



# Identity Loss and Reconstruction in The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz and Day

Jialu Song 

School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing, China.

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Jialu Song  [/0009-0008-9393-9426](https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9393-9426)

### **ABSTRACT**

Mordecai Richler, a contemporary Canadian Jewish writer, reveals the identity confusion faced by Jewish immigrants in their integration into Canadian society through the description of the life experience of the protagonist Duddy Kravitz in his novel *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959). Meanwhile, in the novel *Day* (1961), Elie Wiesel, a contemporary American Jewish writer born in Romania, examines how Holocaust survivors lose their identities and attempt to seek identity reconstruction within the context of traumatic memories and guilt through the perspective of the protagonist, Eliezer. This article aims to interpret the manifestations and reasons for identity loss and the possibility of identity reconstruction of the protagonists Duddy Kravitz and Eliezer based on identity theory. Through interpretation, it can be concluded that Duddy is marginalized by mainstream society and blamed for anti-Semitism within the Jewish community, resulting in a significant identity crisis. However, his success in purchasing land offers the possibility for him to escape marginalization and achieve identity reconstruction in mainstream society. Similarly, Eliezer, as a Holocaust survivor, experiences identity loss under the influence of traumatic memories and feelings of guilt, leading to questioning the existence of God and a death wish. Nevertheless, in the later part of the novel, he transitions from an unnamed narrator to “Eliezer”, and the ashes left after his portrait is burned symbolize his completeness, allowing him to regain self-identity.

**Keywords:** *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *Day*, identity loss, identity reconstruction

### **Introduction**

In his novel *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959), Mordecai Richler (1931-2001), a Canadian Jewish writer, takes the Jewish community in Montreal in the 1940s as the backdrop and depicts the conflicts between the Jewish people and other ethnic groups, and within the Jewish people. He also reveals the identity confusion faced by Jewish immigrants in their integration into Canadian society through the description of the life experience of the protagonist, Duddy Kravitz. Meanwhile, *Day* (1961) is a semi-autobiographical novel written by Elie Wiesel (1928-2017), a Holocaust survivor and contemporary American Jewish writer born in Romania. Wiesel examines how Holocaust survivors lose their identities and attempt to seek identity reconstruction within the context of traumatic memories and guilt through the perspective of the protagonist, Eliezer. Given the proximity of the publication dates of these two novels, the Jewish protagonists, and the common theme of identity loss, it is necessary to analyze and compare the identity loss and reconstruction of these two protagonists. Therefore, the purpose of this essay is to interpret the manifestations and causes of identity loss, as well as the possibilities of identity reconstruction of Duddy Kravitz and Eliezer, based on identity theory. Before starting the analysis, a brief literature review will be conducted.

Chinese scholar Jin (2015) focused on the humorous techniques employed in the novel *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, arguing that Mordecai Richler can make readers better

understand the secular environment in which the protagonist Duddy Kravitz lives and his incongruity with the environment through the use of absurd curses and witty remarks. Such humorous techniques also enable readers to view Duddy objectively, neither resenting his ruthlessness, selfishness, and unscrupulousness nor overly sympathizing with him due to his racial and moral constraints. Foreign scholars Nivatha and Sharon (2018) analyzed the process and challenges faced by Duddy, a third-generation immigrant, in seeking self-identity in Canada. They argue that Duddy attempts to affirm his self-worth by integrating into Canadian mainstream society, but in this process neglects his spiritual connection to Jewish culture, resulting in a loss of his Jewish identity. Their research provides valuable insights for this essay's in-depth analysis of Duddy's identity loss and reconstruction in Canadian mainstream society.

In addition, existing research on Day has examined how it reflects the difficulties faced by the Holocaust survivors in abstracting themselves from the past and its continuing impact on their present lives, mainly from the perspective of trauma and narrative. Sholar Levin (2020) emphasized that while the novel is Holocaust-based, Wiesel did not directly address the event, but rather employed textual silences to illustrate the protagonist's inability to escape memories of the camps and their devastating consequences on his current life. Levin also argued that it is only through transforming these silences into speech that Duddy can truly begin to live in the present.

