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Faith, Freedom, and the Journey of Selfhood: A Kierkegaardian Reading of Paul and Norman in A River Runs Through It by Norman Maclean

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Abstract

This study examines how moral inwardness and existential choice shape the narrative world of Norman Maclean's A River Runs Through It. Drawing on Kierkegaard's conceptual framework of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages of existence (Kierkegaard, 1843/1987,1968), the research argues that the novella presents selfhood as a dynamic process constituted through reflective deliberation, ethical responsibility, and faith-informed engagement. The divergent trajectories of two central figures one oriented toward immediacy, sensation, and aesthetic gratification, the other guided by sustained ethical reflection and religious attentiveness—foreground the tension between impulse and inward commitment. Recreational pursuits, familial interactions, and contemplative engagement with nature operate as sites where freedom, moral responsibility, and selfhood intersect, revealing both the limits of external influence and the necessity of personal inward resolve. Episodes of aesthetic indulgence, ethical deliberation, and spiritual awareness illustrate the progressive movement through Kierkegaard's stages, highlighting the precariousness of selfhood when inward reflection is absent and the transformative potential when ethical and religious inwardness is cultivated. The analysis demonstrates that Maclean's narrative not only dramatizes the emergence of authentic selfhood but also illuminates the relational and existential dimensions of moral development, showing that selfhood is realized through deliberate choice, ongoing inward engagement, and a sustained negotiation between personal desire, ethical responsibility, and spiritual faith.

Keywords: moral inwardness, aesthetic stage, ethical stage, religious stage, selfhood, personal authenticity, familial duty.

Introduction

The moral sense and actions of human beings have been a longstanding field of exploration in philosophy. It has been a contested matter whether it is humanity's inner sense of right and wrong that enables moral action or whether morality derives from socially established norms. At a surface level, it appears that moral sense is shaped predominantly by family, society, and religion. Regardless of its source, it is widely acknowledged that an inner moral order serves as the foundation for every action taken by an individual.

When confronted with choosing between two or more possibilities, every individual is bound to make a choice in agreement with his or her moral ideals, irrespective of their truth value and practical validity. Either an individual acts according to the rules established by society or in light of personal morality. In the latter case, an individual is obliged to assume responsibility for his or her choices.

Like his predecessors, the Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard dealt with this dilemma when he laid the foundations of his existentialist philosophy. Acclaimed as the father of existentialism, Kierkegaard maintained that true morality does not emerge from merely following external social and religious prescriptions, but from one's inner commitment to oneself.

He posits that since every act constitutes an outward manifestation of human free will, every individual ought to choose with what may be termed moral inwardness that is, a passionate, solitary, and infinite concern with the subjective self. For Kierkegaard, acting morally is not merely a matter of choosing between right and wrong, but rather the fundamental choice to embrace ethical life itself.

A morally inward person does not act out of fear, habit, or social conditioning, but out of inner commitment to oneself. In his notable works such as *Either/Or* (1843) *Fear and Trembling* (1984) and *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), Kierkegaard develops the concept of

three stages of existence: the Aesthetic, the Ethical, and the Religious, which represent his proposed journey toward authentic selfhood.

These stages describe possible modes of life through which an individual may move in the pursuit of meaning and selfhood. Kierkegaard does not claim that all people progress through each stage, but rather that these stages represent distinct orientations toward life, choice, and faith.

The aesthetic stage is the lowest sphere of existence, characterized by immediacy, pleasure, sensation, and the pursuit of enjoyment. The aesthetic individual avoids commitment and seeks experiences that provide excitement or escape. Kierkegaard remarks:

"The tragic contains an infinite leniency; really it is what divine love and mercy are, but from the aesthetic perspective on human life; it is even milder, and so I would say it was a maternal love which soothes the troubled . *(Kierkegaard, 1987) p. 123*

*"*The reflective aesthete is now only cognitive flickers away from a self-consciousness that comprehends the despair of freedom and responsibility that accompanies authentic selfhood *"(Kierkegaard 1968, p. 189)*

This stage lacks inwardness and responsibility; it is dominated by external stimulation, impulsive choices, and the avoidance of deeper self-reflection. For Kierkegaard, the limitation of the aesthetic life is that it ultimately leads to dissatisfaction, boredom, and despair. The individual remains fragmented, unable to confront deeper questions of meaning and selfhood.

