian, the martyr, and he became incensed when Martensen used it to refer to Mynster.

Kierkegaard began publishing a series of pamphlets, under his own name, using his own money. He also changed his writing style and addressed his audience directly in this journal that he named *The Instant*. He sought to renew Christian faith within the church. Kierkegaard was profoundly religious and greatly influenced by Martin Luther and Luther's attack on Catholic doctrine that was not supported by scripture. He was clearly hoping for an analogous reformation within the Danish People's Church of the time. His aims are summed up in this excerpt from "Introduction to the Philosopher" by Frithiof Brandt and Peter P. Rohde, at the Kierkegaard on the Internet Web site (www.webcom.com/kierke):

He spoke in his own name, not in order to rebuke the Church and the clergy for not fulfilling the strict demands of Christianity (for he was well aware that neither they nor he could do that), but because, while they failed, they refused to admit that they neither could nor would conform to the demands, preferring to live in domestic comfort and prosperity and worldly culture, while trying to make themselves and the world believe that this was the meaning of Christianity.

Kierkegaard wrote nine issues of *The Instant* and was readying the tenth when he fell ill.

An Early Death

According to recent analysis of his hospital records, Kierkegaard probably suffered from progressive spinal paralysis. In October of 1855, after a fall in the street, he was taken to Frederiks Hospital. He died November 11, 1855, at the age of 42.

Søren Kierkegaard is buried in the Kierkegaard family burial place in Copenhagen, and this hymnal verse appears on his original gravestone:

There is a little time,
 Then have I won,
 Then will the entire strife
 Be suddenly gone,
 Then can I rest
 In halls of roses
 And ceaselessly [with]
 My Jesus speak.

This original tombstone, in fact, now resides in the Copenhagen City Museum. His grave now contains a newer stone with a shortened version of this verse.

Kierkegaard's work remained in obscurity until it was read and promoted by Georg Brandes, a Danish critic. Kierkegaard's fame then quickly spread through Germany, Scandinavia, and France, as well as to the United States. Kierkegaard would most likely not have been surprised; he wrote with that goal in mind and noted in his journal, during the *Corsair* Affair, "To my contemporaries my significance depends on my trousers; it may be that to a later era my significance will also depend a little on my writings."