

# SØREN KIERKEGAARD

(1813-1855)

lived only forty-two years. Yet in his short life, he wrote more than twenty-five books. After his death, his works slipped into obscurity.



When they were rediscovered in the twentieth century they revolutionized European thinking and produced the philosophy that came to be known as

# EXISTENTIALISM.

# *Who was this man, and what did he have to say?*

THIS IS ABOUT US



*I*n one way, it's surprising anybody reads him, because all his writings are about himself, his father, and his girlfriend.



**...BUT THEY TURN OUT TO BE ABOUT YOU AND ME TOO.**



Let's start our story by talking about Søren's father, Michael.

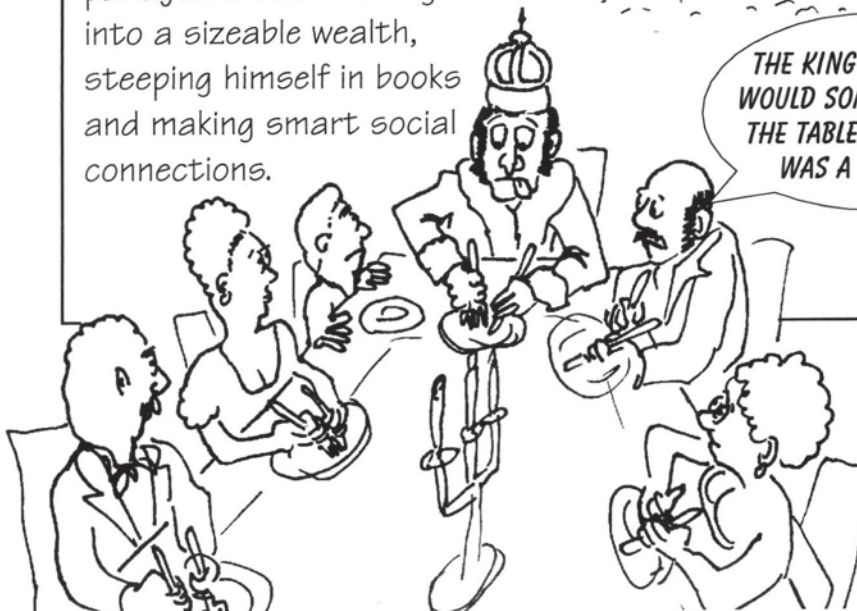
MICHAEL PEDERSEN KIERKEGAARD (1756-1838) had spent his youth in dire poverty in Denmark's windswept sand dune country of Northern Jutland, where at one moment in his childish

despair while tending sheep out on the barren heathland he had raised his little fist to heaven and had cursed God, a major sin in the Lutheran Pietism in which he had been raised.

As a young man he had come to Copenhagen and parlayed a small saving into a sizeable wealth, steeping himself in books and making smart social connections.



THE KING OF DENMARK WOULD SOMETIMES BE AT THE TABLE WHEN SØREN WAS A SMALL BOY.





Søren Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen on May 5, 1813, the last of seven children. His mother, Anne Lund Kierkegaard, was his old father's second wife and had been the maid of the first Mrs. Kierkegaard during the period of her final illness.



There remains the hint of a sexual impropriety between Michael and the maid during the last months of the life of the terminally ill Mrs. Kierkegaard. This sin or some other (perhaps the one from Michael's childhood) had made the old man an overbearing religious penitent who was morbidly fanatical in his belief that he had offended God.

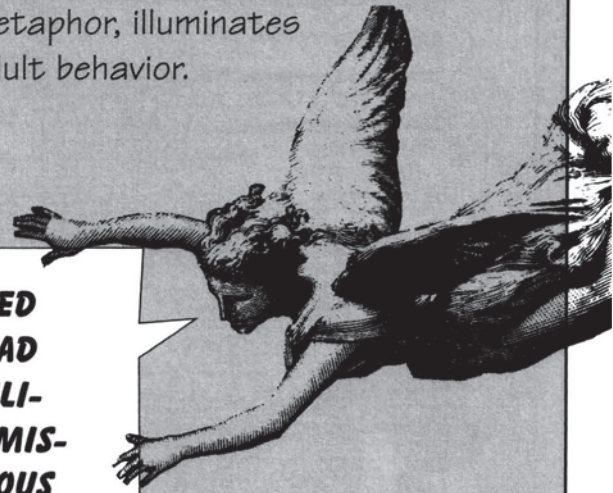
I AM GUILTY!





*In a certain sense, young Søren was sacrificed on the altar of his father's religiosity, or he almost was, just as young Isaac of the Biblical story was almost sacrificed on his father's altar.*

*It is no mere coincidence that Kierkegaard was fascinated by the story of Abraham and Isaac all his life. This story, taken as a metaphor, illuminates much of Kierkegaard's adult behavior.*



**FOR EXAMPLE, HE BELIEVED THAT HIS "NORMALITY" HAD BEEN SACRIFICED ON A RELIGIOUS ALTAR. HIS SPECIFIC MISSION—BASICALLY A RELIGIOUS ONE—PREVENTED HIM FROM BEING LIKE OTHER PEOPLE. IT PRECLUDED MARRIAGE, PARENTHOOD, FAMILY LIFE, AND A CAREER.**

Despite his morbid obsession, Michael recognized his son's genius and tried to nurture it. Even though Michael was self-educated, he was very knowledgeable, and he took much of young Søren's instruction into his own hands.