The ethical stage represents a higher level of existence based on responsibility, deliberate choice, and moral commitment. Transitioning to this stage requires the individual to take accountability for their actions and adopt a stable identity grounded in duty. Kierkegaard explains:

"To choose oneself ethically is to acquire a stability deeper than the accidents of circumstance." (*Kierkegaard,1987, p. 300*)

"The aesthetic factor in a person is that by which he is immediately what he is; the ethical factor is that by which he becomes what he becomes" (*Kierkegaard 1968, p. 492).*

Here, the person develops a consistent moral framework, moves beyond momentary pleasures, and begins to see life as shaped by long-term commitments. The ethical stage involves self-discipline, relational responsibility, and the recognition that choices define the self. It is an inward turn toward integrity, order, and self-governance.

The religious stage is the highest and most demanding sphere of human existence. It involves a personal, inward relationship with God that surpasses ethical rules and rational explanations. Kierkegaard describes this as:

"The religious is the expression of a paternal love, since it contains the ethical but in a mollified form. And mollified by what? Precisely by what gives the tragic its leniency: continuity" *(Kierkegaard, 1987, p.123)*

The religious indvidual accord-ingly finds his elevation, his paradoxical "greatness," by means of that power "whose strength is impotence," that wisdom "whose secret is foolishness," that hope "whose form is madness," and that love "which is hatred of one's self*." (Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, 1983) p. 31*

This stage requires subjective inwardness, complete dependence on God, and what Kierkegaard calls the "leap of faith." It is characterized by passionate commitment, paradox, and the willingness to embrace what exceeds human understanding. The religious person surrenders control, accepts uncertainty, and grounds their selfhood not in external achievement but in divine relation.

These three stages together form a coherent theoretical framework for analyzing faith, freedom, and the journey of selfhood. The Kierkegaard captures the existential movement through the stages:

"Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards" (*Kierkegaard, 1843/1996, IV A 164).*

"Each stage is lived forward, each understood in reflection. Kierkegaard's concept of moral inwardness with its three stages provides a thoughtful lens through which to analyze the short story and novella *A River Runs Through It* by Norman Maclean, published in 1976. The novella explores the divergent moral trajectories of two brothers, Paul and Norman Maclean, raised under the strict Presbyterian guidance of their minister father in early twentieth-century Montana.

Paul embodies a fundamentally aesthetic existence: he pursues fly-fishing with artistic brilliance and lives with reckless abandon, gambling compulsively, drinking heavily, and repeatedly finding himself in dangerous situations that alienate him from social and familial expectations. His refusal to accept help or modify his self-destructive behavior reflects a commitment to individual freedom untethered from ethical responsibility, ultimately leading to his violent death. Norman, by contrast, occupies the ethical stage: he adheres to conventional moral standards, pursues a respectable academic career, maintains social propriety, and experiences profound internal conflict as he witnesses his brother's descent yet feels powerless to intervene in a meaningful way.

From a Kierkegaardian perspective, Paul and Norman occupy different existential planes, reflecting their contrasting approaches toward life and their respective journeys toward or away from authentic selfhood, with the novella ultimately suggesting that both brothers, through their choices and their faith, achieve a form of authenticity that defies simple moral judgment.

Research Questions

1. How do Paul and Norman represent Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethical stages, and what does their bond reveal about the limits of helping someone in another stage?
2. How does *A River Runs Through It* complicate Kierkegaard's idea of moral inwardness, especially between personal authenticity and family duty?

Literature Review

Philosophy and morality have long been intertwined domains shaping human understanding of existence, freedom, and ethical responsibility. Philosophical inquiry supplies conceptual tools for examining life, the self, and human choice, while morality provides principles for evaluating those choices. Human experience often reflects the tension between desire, social expectation, and ethical duty, suggesting that moral decisions are not simply prescriptive rules but existential acts through which individuals define themselves. In this sense, the pursuit of truth, virtue, and meaningful action becomes central to personal growth and to the cultivation of authentic freedom, understood as the ability to make reflective and responsible choices.

