

Fathers and Sons in "Brokeback Mountain"

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The actions of a father affect the entire environment in which a child grows and influences their own relationships throughout life. It is evident in the story, "Brokeback Mountain" by Annie Proulx, and also in the film version directed by Ang Lee, that fathers have an everlasting impact on the lives of their children.

The character, Jack Twist, is fascinated with rodeo life. Jack's father, John Twist, had been a well-known bull rider. When Jack started bull riding, his father never gave Jack advice, or let him in on any of his secrets. Jack's father also never even saw his son ride. In the story, Jack had told Ennis about a haunting incident with his father. Jack had trouble toilet training and could never make it quickly enough to the bathroom. He left the surroundings "sprinkled down." John became violently angry about this and whipped his son with his belt before continuing to urinate on him. John threw a towel at his son and orders him to mop up the mess. While his father urinated on him, Jack noticed that the father "had some extra material" that Jack did not and that he had been cut differently. This event left Jack traumatized and he remained bothered by the fact that he had been circumcised while the father had not. Jack had said, "No way to get it right with him after that."

Ennis travels to Lightning Flat to get in touch with Jack's parents about their son's ashes. In the story John stares at Ennis with "an angry, knowing expression." The film also portrays the father as a cold character. It seems as though John perhaps knew his son was a homosexual and that Ennis must be his lover. Jack's mother speaks well of Jack and how he came home every year to help his father on the ranch. John comments that Jack had the idea about bringing Ennis up to his family's ranch and building a cabin so that they could help get the ranch into shape. John remarks, "But like most a Jack's ideas it never come to pass." The father tells Ennis that Jack thought he was too special to be buried in the family plot. John refuses to let Ennis take Jack's ashes back to Brokeback Mountain. Through this meeting with Jack's parents, Ennis recognizes the father as a common type with "the hard need to be the stud duck in the pond."

In the film it is Lureen's father that refers to himself as "the stud duck in the pond." Lureen's father unmistakably dislikes Jack. He treats him as though he is not part of the family. When Jack's son is born, Lureen's father orders Jack out of the room to retrieve something from the car, as if to dismiss him from one of the most important times in his life. Another instance occurred at Thanksgiving dinner where the father-in-law undermines Jack's authority. Jack finally stands up for himself and tells the father-in-law that he is the guest in Jack's house and what Jack says, goes. In the story Jack doesn't stand up to his father-in-law. Unfortunately Lureen's father never does accept Jack as his son-in-law, and when he dies he leaves the farm-equipment business to Lureen to manage.

Ennis only had his parents for a short time in his life. They died when he was a boy leaving him to be brought up by his sister and brother. The time Ennis did have with his father was not the kindest of upbringings. Unfortunately Ennis's father left him with a warped sense of masculinity. When Ennis was about six, his older brother would beat him up every day. His father got tired of Ennis's crying and told him that if he has a problem then he has to fix it, otherwise it will be with him forever. His dad advised him to fight dirty until the older brother got the message. This is one example of the hostile environment Ennis grew up in. Instead of the father settling the dispute nonviolently between the boys, he teaches Ennis to fight in order to resolve any problems. In the film, Ennis fights in more than one scene, while watching fireworks at the park with Alma and his children, Ennis is faced with two obnoxious men who say the wrong thing to him. Ennis threatens and physically assaults

them until they run off. Another incident is when Alma confronts Ennis about being with Jack for more than just fishing, he tells her to shut her mouth and that she doesn't know what she is talking about, when she persists, he loses his temper, almost hits her, and then runs out. Even later that night Ennis starts a physical fight with a stranger in the street. Ennis's father also gave his sons a "lesson" by taking them to witness the results of a hate crime. When Ennis was just nine his father brought them down to the irrigation ditch, where a man was murdered and left because he had been living with another man and assumed gay. Ennis remembered, "They'd took a tire iron to him, spurred him up, drug him around by his dick until it pulled off." This scene leaves a haunting image of the terrified young boy and the horrible display he was shown. This is more than enough to keep Ennis from being with Jack for more than just their occasional trips. Ennis comments that if his father were still alive and he knew that Ennis was sexual or even living alone with a man, he would probably go get his tire iron.

Both Jack and Ennis become fathers themselves. Ennis is the father of two little girls, while Jack has a boy. Throughout both the movie and the story, these two men don't take much of an active role in their children's lives. They never traumatize their kids like their fathers did, but Jack doesn't take much of a part in his son's life, while Ennis leaves the girls with their mother and in the story he eventually gives up on seeing them until they get the "sense and years to move out from Alma." Ennis admits that he used to want a boy, but ended up with little girls. Jack admits he never wanted any. In the story, Jack does mention that he was worried about his son because he had a reading problem but he couldn't get him any help because Lureen would pretend that everything was fine and she "had the money and called the shots." In the film, Ennis eventually does come around. His daughter invites him to her wedding, and although he is reluctant, he accepts the invitation. He realizes how important she is. She is one of the last people in his life.

The relationship between Jack and Ennis is greatly impacted by the fatherly roles in the film and story. Ennis didn't completely accept the love he felt for Jack because he was battling homophobia himself. Although the men are in love, they don't ever talk about their sex and they never label themselves gay. After the first night the two men are together, Ennis says to Jack, "I'm not no queer," and Jack replies, "Me neither." Ennis is unable to move past his father's opinions and constantly fears the public's opinion. Jack is always ready to leave his wife and build a ranch and a new life with Ennis. He lacks the fear and experience that Ennis has been through. Jack is more willing to risk what he has for the life he wants. Unfortunately neither Jack nor Ennis had a caring, loving, and nurturing childhood. Consequently, Jack and Ennis are not prepared to be the fathers they could have been. As Charles Karel Bouley II comments, "In the story, I see the fear of two obviously gay people too afraid to actually commit to their love, so they run off and marry women and live a life unfulfilled out of fear."

Possibly the behavior of these two men is brought on by what is lacking from their boyhood. If they had proper role models, they could have been better fathers. According to Proulx, the characters she created grew up, "two uneducated, rough-spoken, uninformed young men..." ("Annie Proulx"). The character of Jack Twist was sensitive, subtle, and compassionate, probably due to having a mother role model while growing up, unlike Ennis whose parents died.

A father's contribution to parenting plays an important part in a child's life. "It might seem that the father's role as a playmate makes him less important. Not so. From birth onward, fathers pay more visual attention to children than mothers do. Fathers are much more tactile (lifting, tickling, and handling the baby), more physically arousing (engaging in rough and tumble play), and more likely to engage in unusual play (imitating the baby for

example). Young children who spend a lot of time playing with their fathers tend to be more competent in many ways. It is no wonder, then, that the care giving styles of mothers and fathers have a major impact on children's sex role development" (Coon 98-99).

Jack and Ennis are caught up in nourishing their own boyish needs and not the needs of their children. Jami Bernard of New York's Daily News writes, "What these two feel is eternal and nameless, satisfying a need as primal as that for food" (Kirkwood). According to the Washington Post's Ann Hornaday, "...their first summer together becomes an idyll of half-naked wrestling, nuzzling by the campfire and fistfights that inevitably end in an embrace..." (Kirkwood). They often wrestle as young boys might do. This is a representation of what they didn't have as children, or young men growing up.

Instead of trying to better themselves as fathers, it seems Ennis and Jack were looking for father figures themselves. Feeling lost and confused they found comfort in each other and energy was spent, not so much on their families, but in trying to find and planning time to be back together on Brokeback Mountain, a reprieve from loneliness.

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