He would have the boy eavesdrop on his dinner parties with the elite of Copenhagen, and afterward he would make Søren sit in the empty chair of each guest and set forth the argument which that person had espoused during the dinner.



He would teach Søren geography by taking his hand and strolling through the living room with him pretending it was a foreign country and making him name famous sights that they would "see" in that country. Søren was sent to Latin School with instructions from his father to bring home the third best grade.

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It's easy for a genius to earn the best grade, but to get the third best, he must learn psychology. He must figure out who the second and fourth smartest boys are and place his own work between theirs.

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**LITTLE SØREN'S "TRAINING IN CHRISTIANITY" (THE NAME OF ONE OF HIS LATER BOOKS) WAS HARSH AND WOULD RAISE THE EYEBROWS OF CHILD PSYCHOLOGISTS TODAY.**



*A*is father would show the little boy colored illustrations from a stack of cards depicting famous people and events, such as Napoleon riding on his steed, or William Tell shooting an apple from his son's head. Søren would ask questions: Who is that? What did he do? Then from the middle of the pile Søren's father produces a picture of Jesus on the cross. The boy asks, "Who is it? What did he do? Tell me...."

Why were people so bad to him?" The father tells his son, "This is the Saviour of the world. He was killed by those whom he would save." Years later Kierkegaard wrote, "As a child I was sternly and seriously brought up in Christianity. Humanly speaking, it was a crazy upbringing."



**AS A CHILD I HAD ALREADY BEEN MADE INTO AN OLD MAN.**

There is a passage in the Bible according to which

**“the sins of the father will be visited upon the sons.”**

The Kierkegaard family mythology interpreted this as morbidly as possible to mean that as payment for his sins, old Michael would have to bury all seven of his children before his own death. (The number seven has always had a mystical significance in the Bible.) And sure enough, one by one, the children died off, leaving only Søren and his brother, Peter. Therefore Søren was totally amazed when at two A.M. on August 9, 1838, his father died at eighty-two years of age. Søren had simply assumed that he would die young and had made no plans for his life. His first published work was called,

**“Papers from One Surviving.”**

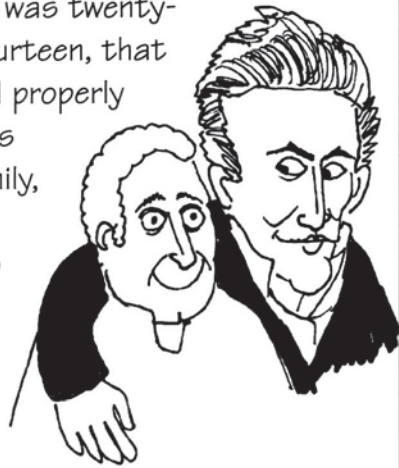






*P*artially liberated from his morbid past, one of the first things Kierkegaard did was fall in love and become engaged. Most people who read about his romance with his fiancée, Regina Olsen, do not like the way he comported himself with her. He met her when he was twenty-

one and she was fourteen, that is to say, three years before he could properly court her. He spent those three years well, ingratiating himself with her family, finding out everything about her he could, placing himself in a position to influence her aesthetic taste, and even befriending her boyfriend, Fritz Schlegel, using his position of confidence to undermine poor Fritz.



In his pseudonymous fictional story, "Diary of a Seducer," Kierkegaard tells of the seduction of a young woman by a man who studies her every gesture. The reader of the story realizes that the woman is doomed because of the totality of the seducer's plan. Similarly, those who know the thoroughness of Kierkegaard's plotting to win Regina feel that she, too, was snared before she had a chance to react. Sure enough, when Regina turned seventeen, Søren wooed her and won her. The engagement party took place, and the announcement was published.



*K*ierkegaard seemed happy with his victory and was well on his way to becoming a solidly entrenched mem-



ber of the bourgeois establishment, when suddenly for no reason he shared with anyone else, he broke the engagement. In his diary he wrote that he had done so because "God had vetoed the marriage." Regina was heartbroken and begged him to return to her. Her father humiliated himself pleading Regina's case. Kierkegaard was intractable and cold. He allowed himself to be seen frolicking in ques-

tionable neighborhoods of Copenhagen.



Then he disappeared from Denmark and sneaked off to Berlin, where he enrolled at the University in a course on Hegelian philosophy under the prominent Professor Schelling, and where his classmates included none other than Friedrich Engels,

Ludwig Feuerbach and Michael Bukunin—each of whom would later exert a powerful influence on European thought.

After the termination of the academic quarter, he returned to Copenhagen, but when he thought he saw Regina nod at him in church, he fled to Berlin again. While in Berlin this second time he wrote one of his greatest books, *Fear and Trembling*, his book about Abraham and Isaac, and it contained a secret message for Regina.