



FATHERHOOD: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON MASCULINE EXPERIENCE IN THE CONFESSIONS OF LOWELL AND SNODGRASS

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What sort of father do we want . . . a “nurturing parent” or a “strict father”?

(Kimmel 252)

Fatherhood, unlike motherhood has not prominently surfaced as a critical area of study. Wahlström believes, “Fatherhood (like motherhood) is in one sense universal, always and everywhere intricately linked to identity formation, social practice, and gendered power. But more importantly, fatherhood also signifies in particular ways depending on cultural and historical contexts” (11). The concepts of fatherhood and motherhood in America influenced and nurtured by social, economic and political circumstances have undergone tremendous changes since the early twentieth century.

Critics have contested and provided debatable definitions that are culturally and socially mapped. The phrase “to father a child”, says Blankenhorn, usually refers only to the act of insemination, not to the responsibility of raising a child what fathers contribute to their offspring after conception is largely a matter of cultural devising (120). He further states that the father unlike the mother, “protects his family, provides for its material needs, devotes himself to the education of his children, and represents his family’s interests in the larger world” (122). While the ideal American family positions the mother as homemaker and primary parent, it positions the father above all as the family’s breadwinner, but also paradoxically as both authoritative and secondary parent. In the wake of The Great Depression in America and the second-wave feminist movement, the role and the position of men in society became further complex. Questions of family interaction and personal identity ushered by Modernism involved men in the “science of child-rearing” (La Rossa 12). The late twentieth century has been described by feminist critic Lynne Segal as a time when “men’s hold on their status as father was less firm and secure than ever before” (27). Therefore, the shift from ‘Old Fatherhood’ to ‘New Fatherhood’ in America has been gradual.

The New Fatherhood has gained recognition in America with Griswold’s *Fatherhood in America: a history* and La Rossa’s *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History*. The authors project a shift in the cultural understanding of middle-class fatherhood which began in the early twentieth century. Griswold states that New Fatherhood has concretely shaped increasing opportunities



and freedom for young people, which means that children “could no longer be dominated by fatherly power” and the father’s role becomes that of aiding the child’s “personality formation” (92-93). Hence, the concept has revolutionized all earlier precepts of fatherhood. He further adds, “Individual adjustment and personality formation became the sine qua non of successful family life, tasks best accomplished in tolerant, non authoritarian families that enhanced the emotional fulfillment and psychological security of each member” (93).

The impact of a father on daughters in the era of the New Fatherhood has fostered gender identity in professional life and in personal relationships. Fathers have become increasingly understood as contributing to their daughters’ abilities to love and to work. As Fields acknowledges:

Her father’s imprint marks a woman’s identity for all time—her sense of self, her work, her love relationships, her understanding of the sexual differences. His effect varies at different stages of her life, but the important qualities of psychological development are strongly influenced by the first man in a woman’s life. (29)

Rather than establishing patriarchal authority of an earlier era, the ideal father in the twentieth century becomes for his daughter a guide who would instill gender identity that would help her to be able to love and to work. Recently, Boose has pointed out that in *The Father’s House and the Daughter in It* there is the prospect of a kind of isolation that runs through the traditional notion of fatherhood, extending even to its modern variant:

The tangent at which the father and daughter meet is the line that potentially threatens almost every enclosing structure of the family unit. That boundary, moreover, is a double one: one of its markers defines the father’s control over inner family space; the other, his authority in the space of the outside, cultural world. And the daughter’s movement to cross that threshold and move out of the father’s house, whether into the house of another man or into the world of paternal institution, threatens the father, familial or cultural, with loss.(46-47)

Fathering a daughter is a relationship that would allow the child to develop her individuality in normal and healthy ways. Modern fatherhood sustains a relationship that will allow the daughter to grow in her capacity to love, to become capable of leaving her father behind as her most significant male relationship, the prospect of this loss is something of a threat to the individuality of the father, and betokens a kind of loneliness. His function is to prepare for himself to be surpassed. The confessional fathers, Lowell and Snodgrass are concerned with both of these dimensions of fathering daughters—maintaining a meaningful relationship with their girls in helping them to establish a sense of their own selves, and simultaneously responding to the sense of loss of individuality and consequent loneliness that is entailed in this. This paper is a



diversion from the traditional confessional issues as it compares Snodgrass' *Heart's Needle* and Lowell's *For Lizzie and Harriet* and depicts the challenges of fatherhood and explains the concept of The New Fatherhood in America.