#### *The Manifestations and Reasons for the Loss of Identity of Duddy Kravitz and Eliezer*

Identity serves as a defining marker of one's existence in society, and without a clear identity, individuals may experience anxiety and a lack of belongingness (Yang & Chang, 2020). Over the past two millennia of the Diaspora, the Jewish people have wandered the world, lacking a fixed homeland and constantly facing strong cultural impacts and even persecution from hostile forces in their host countries. To establish a unique lifestyle in foreign lands, Jewish immigrants must uphold and transmit Jewish traditions. At the same time, they strive to integrate into the mainstream society and culture of their host countries. Therefore, many Jewish immigrants often exist in a liminal state between two cultures, causing them a sense of loneliness and exclusion from the world, which results in their loss of ethnic identity. In the novel *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Duddy Kravitz and his family, as Canadian Jewish immigrants, lived in the Jewish community of Montreal in the 1940s. There were not only conflicts between the Jewish people and other ethnic groups, but also complex and tense interpersonal relationships within the Jewish people. This social tension made Duddy's identity loss particularly significant, as he was marginalized by mainstream society and accused of anti-Semitism within the Jewish community.

Duddy, as a Jewish immigrant, has always been marginalized by the dominant WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) in Canadian society. While attending Fletcher's Field High School, he suffered persistent hostility and marginalization from teachers belonging to WASP. Some of the teachers routinely resorted to the physical punishment of bondage against the Jewish students, and they not only lacked understanding and empathy for Jewish culture but even openly displayed anti-

Semitic tendencies. Their attitude was summed up in W. E. James's tasteless wisecrack that his name is "'Jew' spelled backward" (20). This anti-Semitic attitude contributes to strained relations between them and the Jewish students, further complicating Jewish immigrants' integration into Canadian society.

In retaliation against these teachers, Duddy and other boys in his class mischievously suggested that a Christian shopkeeper at a newly opened mission on St. Joseph Boulevard go to their school "at lunchtime tomorrow and hand out some of these free pamphlets and stuff to the guys" (7). They even threw pamphlets related to Jesus at students exiting the Lubovitcher Yeshiva, a Jewish seminary. While maintaining a firm faith is crucial for Jewish immigrants to establish a unique lifestyle in a foreign land, it is shocking that Duddy used religious beliefs, which should be treated with devotion, as a tool to retaliate against teachers with anti-Semitic tendencies. This act profoundly reveals the alienating impact of marginalized identity on his self-identification, leading him astray in his path toward self-construction.

Duddy's identity crisis is further manifested in the accusations of anti-Semitism within the Jewish community for his almost paranoid pursuit of wealth and land. As a child, Duddy was only cared for by his grandfather, whose ingrained Jewish traditional values profoundly influenced the young Duddy. His grandfather often emphasized that "A man without land is nobody" (24). This idea led Duddy to view owning land as the ultimate goal in life and a key means of realizing his worth and gaining recognition from his family. Therefore, to earn the money needed to purchase land, Duddy began selling stamps, renting prohibited American comics, stealing and selling hockey sticks, and working in his uncle Benjy's dress factory before even turning 14. Upon discovering the land he desired while working as a waiter in a hotel in the Laurentian mountains, Duddy became increasingly unscrupulous and deceitful. He deceived those around him, including his loving girlfriend, Yvette, and his loyal business partner, the epilepsy patient Virgil. By forging Virgil's signature on the check, Duddy obtained Virgil's money and ultimately acquired the coveted land.

However, his unscrupulousness and greedy pursuit of material things did not earn him recognition from those around him, but instead made him more distant from them. Duddy's uncle Benjy labeled him "a pusherke, a little jew-boy on the make" (139) and expressed skepticism towards his commercial ambitions, considering them greedy and vulgar. Irwin Shubert was particularly vocal about his objections to Duddy's questionable business practices and general avarice, going as far as to say that Duddy's practices were helping to perpetuate antisemitic sentiments by living up to negative stereotypes of the Jewish business owner. This alienation and accusation exacerbated his identity crisis, leaving him increasingly lonely and confused in his pursuit of personal goals.

The Holocaust, which occurred from 1933 to 1945, was a systematic, bureaucratic, and state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators during World War II. Set in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel's novel *Day* explores the identity crisis of a Holocaust survivor through the thoughts, daydreams, and

memories of its protagonist, Eliezer. As a Jewish survivor who was sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp during the war, Eliezer became a journalist working in New York in the 1960s. One July evening, he was unexpectedly hit by a taxi, sustaining severe injuries. This unexpected event triggered his deeply buried memories, encompassing not only the suffering he and the Jewish people endured during the Holocaust but also the deep sense of guilt he carried as the sole survivor of his family. This guilt, compounded by the trauma of the Holocaust, led to Eliezer's serious loss of identity, manifesting in his questioning of God's existence and his suicidal tendencies.

