

The Squid and the Whale

This film, written and directed by Noah Baumbach, takes place in Park Slope Brooklyn 1986. Some critics claim that the film reflects the writer's personal experience of his parents divorce. Both were involved in the literary field. The film was cited as a letter of hate towards the writer's own father. While the film is ostensibly about a divorce and a family in crisis it is in principal a sensitive coming of age story primarily from the perspective of a 16-year-old adolescent. It is also a fascinating portrayal of the obstacles that a parent with narcissistic features can present in the child's struggle for independence. The Squid and the Whale is about divisions, about clashing forces; the mother and father, the child and parent, the intellectual and the philistine, the appearance of things and their true nature. Underlying each of these conflicts and every scene in the film is the battle between cynical detachment and vulnerability.

The opening lines "Me and Mom vs. You and Dad sets the stage for an excessively competitive doubles tennis. Younger son Frank sides with Mom where older brother Walter proudly joins the father who gives some questionable advice regarding her backstroke. Competitive games are repeated throughout the film' boxing, ping-pong. The fiercest competition is the literary competition to publish that both parents are engaged in. In this area the father condescendingly tries to give advise for his wife to improve her writing.

Characters

Bernard the father had formerly published a book and teaches creative writing at a community college. He seems to be in a creative slump. He is contemptuous and egotistical with little awareness of his behavior on others. He seems to be failing in work, his marriage and financially but consistently blames his failure on others; idiots who don't publish him, philistines, and his wife's affairs. He does not take responsibility for himself.

Joan seems less developed as a character. She is warm but a bit elusive fighting for independence with a husband who is envious and condescending. She seems to be a devoted mother; calls her children chicken and pickle. Like many mothers of adolescent boys she may be trying to engage them as if they were a younger age level and seems to have difficulty with the aggressive and sexual drives that they exhibit.

Frank 12 years old true to his name is open and honest expressing what he thinks and feels. He is therefore more vulnerable and has fewer defenses to cope with the emotional pain of the parental separation and the feelings of abandonment and confusion that this brings. He engages in acting out behavior and experimentation with drugs in order to subdue some of his anguish.

By watching his father 16 year old Walter has learned how to hide his feelings and often his ignorance behind a jargon that passes for intellectualization. He seems to be

precocious intellectually but keeps a safe distance from his own experiences preferring to act in a superior manner in imitation of his father.

The different characters of both boys are evident in their response to the parents telling them that they are going to separate. Frank, undefended, begins to cry. Walt remains detached and adult like asking about the custody of the cat. His own fears of abandonment or neglect are projected onto the pet thus allowing him to deny to his own fears.

I would now like to review some of the developmental tasks of adolescence and discuss the obstacles that are presented. Adolescents struggle to gain independence from their parents in an effort to achieve an identity. There are repeated shots of Frank gazing at his reflection in the mirror. In one shot his mother is behind him. He wants to see only his physical resemblance to her because he is angry with his father. She states that he has some of his father's features; trying to keep up a faltering father son bond. At one point Frank gets drunk and stares in the mirror asking him "Who are you?" He seems to be unable to recognize the intoxicated stranger that was formerly just a child who was not ever permitted to drink soda pop. The curious mixture of overprotection and parental neglect brought about by the parents' preoccupation with their own problems seems to leave Frank lost and desperate. Frank looks to his tennis teacher as a form of hero worship. This is quite appropriate in early adolescence as a form of idealization and trial identification. He tells his father that he wants to become a tennis player when he grows up. The father immediately dismisses tennis players and Frank's tennis instructor as a philistine, defined as someone who does not know about good plays and books. Frank simply says that he is a philistine. He is able to challenge his father and show some independent thought even though he risks the father's dismissal and devaluation.

Walt, on the other hand, relates to the father by imitating him and reflecting back the father's idealized view of himself. This type of identification does support independent ego development. Father tells Walt not to bother reading *A Tale of Two Cities*, which is only minor Dickens; that the major works are *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*. The mothers tell him to read the book himself and form his own opinion. (*A Tale of Two Cities* is about mistaken identities whereas the other two are among the first coming of age stories. Perhaps the message is that he should indeed be trying to form his own ideas and opinions rather than merely quoting those of his father.)

In discussing *The Metamorphosis* the father tells Walt it is Kafkaesque. Obviously Walt does not read the book and merely parrots his father only to have his girlfriend Sophie later confront him with that fact that of course it is Kafkaesque. It is written by Kafka. The story of *The Metamorphosis* is about a young man Gregor Samsa who wakes up and recognizes changes in his voice, his appearance his behavior. He repulses his family. Eventually he realizes that he has turned into a cockroach. In a psychoanalytic study the meaning of this metaphor was discussed. While waking up and finding the body transformed encrusted and unrecognizable could be a reference to old age or illness it could also represent the rapid and decisive changes that occur in adolescence in the body image and psyche. Walter prefers to pretentiously lecture about his father's academic

theories rather than immerse himself into the potentially painful and confusing feelings that adolescence brings that could bring about a true maturation.

