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Fighting the Good Fight

by Sarah Huber

(English 102)

The Assignment: Write a five-page, explanatory paper based on “Cinderella” and its thematically related topics; integrate and documents at least one to four sources.

In ABC’s newest reality television show, “Extreme Makeover,” women are interviewed to earn the chance to be completely made over. Doctors, surgeons, dressers, and a team of make-up artists work together to transform these women into their vision of the perfect woman. After being surgically altered, these women hope to have a better life and better self-esteem. If these women had fathers who supported them during their youth, they would not be so unhappy with themselves. When deserted by a dominant father figure in their lives, however, young girls (women) are left only with a diminished self-esteem.

Jacqueline Schectman, Jungian therapist and author of the essay, “Cinderella and the Loss of Father-Love,” writes that the father-daughter bond is just as important as the mother-daughter bond for the development of good self-esteem. Schectman’s version of Cinderella explains that it is as much the father’s responsibility to raise his child or children. He needs to contribute to those children physically, mentally, emotionally, or any other way he can. The father’s contribution to his family life can be supporting his wife, (first or second) in nurturing their children (Schectman 578). Although the father might not be completely gone, even his “partial” absence will negatively affect his children’s self esteem (Schectman 578). The father is needed to provide “consciousness” to his children (Schectman 578). Schectman believes that the lack of the proper father figure made Cinderella go looking for his replacement in the prince. She needs someone to love her, support her and tell her the words she did not hear from her father. Cinderella only wants to live her life “safely” in another man’s care (Schectman 577).

Jonetta Barras, author of the book, Whatever Happened to Daddy’s Little Girl? The Impact of Fatherlessness on Black Women, knows what life is like without a steady father figure. She explains that not having a permanent father leaves women to at first not trust other men, and then in time become convinced that they need a man (Barras 65). The situation is more complicated for those women who do not know their fathers or who meet them later in life (Barras 65). Most likely, these women, me included, develop distaste in men but at the same time are oddly drawn to them (Barras 65). Barras completely believes in the same theory about self-esteem loss by women as a result of losing their fathers. She states that often after their fathers leave them, girls feel “unworthy or unlovable” (Barras 67). She then tells her personal story of how after each of her three pseudo-fathers left her, she crumbled and blamed herself (Barras 65). Schectman explains that Barras, like all fatherless women, felt as though she was “unseen by those she loves” (576).

At first, I was too young to realize that I did not have a father (I was nine months old when my parents divorced). I realized when my cousin pointed out that it was strange that I did not have a family like she did. I then asked my mother and she explained that they got divorced and she was much better off without my father. I wanted to scream because I did not deserve to not have a dad, and I naturally blamed myself. I assumed then that my birth caused my parents to get divorced. Now, of course I know that this is not true. When you’re young, though, life is very confusing.

Barras continues to say that when girls feel they are unlovable, they tend to keep thinking that way for a long time (67). Girls might think the only reason that anyone loves them is that they have done something extraordinary (Barras 67). They also experience a roller coaster of emotions consisting of fear, abandonment and rejection (Barras 68). The healing that some of these girls will experience when they are older comes in various forms. Some of them will stoop to becoming promiscuous with men; others

will avoid all forms of intimacy (Barras 69). Whatever they do to heal, they can never fully recover from the “fatherless syndrome” (Barras 67).

Another outcome of fatherlessness is a completely blind obedience to anyone in power. This idea comes from the book, Women’s Ways of Knowing, written by educators, Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule. This powerful book covering women’s ideas about themselves in the world stems from the idea of male influence upon women. The authors write that girls who lack a proper father believe that their sense of self resides in others (Belenky et al. 31). Family structure has an immense impact on the later life of a woman; some women tend to only see themselves in the same way as their family did (Belenky et al. 31). Schectman agrees, saying that Cinderella hides in her rags because she felt that it was not “safe enough (to) love” (585). Schectman also says that the influence of Cinderella’s family affected how she reacted to the prince (587). Cinderella did not even know this man, and yet she left to live with him, probably to escape the “harsh” life that she was living (Schectman 588). The women Belenky et al. call “the silent” knew too well how Cinderella felt, and they share their tales of parents who were absent emotionally from their lives (157). One such woman, Bridget, says: “I’ve begun to appreciate what a family means ... (I need to be) making an effort to understanding them more and getting them to understand me more” (Belenky et al. 155). In these environments, talking was never really encouraged or was discouraged by the parents (Belenky et al. 158). In fact, one woman states: “They were the parents that said shut up to everyone and you don’t tell nobody nothing” (Belenky et al. 158). If these parents did not pay attention to the needs of their children, it is no wonder they have low self-esteem.