Building upon this foundation, Socrates established the foundational link between philosophical inquiry and moral life. He insisted on continual self-examination and critical reflection, claiming that virtue arises from reasoned judgment rather than blind adherence to custom. His declaration that "The unexamined life is not worth living" (*p.33*) *(Plato, 1997)* highlights that moral understanding develops through active reflection. For Socrates, wisdom and ethical practice are inseparable, and authentic selfhood emerges through attentive engagement with one's beliefs and responsibilities, fostering a freedom grounded in moral coherence and existential awareness. In comparison, Kierkegaard similarly emphasizes inward reflection and personal responsibility, but where Socrates roots authentic living in rational inquiry and dialectical self-examination, Kierkegaard grounds it in subjective truth and the individual's passionate relationship with God. Socratic inwardness is rational and dialogical, while Kierkegaard's is existential, spiritual, and centered on the leap of faith.

Tracing the development of ethical thought, the Hellenistic schools, particularly the Epicureans and Stoics, played an important role in shaping moral philosophy. Epicurus argued that the highest good is pleasure as freedom from pain, advocating actions that promote tranquility and minimize suffering *(Epicurus, 1994)*. Likewise, Stoics such as Epictetus emphasized virtue, self-control, and mastery over one's judgments rather than external circumstances (*Epictetus, 1948*). Both traditions highlight reflective deliberation and personal responsibility as essential to ethical life, even though they differ in focus—Epicureans prioritize peace of mind, while Stoics prioritize rational virtue.

In contrast, Kierkegaard situates ethical life in subjective inwardness and the individual's relation to God (*Kierkegaard, 1987*). While the Hellenistic schools stress rational deliberation and external measures of well-being, Kierkegaard emphasizes reflection, conscience, and existential responsibility. He argues that authentic ethical life requires inward commitment and the courage to choose faithfully before God (*Kierkegaard, 2009).* In this way, Kierkegaard builds on classical ethical thought while highlighting the centrality of faith, personal inwardness, and the existential challenges of moral freedom.

Following this classical perspective, Hegel located ethics in Sittlichkeit ethical life rooted in social institutions (*Stern, 2012*) and regarded the state as "the ethical whole," where morality is fulfilled through communal participation (Hegel, 1991). He famously declares, "What is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational" (*Hegel, 1991, p. 10),* expressing his belief that truth unfolds through historical institutions, including family, civil society, and the state. In Hegel's view, the individual realizes freedom only within these universal structures. In contrast, Kierkegaard argues that such a system diminishes the individual's inward struggle by absorbing personal responsibility into the universal. For Kierkegaard, truth is not found in the rational unfolding of history but in the subjective, inward commitment of the single individual before God. Thus, Hegel grounds morality in the universal; Kierkegaard grounds it in the inward and the singular. His critique targeted not only Hegel but also Danish Hegelians like Martensen and Heiberg, whose systematic applications of Hegelian thought he found reductive (*Stewart, 2003; Stern, 2012*).

Kierkegaard's relation to Kant involves both overlap and departure. Both saw moral obligation as involving constraint and recognized that humans lack "holy wills" (*Stern, 2012; Green, 1992*). Kant grounded obligation in practical reason and the categorical imperative, locating the source of moral law in the autonomous rational will *)* (Kant, 1998). He famously states, "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me"(*p. 133*) *(Kant.I, 1997),* underscoring that moral duty arises from rational autonomy and universalizable principles. Kierkegaard, however, argues that moral obligation reaches its fullest and most demanding form only in relation to God. While Kant's autonomy emphasizes rational consistency, Kierkegaard's theonomy emphasizes faith, inward passion, and the possibility of radical commands

transcending universal ethics. Yet both focus on inwardness and motivation, distinguishing them from consequentialist approaches.