The most disturbing example of Walt's inauthentic behavior is when he steals the lyrics of Pink Floyd and claims them as his own. He is verging on becoming an impostor; he prefers to steal the work of others rather than risk the hard work and potential disappointment and failure of working hard at his own goals.

Socialization

Frank is rarely seen with friends. In fact Walt tells Frank not to tell any of his friends that the parents are separated yet Walt immediately tells his. Frank is often seen alone in painful scenes like drinking alone and masturbating in the library and smearing semen on lockers. His aggressive and sexual urges seem uncontained and he seems to have little recourse to peer support.

Walt tries to develop a relationship with a girl Sophie and asks for his Dad's approval of her. Father tells him to play the field and blames his current slump in creativity on his two failed marriages. Father tries to restrict Walt into a regressive dyadic relationship with him in order to support himself and discourages Walt from having a girlfriend. In one painful scene Walt and father and Sophie are at dinner in a restaurant and it is time to pay the bill. Sophie gestures to pay her own way and father takes her money. Firstly it shows how the father is not welcoming his son's girlfriend and the father is not playing the parenting role. At some point when socialization increases children begin observing and comparing the behavior of their parents with that of their friends. This scene may have marked the beginning of Walt's' eventual deidealization of his father when he sees how stingy he is.

Sexual development

Adolescence presents the youths with uncontrollable sexual urges while lacking the cognitive development to contain them. Frank's expression of sexuality through masturbation in the library may express a reaction to the father exposing him to inappropriate-sexualized material as well as an expression of contempt for his overly literary parents. Walt sides with the father in the divorce believing father's claims that mother's repeated affairs caused the breakup. Walt berates the mother for what he sees as her wanton sexual behavior. At one point there is a shot of a poster from a film Mother Whore. Independent of the mother's actual behavior the sexual urges of the teen can cause a rise in incestuous feelings and the mother can appear seductive to the boy. Part of Walter's disgust with his mother's sexuality is a defense against his own incestuous feelings towards her. He uses primitive defenses of splitting seeing the mother as the disgusting sexual object and the father as the victim who is superior but damaged by the dangerous mother. This offers him a safe distance from his mother. A more solid identification with a strong father figure (as opposed to an imitation of an idealized father) might have offered a more protective closeness to help ward off the mysterious maternal figure. To make matters worse, Walt's father dates a young girl who Walt is attracted to thereby expressing competition and envy towards his son. Unlike Frank Walt

seems so hungry for his father's approval and admiration that he cannot challenge his father in an independent assertive manner.

A few factors seem to come together to help Walt separate from his father. One factor was being confronted with having stolen the lyrics of the song and having to face the truth about himself and his own talent. Another is perhaps seeing his father from the eyes of Sophie and comparing his fathers' neglectful, self-centered behavior with her parents. The greatest change in my opinion came with seeing the psychologist and being confronted with the symbol from his own unconscious of the squid and the whale. In an analysis if a patient produced this image he would be asked to free associate about the personal meaning of the symbol. In film analysis we are all allowed to associate to the possible meaning this image could have. Permit me to suggest a couple possible meanings. The smaller squid is locked in an embrace or combat with the larger whale. The could represent the mother and father in their fierce competition for success and power. Following this interpretation even though the father called Kafka "one of his contemporaries" I would suggest that the father represents the squid defending himself through ink; a cloud of liquid aggression. Father's words are derisive and used defensively and aggressively. Despite father's air of superiority mother seems to be the whale; her publication in the New Yorker places her more among the giants than the smaller fish.

Quote from Leonard Cohen" You don't know how serious it is between a man and a woman when you are 16. You haven't walked into the cage with the beast. The beast being your heart" Equipped with a fragile sense of self Walt fears entering into the arena of romantic relationships where the possibilities for humiliation and failure are endless. An alternate meaning of the symbolism of the squid and the whale is taken from the clue that Walt was with his mother in the museum when he sees this diorama (father is not present). Without protection from identification with a powerful father a boy can feel potentially engulfed by a strong mother; warmth and intimacy with mother can have a seductive effect. The squid kid can feel overwhelmed by a mother who has talent intelligence and insight especially if he intuitively knows that his father is a weak By remembering this time in the museum with his mother Walt seems to be able to tolerate memories of intimacy with his mother, which were not so threatening. This seems to allow him to develop a more balanced view of both parents.

In the film Walt's view of father seems to change from hero worship to protectiveness to disillusionment. The loss of his idealization of his father seems to coincide with the loss of his false view of himself. He begins to be able to compare and evaluate and deal with the complexity of relationships letting go of his more primitive defenses of splitting and idealization and devaluation. Through his capacity to remember and confront his most basic anxieties embodied in the sculpture (whether they are fear of engulfment by the maternal object, fear of humiliation entrapment or being hurt) Walt seems to mature. He may now feel emboldened to try to read some books or write his own poems or try new experiences poems in an effort to forge out a more authentic identity.