Before the Holocaust, Eliezer engaged in discussions about God with his grandmother, a simple yet pious elderly Jewish woman "who saw God everywhere, even in evil, even in punishment, even in injustice" (28). She emphasized that "God is immortal" (*ibid*) and firmly believed that God would provide warmth to the faithful, stating that "he who doesn't forget God isn't cold in his grave" (*ibid*). Under the influence of his grandmother, Eliezer was also convinced of the existence of God, imagining him as "great and powerful, immense and infinite" (38). However, after the Holocaust, he began to doubt the reality of God's existence. As he awoke from his hospital bed, Dr. Paul Russel advised him, "You must thank God" (18). Yet, Eliezer repeated the question "How does one thank God?" (*ibid*) twice, and expressed his questioning of God, "Why thank him? I had not been able to understand for a long time what in the world God had done to deserve man" (*ibid*). This response reveals the devastating impact of the Holocaust on Eliezer's faith. Having lost all his loved ones and experiencing unprecedented loneliness and despair, his belief in God collapsed. He began to question why, if God was all-powerful, he did not intervene to save the Jews from such suffering. This loss of faith led Eliezer into the abyss of nihilism, making his identity unclear and causing him to doubt everything, including the meaning and value of life.

Eliezer told Dr. Russel that those who returned, "you must look at them carefully" (67), because "their appearance is deceptive, they are smugglers, they look like the others" (*ibid*), but "it isn't true" (*ibid*). In the novel, Eliezer functions as a "living dead", whose memories are filled with the horrors, persecution, torture, and humiliation he endured during the Holocaust. These traumatic memories, coupled with the guilt of surviving alone, left him a strong sense of despair and self-loathing. Despite having his friend Gyula and the woman named Kathleen who loved him, Eliezer found no satisfaction in life, "he has survived, but it is a survival he can no more come to terms with than the wholly meaningless deaths visited on his family and the millions of others" (Idinopulos, 1972), creating a strong desire for death. This strong desire for death his sense of powerlessness and despair towards life, as well as his loss of identity.

When Eliezer was involved in a car accident in Times Square in Manhattan, and woke up unable to move or speak, he felt alone and abandoned, "Deep inside I discovered a regret: I would have preferred to die" (18). Furthermore, he rejected Dr. Russel's perception that "suffering is not the enemy" (20). Instead, he chose to go toward death because, at that time, his Thanatos defeated Eros. Near the end of the novel, the author reveals Eliezer's long-hidden secret, "The accident had been an accident only in the most limited sense of the word. The cab, I had seen it coming. It had only

been a flash, but I had seen it, I could have avoided it” (105). Eliezer confessed that the car accident was a suicide attempt. The reason for his seemingly incomprehensible willingness to welcome his death is brought out in the preface to the novel. After the Holocaust, many of the Jewish children in Poland were unable to embrace life. They had known how to fight hunger, conquer fear, and outmaneuver the myriad perils that had plagued them. But once the world had more or less returned to normal, they gave up. The painful awareness of the extent to which the horrors of the Holocaust had depleted them, coupled with the feeling that they had been both vanquished and stigmatized, left them feeling so completely alone that they no longer had a reason to live. Eliezer’s ideas are consistent with theirs. Wiesel also suggested that for some Holocaust survivors, if they could no longer bear the guilt of watching their loved ones die while they survived, death became a form of liberation. Therefore, as Eliezer experienced in the novel, he attempted to escape his unbearable past and unpredictable future through suicide. However, this death instinct is not true liberation; it is merely a manifestation of his sense of powerlessness and despair towards life, as well as a reflection of his lost identity.

#### *The Possibility of Identity Reconstruction for Duddy Kravitz and Eliezer*

Notably, in the novels *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Day*, authors Mordecai Richler and Elie Wiesel not only respectively described the identity crises faced by Duddy and Eliezer, but also provided an exploration of the possibilities of their identity reconstruction. In *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Richler’s portrayal of Duddy’s relentless pursuit of wealth and land may lead readers to criticize him as an anti-Semite. However, Duddy’s actions are rooted in his deep identification with the traditions and culture of the Jewish community. Unlike Benjy, Lennie, and Irwin, who had abandoned their Jewish faith, Duddy remained steadfast in his adherence to his Jewish identity, particularly in his desire to win favor from his grandfather who strictly adheres to the Jewish identity. Teenage Duddy headed into the Laurentians as a waiter at a resort and discovered a piece of land with a lake and farms that may be coming up for sale. He also saw not only a resort camp, but also an entire village, including a synagogue, and he was convinced that he could replicate them on this land. Moreover, he believed that the land would be a home, not just for his grandfather, but for his family. They could maintain their Jewish identity and Jewish cultural traditions in the land without restriction, which is of great significance to the survival and development of the Jewish people.