Nietzsche also addressed inwardness but reconfigured it. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche, 1909), he presents the "Übermensch," a figure who creates values and engages in self-overcoming. Nietzschean inwardness emphasizes self-creation, autonomy, and resistance to external moral frameworks. Stanković Pejnović (2015) applies this concept to D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers, showing how Paul Morel exemplifies Nietzschean inwardness through self-assertion and the creation of personal values. Compared with Kierkegaard, Nietzschean inwardness is secular and self-affirming, whereas Kierkegaardian inwardness is faith-oriented, emphasizing humility and accountability to God.

Jean-Paul Sartre reimagines inwardness through radical freedom. In *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 2021), he argues that humans are "condemned to be free,(p. 553)" responsible for creating their essence through choice. He reinforces this view by stating, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" *(p. 22)* (Sartre, 2007), highlighting that identity and morality result from continual self-definition. Sartrean inwardness is secular and autonomy-driven, emphasizing authenticity achieved through responsible choice. Literary applications, such as Yaseen and (Khan, 2024) study of Chaucer's pilgrims, show characters negotiating agency, self-deception, and moral responsibility. Compared with Kierkegaard, Sartre removes God from the center of moral life and replaces religious inwardness with existential self-determination. Yet both share a focus on responsibility, self-awareness, and the individual's confrontation with freedom, though Kierkegaard roots these struggles in faith and spiritual accountability. Sartre emphasizes the anxiety and burden of absolute human freedom, where the self alone must determine values and face moral consequences, capturing both the liberating and weighty dimensions of ethical life.

Kierkegaard's influence is particularly visible in American literature. Walker Percy has drawn sustained scholarly attention, with Campbell (2015) arguing that Percy's characters follow Kierkegaardian paths from despair to faith. Davis (2023) examines Kierkegaardian anxiety and despair in works by Steinbeck, O'Connor, Percy, and Updike, showing how mid-twentieth-century authors engaged existential questions within religious frameworks.

Kierkegaard's insights help illuminate characters confronting "sickness unto death"—despair arising from misrelation to self, others, and God.

Kierkegaard is chosen over his predecessors and successors because his framework offers a uniquely nuanced account of inward moral development that speaks directly to the existential tensions depicted in *A River Runs Through It*. While earlier thinkers such as Socrates emphasize rational deliberation and virtue, their views remain oriented toward universal principles rather than the subjective struggle of choosing oneself. Later figures like Nietzsche and Sartre, though influential in their own right, shift toward secular self-creation and radical autonomy, thereby losing the theological depth that is essential to understanding the novella's setting and its concern with Christian themes. Kierkegaard alone combines inwardness, freedom, responsibility, and faith into a single vocabulary capable of capturing Paul's aesthetic self-enclosure and Norman's ethical striving.

Despite extensive Kierkegaardian applications, Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* (1976) has received little attention in this regard. This absence is notable given the novella's engagement with themes central to Kierkegaard: the tension between aesthetic and ethical existence, divine grace, the limits of understanding, and the pursuit of authentic selfhood. Scholarship has focused on its Presbyterian theology (Lindor Scholar, 2016), its tragic vision and themes of predestination (Wood, 2025), and its exploration of familial love. Wood (2025) observes its engagement with biblical patterns of election and loss, yet these insights have not been examined through a Kierkegaardian lens.

The novella's Presbyterian context with its emphasis on fallenness, grace, and divine sovereignty provides fertile ground for such analysis. The brothers' divergent responses to this framework echo Kierkegaard's spheres of existence. Norman moves from the aesthetic toward the ethical, marked by responsibility and reflection, while Paul remains largely aesthetic, living for immediacy and artistic self-expression in fly-fishing. The question "Can we love completely without complete understanding?" resonates with Kierkegaard's themes of faith, paradox, and the limits of rational comprehension. The father's sermon "It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us" (*Maclean, 1976, p. 77)* captures the mystery of the other and the need for love despite uncertainty.

