The Ideal Parent Essay, Research Paper

The Ideal Parent:

Can One Ever Exist?

Many kids complain about their parents. I hear it all the time from all kinds of kids who come from all sorts of different backgrounds. It seems in the world today parents get all the negative attention, and it seems like all the good they do go unnoticed by the public. Two different kinds of mothers were presented in the stories “Two Kinds” by Amy Tan, and “I Stand Here Ironing” by Tillie Olsen. Sometimes children complain about their mothers, each wishing they could have different type of mom. The lives and situations of each mother were different, but in my opinion, both mothers were a bad model for parenting.

“I Stand Here Ironing” by Tillie Olsen shows us a mother who is struggling through her own life and does not pay any attention to her daughter. The mother in this story happens to be the narrator, and we get the indication that she isn’t a very good mother. To start, she was very young when she first had Emily. “I was nineteen. It was the pre-relief, pre-WPA world of the depression” (241). She was not ready to be a mother, and it certainly wasn’t the best time for a young girl to have a child. This is not a good model for parenting. A mother should have a child at a time when she feels she is prepared to able to properly care for a child. Emily’s mom was poor, and without a husband as a father figure for Emily. She could not even afford the expenses when Emily was really young and, “it came to where I had to bring her to his family and leave her” (242). She had to send Emily away a couple of times through her young childhood. Emily was sent away at a time where a mother would have been very important in shaping, influencing, and nurturing her to become a great adult. Emily never got that chance.

Emily’s mother was too lenient. A child should have rules, or some kind of structure to help them develop a good character. Emily didn’t go to school when she didn’t feel like it, and her mom let her. She even stated:

I let her be absent, though sometimes the illness was imaginary. How different from my now-strictness about attendance with the others. I wasn’t working. We had a new baby. I was home anyhow. Sometimes, after Susan grew old enough, I would keep her home from school too, to have them all together. (244)

This shows how selfish the mother was. She wanted everyone to be home with her at the expense of their education. She let her children do whatever they wanted to. At the end of the story, Emily decides not to take her midterms. This is an example of what happens when a child is allowed to do whatever they want. Emily grows up not realizing her full potential, and is constantly robbed of the opportunity to better herself.

At the end of “I Stand Here Ironing,” Emily’s mom acknowledges the fact that she was a bad parent. “We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth. I was a young mother, I was a distracted mother?My wisdom came too late. She has much to her and probably little will come of it” (246). Even after all that has happened, Emily’s mom still stays out of Emily’s life. The diction shown by Olsen suggests that even though Emily’s mom realizes her mistakes, she will do nothing to correct them and continue to have very little presence on Emily’s life. “Let her be. So all that is in her will not bloom-but in how many does it?” (246).

The mother in Amy Tan’s “Two Kinds” is vastly different than the one mentioned in “I Stand Here Ironing” by Tillie Olsen. Tan immediately begins her story saying that this “mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America” (247). She already went through hard times in China, so she knew the importance of succeeding in America. One of the main reasons I believe Jing-mei’s mother is a bad model for parenting is because of the fact that she put too much pressure on her daughter to succeed. She cared so much for Jing-mei, that it eventually became a negative influence on her. One method she used to push her to succeed was to test her:

Every night after dinner, my mother and I would sit at the Formica kitchen table. She would present new tests, taking her examples from stories of amazing children she had read in Ripley’s Believe It or Not, or Good Housekeeping, Reader’s Digest, and a dozen other magazines she kept in a pile in our bathroom. (248)

All this pressure towards succeeding eventually caused disappointment. The tone and diction seem to change as the further the story goes. Jing-mei’s attitude towards her mother changes from wanting to succeed for her, to purposely failing for her. “And right then, I was determined to put a stop to her foolish pride” (251). Jing-mei also starts arguing more and more with her mother and shows a more rebellious side. All the pressure to be a prodigy causes Jing-mei to develop a low self-esteem.

It was not the only disappointment my mother felt in me. In the years that followed, I failed her so many times, each time asserting my own will, my right to fall short of expectations. I didn’t get straight As. I didn’t become class president. I didn’t get into Stanford. I dropped out of college. For unlike my mother, I did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be. I could only be me. (254)

There are two different kinds of mothers addressed in each of these works. Emily’s mom was going through a hard time, giving birth to Emily at a time when she was not ready to become a mother. She perhaps didn’t show enough love and attention for Emily. She was too lenient and easy going. She didn’t let her see what a better life she could have had. Most importantly, she did a poor job of preparing Emily for adulthood and beyond. At the end Olson writes, “Only help her to know-help make it so there is cause for her to know-that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron” (246). Worst of all it appears that she will continue to have little influence on Emily’s life and will not resolve this problem that she regretfully has made.

Jing-mei’s mom was very much the opposite of Emily’s mom. Since Jing-mei’s mom had already gone through hard times, she was more motivated and determined to succeed and not have the same outcome again. She put so much pressure on Jing-mei and eventually drove her to expect failure when she tried at anything. She forced Jing-mei to do many things against her will, and prevented her from growing up and giving her an opportunity to discover who she was. Luckily, Tan does write a resolution to this as Jing-mei:

For the first time, or so it seemed, I noticed the piece on the right-hand side. It was called “Perfectly Contented.” I tried to play this one as well. It had a lighter melody but the same flowing rhythm and turned out to be quite easy. “Pleading Child” was shorter but slower; “Perfectly Contented” was longer but faster. And after I played them both a few times, I realized they were two halves of the same song. (255).

Tan uses the “Pleading Child” and “Perfectly Contented” as symbols to Jing-mei’s life. The “Pleading Child” represents the time when she was young and she was struggling to be whoever she wanted to be, and free from the confinement put forth by her mother. “Perfectly Contented” represents the person Jing-mei has grown into. She at last finds inner peace with herself after all she went through. She learns to accept the kind of person she has become. When Jing-mei realizes that they make up two halves of the same song, it strikes her that her past and present make her a whole person. It makes up who she is. I think both mothers were bad models for parenting. Neither allowed their daughter to grow up and discover themselves as individuals. Through the words of both authors it seemed like both daughters regretted having a mom like they had. Perhaps there is no such thing as an ideal parent because everyone has a different opinion on what an ideal parent would be like. In my opinion, both mothers did a poor job preparing their daughters for the future in the real world, and that’s why I think they are a bad model for parenting.

Olsen, Tillie. “I Stand Here Ironing.” Making Literature Matter: An Anthology for Readers and Writers. John Schilb, and John Clifford. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000. 240-246.

Tan, Amy. “Two Kinds.” Making Literature Matter: An Anthology for Readers and Writers. John Schilb, and John Clifford. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000. 247-255.