Mary Pipher, author of the book, Reviving Ophelia, Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls, agrees that fathers, either nonsexist or sexist, can have a negative impact on their daughters. Pipher writes that these fathers can lead their daughters to either rebellion or a destroyed self-esteem (117). Sexist fathers can teach their young girls to use power and to control men (Pipher 117). Pipher also says that nonsexist fathers can be helpful in making their daughters have a healthy nature (117). The father is an intricate part of a young girl’s life; he leads his daughter (daughters) into the world by teaching them to protect themselves. If the father is not involved in the daughter’s life, she has to find her own way. The best fathers, Pipher states, confront their “own lookism and sexism” (117). This means that these fathers teach their daughters about good male-female relationships, by modeling them (Pipher 117). It also means that the best fathers understand the male point of view, and they focus on how men act in this culture (Pipher 117). They also aid in defining their daughter’s “wholeness” (Pipher 117). Barras states that without their fathers, young girls are left without “security” and have “nothing to which (they) can cling as Linus does to his blanket” (18).

I know what Cinderella went through exactly; I lived without a father for about five years. I look back at the impact of not knowing him now, and it makes some of the choices I have made make sense. I dated many men in high school who seemed to be saying the right lines; I had never heard from a male father figure. I knew all along, unconsciously, that I needed to have my father’s approval and love. Sometimes I realize that my self esteem could be better, that I know I should be more confident in who I am. Not hearing how important or special I was, from the right person, destroyed some of my self-esteem. I was lucky enough to have a great mother and a stepfather who treats me well, to still come out on top. There are children who are not so lucky; they live out their lives in lies and trouble.

Barras, Belenky et al., Pipher and Schectman all realize the profound impact of fathers on their daughters. They all agree that without the support in any way from the father, the daughter is bound to have trouble in life. Barras’s firsthand accounts of her experiences with three fathers touch the audience. Through her incredible stories, we are vividly drawn into her world and experience the way that she felt during her childhood. Belenky et al.’s study of various women and their stories of how family structure impacted them and their relationships with men also were an inspiration. The book covered not only personal stories but related them to the audience so that we could feel and think the way the women did. Pipher’s work covered yet again, the importance of a strong and supportive family. In Schectman’s essay that was based on Cinderella’s struggle with her less than involved father, she delves into the situations surrounding why he was not there and what went wrong. She also explores the relationship between

Cinderella and the prince, explaining the unconscious search for a replacement father.

All four of these works not only helped me better understand Cinderella, but my own life as well. Living fatherless is not uncommon; knowing there are many women out there, even professionals, abandoned by fathers, too brings peace to my life. Hearing the outcome of the women in each of these works gives me something to improve on in my life. I have the chance to turn myself into something great, despite all the years of doubt. I know that I need not depend on a man for my self-esteem or to get anywhere in life.

Some women may think that going on the show “Extreme Makeover” will not only raise their sense of self esteem, but also make them whole again. They might have had a less than perfect father and believe that they need to alter themselves to meet his demands. A woman, however, needs to be happy with who she is, regardless of what her father thinks of her.

I am now on a quest, to fight the good fight and let women everywhere without fathers know that they are not alone. As the ancient Chinese proverb says, “No matter how the wind howls, the mountain will not bow down to it” (Mulan. Dir. Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft. Walt Disney Pictures, 1998). No matter what men, mostly our fathers, may say or do, we are not going to just bow down; we will stand and fight, together.

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