Through Kierkegaard's notion of moral inwardness, the contrasting paths of Paul and Norman take on new clarity. Their spheres of existence, their divergent inwardness, the role of grace, and the strain between freedom and responsibility reveal subtleties often overlooked. The paradox of loving without full understanding becomes central, particularly in Norman's reflective account of a selfhood Paul strives toward but cannot fully realize.

Data Analysis:

Faith, freedom, and selfhood constitute central concerns in existential philosophy, particularly in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, who conceptualizes human existence as progressing through distinct stages toward authentic selfhood. According to Kierkegaard, individuals navigate life through three stages the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious each reflecting a unique orientation toward pleasure, moral responsibility, and faith. The aesthetic stage prioritizes immediacy and sensory enjoyment, often resulting in dissatisfaction and existential despair, whereas the ethical stage entails deliberate choice, moral accountability, and inward reflection.

The religious stage demands a personal, inward relationship with the divine, requiring courage to embrace life's inherent paradoxes. Underpinning Kierkegaard's framework is the principle that freedom and personal choice are central to the development of selfhood, and that inwardness is essential for authentic moral and spiritual growth.

Norman Maclean's A River Runs Through It articulates these Kierkegaardian preoccupations through the divergent life paths of the two brothers, Norman and Paul. Norman embodies ethical commitment and religious sensitivity, marked by sustained moral self-examination, a sense of responsibility, and a quiet spiritual consciousness, especially in his familial relationships and his contemplative engagement with nature. Paul, by contrast, largely remains within the aesthetic mode of existence, driven by immediacy, thrill, and sensory gratification. At moments, however, he exhibits brief intimations of ethical awareness or spiritual depth, suggesting an unresolved struggle between impulse and the possibility of inward transformation. The brothers' dynamic foregrounds the role of freedom and choice in shaping selfhood, underscoring both the limits of external influence and the necessity of inward resolve. Whereas Norman follows the discipline and depth of ethical and religious

life, Paul's trajectory illustrates the precariousness of selfhood when it is not grounded in deliberate commitment, echoing Kierkegaard's insistence that authentic existence emerges only through individual inward responsibility.

Aesthetic stage

Individuals in the aesthetic stage live primarily for immediate pleasure, sensory enjoyment, and superficial consolation, often avoiding reflection or moral responsibility. Kierkegaard illustrates this perspective, noting:

"**The tragic contains an infinite leniency; really it is what divine love and mercy are, but from the aesthetic perspective on human life; it is even milder, and so I would say it was a maternal love which soothes the troubled**" (*Kierkegaard,1987 p. 123).*

This highlights that the aesthetic stage is characterized by leniency and comfort, akin to a maternal form of care, which soothes distress without demanding inward engagement or ethical deliberation. Individuals in this stage seek novelty, excitement, and aesthetic appreciation, whether in art, leisure, or social pleasures. While such experiences satisfy immediate desires, they preclude deeper engagement with existential questions, ethical obligations, or spiritual selfhood. Philosophically, Kierkegaard positions the aesthetic as a natural yet limited stage: it provides temporary relief and stimulation but is inherently unstable, often culminating in boredom, dissatisfaction, or existential despair if one remains there without progressing toward reflection or faith.

Paul consistently embodies this orientation, living a life structured around excitement and personal enjoyment. His immersion in immediacy is particularly evident in his approach to fly-fishing, which he treats not as a contemplative or disciplined craft but as an exhilarating challenge driven by mastery and thrill. He remarks,

"**I'm pretty good with a rod, but I need three more years before I can think like a fish**"

(p. 75) (Maclean, 1976)

This statement reflects his focus on skill and outward achievement rather than ethical reflection or inward growth. Paul's pride in his abilities and preoccupation with performance

exemplify the aesthetic focus on sensation, illustrating Kierkegaard's notion of the aesthete as someone primarily guided by mood and immediate pleasure.