In Duddy’s view, having land of his own in Canada will not only enable him to gain the recognition of his family, but it can also be a way for him to achieve personal value and social status improvement, which will help him to make the leap from the margins of society to the center. At the end of the novel, Duddy did not have the cash to pay the bill, but because he was recognized by the waiter as “Mr. Kravitz who just bought all that land round Lac St. Pierre” (185), the waiter informed him, “That’s all right, sir. We’ll mark it” (*ibid*). This shows that even though in the end Duddy achieved his goal of purchasing the land through the shady method of forging a check, he

had gained a higher status and reputation in the community, as his name alone is sufficient for credit. Duddy realized his aspiration to establish a greater name for himself in Canada, and the reconstruction of his self-identity is no longer completely impossible. Through Duddy's story, Richler also provides insights and possibilities for Jews in new countries to maintain cultural traditions, achieve identity reconstruction, and enhance their social status.

Moreover, it can be found that Elie Wiesel also explored the possibility of reconstructing Eliezer's identity in the novel *Day*, thereby expressing an affirmation of the value of continuing the life of Holocaust survivors. For the majority of *Day*, Eliezer appeared anonymously as "I", reflecting his loss of identity as he was too deeply entrenched in the shadows of his past trauma. However, towards the latter part of the novel, when Eliezer revealed a painful experience to his girlfriend Kathleen and mentioned his mother, Sarah, he regained his name and self-identity, "I am Eliezer, the son of Sarah" (75). This transformation not only represents a reconfirmation of his identity but also offers readers a glimpse of hope that Eliezer might break free from the shackles of the past and face life anew. It is worth noting, however, that voicing his name is not the culmination of his healing process or identity reconstruction. The healing of trauma and the reconstruction of identity are lengthy and ongoing processes, requiring constant struggle against the painful memories within him.

At the end of *Day*, Gyula offered sincere advice to Eliezer: "The dead have no place down here. They must leave us in peace" (105), and "Suffering is given to the living, not to the dead. It is man's duty to make it cease, not to increase it. One hour of suffering less is already a victory over fate" (106). These words made Eliezer realize that indulging in past misfortunes and sorrows is a betrayal of those he loves. Subsequently, he watched Gyula "holding the canvas with his fingertips, turning it in all directions, and waiting for it to be reduced to ashes" (108). At that moment, Eliezer realized that the portrait representing his empty soul was being destroyed before his eyes. The destruction of the portrait was not intended to bring death but to liberate him, freeing him from the guilt and shame that have prevented him from embracing life. The pile of ashes left will make Eliezer whole again, enabling him to slowly accept the fact of his survival and the death of his loved ones.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, both Duddy and Eliezer are faced with the challenge of identity loss and reconstruction. In *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Duddy's identity disorientation is reflected in his marginalized social status and his plight of being challenged as an anti-Semite within the Jewish community for his relentless pursuit of wealth and land. However, although his acquisition of money and land is morally questionable, the land he acquires opens up the possibility of escaping his status as Other and reconfiguring his Jewish identity within Canadian mainstream society. Moreover, in *Day*, Eliezer is deeply haunted by traumatic memories of the Holocaust and burdened with survivor's guilt, which causes him to sink into the past and lose faith in the future, even questioning God and developing suicidal tendencies, demonstrating a serious loss of identity.

However, towards the later part of the novel, he actively transforms from the anonymous “I” to “Eliezer” and begins to emerge from the shadows of the past, exhibiting the potential for identity reconstruction through the act of Gyula burning the portrait.

By analyzing the identity loss and reconstruction of Duddy, readers can sense the author Richler’s concern for the marginalized identity of Jewish immigrants in a foreign land and his emphasis on the need to balance their own traditions and the mainstream culture of the society if they want to gain a foothold in the foreign country. At the same time, Eliezer’s experience also gives readers a glimpse into the psychological and emotional world of the Holocaust survivors, and their efforts to seek self-identity and rebuild their lives amid trauma. Both characters are highly representative, reflecting not only their individual experiences but also the collective memories, traumas, identity losses, and efforts towards reconstruction of the Canadian Jewish immigrants and Holocaust survivor groups.

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