Snodgrass' poem begins under the stress of harsh weather reflecting an inner unrest:

*Child of my winter, born.
When the new fallen soldiers froze
In Asia's steep ravines and fouled the snows,
When I was torn
By love I could not still.
By fear that silenced my cramped mind
To that cold war where, lost, I could not find
My peace in my will,
All those days we could keep
Your mind a landscape of new snow
Where the chilled tenant-farmer finds, below.
His fields asleep. ... (1-12)*

The poem represents the father as a soldier on a snowy Cold War battlefield in Asia, freezing in a trench. But as the poem goes on this bleak imagination of his situation as helpless and imperiled is softened and the speaker finds through exposition of his suffering a route to wisdom.

*Of all things, only we
have power to choose that we should die;
....
Child, I have another wife,
another child. We try to choose our life. (194-201)*

There is nothing triumphant in this declaration. Not trying to be inspiring but rather candid, he ponders over a life lesson. The parents' separation and the father's starting a new family are depicted in a series of vignettes. The distance between father and daughter is addressed frankly, "I write you only the bitter poems / that you can't read" (360-61). The speaker portrays himself as troubled, one who cannot assess or imagine a relation to her. Snodgrass reflects on the state of things between himself and his child and finds himself unable to sustain the role of teacher and guide. Snodgrass is more a friend than a guide. A representative difference comes in the seventh section of *Heart's Needle* where the intent of a whole poem seems to be capturing and stilling a moment in which father and daughter are brought together as equal participants in a game:

*Here in the scuffled dust
is our ground of play.
I lift you on your swing
....*



*then will fall back to me stronger.
Bad penny, pendulum,
you keep my constant time*

....
*Once more now, this second,
I hold you in my hands. (202-19)*

Narrating a springtime return to the zoo with his daughter, Snodgrass describes the pleasures of the season, including budding crocuses and hot dog barbecues, before ending the poem this way:

*In full regalia, the pheasant cocks
march past their dubious hens;
the porcupine and the lean, red fox
trot around bachelor pens
and the miniature painted train
wails on its oval track:*

....
*If I loved you, they said, I'd leave
and find my own affairs.
Well, once again this April, we've
come around to the bears;
punished and cared for, behind bars,
the coons on bread and water
stretch thin black fingers after ours.
And you are still my daughter. (418-33)*

If he has escaped the cage of childless bachelorhood, he nevertheless finds himself confined to a role in which his daughter's alternating needs for companionship and independence.

Lowell exhibits similar traits in his Harriet Poems. In *Harriet, Born January 4, 1957* he notices:

*Half a year, then a year and a half, then
ten and a half—the pathos of a child's fractions,
....
the universe by name and number.*

For Harriet, the years move slowly and are filled with milestones of change. Lowell's experience of the cyclical and exhausting passage of time is symbolized by the hundred times he has driven his daughter through this same fog, leaves him with less hope that there will be satisfying culmination to their wandering search. In *The Hard Way* he reveals:

*Don't hate your parents, or your children will hire
unknown men to bury you at your own cost.
Child, forty years younger, will we live to see*



*your destiny written by our hands rewritten,
your adolescence snap the feathered barb,*

....

*I only learn from error; till lately I trusted
in the practice of my hand.*

Lowell sees his relationship to his daughter in the light of the vulnerabilities and limitations that they both face as human beings, subject to uncertainty in life and the certain fact of their own mortality. The tension between his function as a modern poet and a New Father is akin to Snodgrass' poem in that he is so attuned to the flaws in the relationship with his daughter that he is unable to articulate his hopes for her life in a genuine way. In *Familiar Quotations* he says:

*A poet, if all else fail ... your words from nowhere:
on your first visit to a child—"I am too happy,
sometimes the little muddler can't stand itself."
Your transistor was singing Anton Webern—
what is it like? Rugged: if you can like this,
you can like anything.*

....

*Christ imagined all men were his brothers;
He loved all men, he was you, and might have lived—
for love, he threw his lovely youth away.*

But you can't love everyone, your heart won't let you. (1-14)

Lowell has loved his daughter well enough to preserve her wisest words, and his usually isolating irony is used with a very light touch to make this momentary reversal of roles into a caution to Harriet to continue to question and pursue the nature of true love. Lowell seems to have negotiated more successfully than Snodgrass the interplay between an introspective-didactic impulse and a concern to foster through his relationship with his daughter ability to love, which he does finally by writing for her future.

Through the poems both the poets reveal an inextricable part of relating to their daughters the sense of loneliness that looms large. The poets, through their confessions have not only expressed their concerns for their daughters, but have also shown them the path to individual freedom and choice. This is one of the more complicated negotiations of family life, and the poets' unusually autobiographical approaches to writing make their grappling with it all the more valuable as evidence of what modern fatherhood has meant to the fathers themselves.

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