Paul's impulsivity extends to his social and romantic life, where he seeks relationships for pleasure, novelty, and thrill rather than commitment. Norman recalls,

"**Paul began to tell me about a new girl he had picked up. I listened on my toes, ready to jump in any direction"** *(Maclean, 1976, p. 41)*

This reveals Paul's pursuit of novelty and excitement without concern for sustained relational responsibility. His behavior is dominated by fleeting desires, reflecting the aesthetic individual's preoccupation with immediate experience. Additionally, Paul's early life choices reinforce his aesthetic orientation. The narrator explains,

"**Paul had decided this early he had two major purposes in life: to fish and not to work. In his teens, then, he got a summer job as a lifeguard at the municipal swimming pool, so in the early evenings he could go fishing and during the days he could look over girls in bathing suits and date them up for the late evenings"** *(Maclean, 1976, p. 12)*

Here, Paul deliberately structures his life to maximize pleasure while avoiding responsibility, echoing Kierkegaard's observation that aesthetic living prioritizes immediacy over long-term consequences.

However, Kierkegaard also emphasizes that the aesthetic is the beginning, not the end, stating: "**The aesthetic is the beginning, but it cannot be the end. If a person remains there, he loses himself; if he moves beyond it, he may gain himself before God."** Paul's life illustrates the first part of this idea: his aesthetic pleasures and impulsivity represent a natural starting point, yet they also reveal the risk of stagnation if one never moves toward reflection or faith. In this sense, Paul's aesthetic stage, while limiting his inward development, contains the potential to awaken awareness of deeper moral and spiritual realities, a potential that occasionally surfaces in his brief contemplations, hinting at the possibility but not the fulfillment of faith.

Norman, although engaging in certain aesthetic pleasures during his youth, does not inhabit the aesthetic stage to the same extent as Paul. He observes,

"I liked the woods and I liked work, but for a good many summers I didn't do much fishing" *(Maclean, 1976, p. 12)*

While he enjoys leisure, Norman does not allow immediate gratification to dominate his life. Rather, he pursue activities that foster discipline, self-reflection, and relational awareness practices that anticipate his progression toward the ethical and religious stages. This contrast shows Kierkegaard's contention that, although aesthetic experiences are universally available, transcending them necessitates inward reflection and deliberate moral choice.

Viewed Together, aesthetic stage shapes both brothers differently: Paul remains largely absorbed in mood-driven pleasure, impulsivity, and avoidance of responsibility, whereas Norman gradually develops reflection, responsibility, and moral awareness, demonstrating the beginnings of self-directed growth and the potential for faith.

Ethical stage

The ethical stage, as Kierkegaard defines it, represents a mode of existence in which the individual moves beyond the fleeting pleasures and moods of the aesthetic stage to embrace deliberate choice, moral responsibility, and self-reflection. Kierkegaard states that

"**The ethical is strict and harsh"** *(Kierkegaard,1987, p. 123).*

"**To choose oneself ethically is to acquire a stability deeper than the accidents of circumstance"** *(Kierkegaard,1987, p. 300),*

focusing on view that ethical living requires a stable and coherent sense of self grounded in principle rather than circumstance. Individuals in this stage evaluate their actions through long-term consequences, duties, and moral ideals, cultivating integrity and accountability. This stage involves conscious engagement with obligations to oneself and others, where decisions are guided by reflection and commitment rather than impulse or desire.

The ethical stage reflects a shift from immediate gratification to sustained responsibility, where individuals construct meaning through deliberate choices and the acceptance of their consequences. While it does not reach the inwardness of the religious stage, it provides a structured framework for living, promoting self-discipline, coherence, and stability. By prioritizing responsibility, consistency, and principled action, the ethical stage bridges the

superficiality of aesthetic living and the deeper demands of spiritual or religious commitment, serving as a crucial stage in the development of authentic selfhood.

Norman depicts ethical living through careful reflection and relational responsibility. He reflects,

"**I liked the woods and I liked work, but for a good many summers I didn't do much fishing"** *(Maclean, 1976, p. 12)*

It signifies that although he enjoys leisure, Norman does not allow immediate pleasure to dominate his life. Instead, he engages in activities that cultivate discipline, self-reflection, and a sense of responsibility. His choices indicate thoughtful consideration of how to spend his time, reflecting Kierkegaard's notion that ethical individuals act with inward deliberation and a commitment to self-directed moral development.

He consistently considers the moral implications of his actions toward Paul, balancing care with respect for his brother's autonomy. He contemplates whether to intervene in Paul's reckless behavior:

Should or shouldn't I speak to my brother about what happened the other night? *(Maclean ,1976, p. 32)*

It validates Norman's inward deliberation, as he weighs the moral consequences of speaking up against his respect for Paul's independence. His ethical reflection also extends to practical responsibilities:

"**Shouldn't I at least offer to help him with money, if he has to pay damages?"** *(Maclean, 1976, p. 32)*

Here, ethical awareness involves not only discerning what is right but also considering tangible actions that fulfill moral obligations. Norman's careful weighing of conscience and action exemplifies Kierkegaard's assertion that ethical life requires conscious choice and committed inwardness.

Norman further proves his ethical responsibility through constructive actions intended to guide others positively. For instance, he involves Neal, his brother-in-law, in meaningful activities: "**By taking him fishing with us."** *(Maclean, 1976, p. 38)*

This act illustrates Norman's moral concern in practice—he seeks to provide guidance and meaningful engagement while respecting Neal's autonomy. It reflects an ethical orientation that influences positively without imposing control, embodying Kierkegaard's ideal of relational ethical responsibility. Norman also acknowledges the limits of his influence over Paul: "**It is a shame I do not understand him"** *(Maclean, 1976, p. 26).* He recognizes that while he can reflect, guide, and offer support, he cannot compel Paul to act ethically or internalize responsibility.

Although primarily impulsive and oriented toward aesthetic pleasures, Paul occasionally reflects ethical awareness. For example, "**Then he insisted we go by way of Missoula and spend the night with father and mother"** *(Maclean, 1976, p. 60).* This illustrates that Paul can act generously and considerately, yet such behavior is sporadic and situational, in contrast to Norman's consistent ethical inwardness.

The contrast between Paul and Norman illustrates Kierkegaard's ethical stage as a life of deliberate choice, inward reflection, and moral responsibility. Norman's consistent ethical awareness and relational sensitivity exemplify sustained moral development, while Paul's occasional acts of consideration underscore the difference between sporadic insight and committed ethical living. Their characters demonstrate that ethical growth requires conscious, self-directed engagement with both reflection and action.

Religious stage

The religious stage represents the highest sphere of human development, characterized by inwardness, faith, and a personal relationship with God. Kierkegaard emphasizes that this stage integrates ethical responsibility but transcends it, offering ultimate consolation and guidance:

"**The religious is the expression of a paternal love, since it contains the ethical but in a mollified form. And mollified by what? Precisely by what gives the tragic its leniency: continuity"** *(Kierkegaard,1987, p. 123).*

In this passage, Kierkegaard contrasts the religious stage with the aesthetic and ethical stages. While the aesthetic stage provides maternal leniency and the ethical stage demands strict moral responsibility, the religious stage combines ethical rigor with spiritual guidance,

likened to a paternal form of love. This stage requires inward reflection, courage, and faith, enabling the individual to confront existential paradoxes while trusting in a higher, divine order. The religious stage is thus not simply about following ethical rules, but about integrating moral responsibility into a larger, transcendent framework, allowing for spiritual consolation and authentic selfhood.

In A River Runs Through It, Norman embodies the religious stage through his continuous contemplation of memory, life's continuity, and its deeper mysteries. He observes, "**Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them**" *(Maclean, 1976, p.77),* revealing that, although he cannot fully comprehend the inner lives of those he loves, he maintains a profound moral and spiritual connection to them. His affection is coupled with humility and inward reflection, demonstrating that religious life involves recognizing human limitations while sustaining meaningful relational and moral bonds. Through deliberate contemplation of the past and his relationships, Norman integrates memory, loss, and personal experience into his sense of selfhood, aligning with Kierkegaard's notion that religious life requires inwardness, acceptance of the unknowable, and trust in the transcendent.

Taylor also asserts this concept by claiming:

Deliberate and committed choice provides the narrative structure of a selfhood in becoming; it is the personal history of the gradual construction of an authentic and self-possessed personality *(Taylor, 2000, p. 242).*

Norman's awareness of the transcendent and unity with nature further manifests his religious engagement. He reflects, "**Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters"** *(Maclean, 1976, p. 77)*

Here, the river functions as a symbol of divine order, continuity, and moral truth. Norman's perception of nature as a medium of spiritual insight reflects his capacity for inward reflection and acceptance of existence's ultimate mysteries. His interpretation of the river

represents the integration of temporal experience and transcendental understanding, key markers of Kierkegaard's religious stage.

Paul, by contrast, exhibits only sporadic glimpses of religious consciousness, revealing occasional awareness of life's fragility, mortality, and the possibility of a higher moral or spiritual order. While fly-fishing alone, he reflects, **"I think a lot about death when I fish alone. The river makes me realize that life is fragile and moments pass too quickly"** *(Maclean, 1976, p. 27)*, and he occasionally senses guidance in the natural world: "**Sometimes I feel the river knows things I cannot. It moves in ways I cannot control, yet I trust it, as if it teaches me how to be***" (Maclean, 1976, p. 54).*

These moments suggest that Paul is capable of perceiving existential truths and a sense of the transcendent, but such insights are fleeting and situational, arising only in isolated experiences rather than forming a sustained spiritual practice.

Norman's sustained reflection and inward engagement affirms Kierkegaard's religious stage, showing faith as a deliberate, self-directed commitment that embraces life's uncertainties. Paul's sporadic glimpses of mortality and the transcendent remain fleeting, highlighting that authentic religious development requires continuous inward reflection, moral deliberation, and trust in the transcendent rather than occasional awareness.

The contrasting lives of Paul and Norman vividly substantiates Kierkegaard's stages of moral inwardness, highlighting how selfhood develops through deliberate reflection and ethical engagement. Norman's consistent ethical and religious inwardness shows that authentic moral and spiritual growth emerges from conscious, self-directed choice. His engagement with family, nature, and memory shows that inward reflection can coexist with relational responsibility, emphasizing that personal authenticity does not diminish care for others. Paul, by contrast, remains largely guided by aesthetic impulses, with only occasional ethical or spiritual awareness, reinforcing the difficulty of transcending immediate pleasure without sustained inward effort.

The characters in the novel accentuate how moral inwardness is experienced in relationships. While guidance and influence are possible, genuine growth cannot be imposed; Paul's sporadic insights reveal the limits of external influence when individuals occupy different

stages of development. Maclean presents selfhood as both personal and relational, shaped by freedom, reflection, and ethical responsibility within familial and social contexts. Through the brothers' contrasting paths, the narrative demonstrates that authentic development requires ongoing inward engagement, balancing personal moral deliberation with attentiveness to the ethical demands of relationships.

Conclusion

The analysis of Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* through Søren Kierkegaard's framework of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages elucidates the intricate relationship between immediacy, moral responsibility, and spiritual inwardness in the formation of authentic selfhood. This close textual reading examines how these modes of existence intersect within familial relationships and lived experience, revealing the limits of external influence on moral and spiritual development. Through the contrasting trajectories of Paul and Norman, the narrative shows that selfhood is not determined by circumstance alone but emerges through inward deliberation and personal commitment. Maclean's portrayal affirms that identical environments can yield divergent existential paths depending on how individuals appropriate freedom and responsibility.

The study further explores how aesthetic living, oriented toward immediacy and sensation, lacks the stability required for sustained moral or spiritual coherence. Paul's trajectory underscores the volatility of aesthetic existence, while Norman's ethical reflection and religious attentiveness reveal how deliberate choice and inward discipline foster moral continuity and existential depth. In this way, ethical and religious inwardness do not restrict freedom but refine it, directing it toward meaningful selfhood.

This analysis contributes theoretically by showing that Kierkegaard's stages operate not as fixed categories but as existential possibilities continually negotiated through inward choice. Ultimately, Maclean's narrative affirms that authentic moral and spiritual development arises through sustained inward engagement with freedom, responsibility, and faith rather than through imposed guidance or external conformity.

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