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ENG 2010

Evaluation Essay

A Child Called "It"

A Child Called "It" is an emotional autobiography about a young boy named Dave Pelzer who struggles to survive his mother's horrific mental and physical abuse at the young age of 4 years old. Dave describes his tragic every-day life as he grew up in his parents' home and how he fought each moment to stay alive for just one more day. Throughout the novel, Dave describes his mother's abuse as a game that she played to see how far she could push him to break his will to fight back. As the book progresses, Dave details how his situation became increasingly worse. The abuse starts out less severe at first before his mother begins to inflict vital wounds that marked his entire body. Dave's abuse became more brutal to the point that his mother physically stabbed him after threatening him multiple times in the past with a knife.

When I started reading *A Child Called "It,"* I knew from looking at the cover that this was going to be a story about a young child who was abused. However, I did not expect Dave to be so young when his mother started abusing him at the age of four years old. I also did not predict that the novel would be as graphic as it is. Dave was not just hit constantly by his mother, but commanded to burn his hand on a stove and clean the bathroom while she let ammonia fill the air until he was seconds from fainting. I did not think Dave would be so vivid about his autobiography, but the detail helped me understand that Dave's mother was not simply hitting him as her form of abuse.

Regardless of the fact that his mother abused him, Dave constantly defended her. After hitting Dave, she would make up a story for him to restate in case anyone cared enough to ask. With all of the stories and excuses that his mother made up, Dave began to believe the lies were true as well. “Without hesitation, I tell them it was an accident; which it was – Mother never meant to stab me...Mother punishes me because I am bad” (Pelzer 10).

It is shocking to see how much influence Dave’s mother had on him and that he would defend someone who hurt him so much for such a long time. I expected the hatred that Dave expresses through the book, but I did not foresee him constantly blaming himself for an abusive mother who would harm him without a specific cause. He truly thinks that his pure existence is what causes his mother to act out violently even though it was never his fault to begin with. His automatic response is to defend his mother, although she was never deserving of his kindness. For this reason, readers gain a sympathetic connection towards Dave’s innocence.

Aside from being physically abused, Dave’s self-esteem was constantly being lowered by his mother. He was always deemed worthless even though he was the only one who had to complete all the chores within the household. No one in his family had permission from his mother to speak to him, his classmates bullied him while he was at school, and his father who he had considered to be his hero gradually started to treat him as if he was the cause to his wife’s growing madness. Atop of this, Dave was the only child among his siblings that had received his mother’s cruel treatment. All of his other siblings were treated with love from his mother while Dave faced his mother’s continuous punishments alone. This became another factor to cause him to believe that he was truly the odd one in the family who had done something wrong to have his mother single him out for the abuse that she inflicted on him.

It was strange to me why Dave's mother chose specifically him to abuse while she treated her other children with care. When I read about Dave having other siblings, I automatically assumed that they would later be abused along with him. I was genuinely surprised at the contrast in treatment between Dave and the rest of her children and I kept expecting her to act out violently any day towards Dave's siblings. However, she continued to direct her abuse solely towards Dave and never harmed anyone else. Although it would be horrible if Dave's mother did abuse all of her children, I still felt it was injustice of her to harm one but not all.

For a handful of times in *A Child Called "It,"* Dave mentioned his hatred towards his siblings for being able to live a normal life while he had to suffer his mother's wrath alone. They were all able to sleep in a warm bed while he was cooped up in the cold garage, making a makeshift bed out of an old army cot that provided him little to no heat. Although it would have been horrific if Dave's mother had abused all of her children, it makes readers wonder why she chose to harm just Dave while her other children were spared from her beatings and harsh remarks. Dave discusses how his siblings had also treated him badly as they were encouraged by their mother to do so. However, the story feels slightly biased since the novel is told in Dave's point of view. During the few times that his mother allowed him to play with his siblings, Dave was accepted to play with them without hesitation. This raises the question of whether Dave's siblings were too scared of their mother's bipolar personality to disobey her, or if they were just mean towards Dave because they simply wanted to be. Nevertheless, Dave was envious of his siblings for being able to have everything that he didn't have, and for being blessed with the opportunity of not having to go through what he was facing.

Dave utilized vivid imagery for readers to visualize his abuse as a child to help towards better understanding the situation he was in. He had moments where he would reminisce about

the sweet mother he loved and felt safe with before her personality changed from kindness to hatred. “From above, I felt someone hug my shoulders. I thought it was my father. I turned and became flushed with pride to find Mom holding me tightly... I never felt as safe and as warm as that moment in time, at the Russian River” (Pelzer 26). By remembering the good times he shared with his mother, Dave was able to show to the readers that this was previously a normal woman who was a wife and mother to her children. His mother was someone that anyone could relate to who had loved her family, but somehow changed when her personality became corrupt and twisted. Without warning, the kind mother who Dave had loved was gone. In her place was a woman who lived off of her son’s suffering, and never tired of the torment that she was putting him through day by day.

While Dave’s mother continued to hurt him physically, her verbal blows were not any less cruel. When thinking of the word abuse, I mainly think that it has something to do with physical harm on an individual’s body. I expected most of this autobiography to be about Dave’s mother hitting him, but that was not the case. Throughout the novel, Dave’s mother began to gradually degrade him by not referring to him by his name. Instead, she started to refer to him as The Boy in place of Dave as if to indicate that he is a random child who is undeserving of an actual name. Regardless of how vicious Dave’s mother was to him, he was still hopeful for her to somehow approve of him and his existence. Even as Dave’s teacher sent home a letter to his mother to acknowledge that he had accomplished something great at school, his mother denied him of his small glory. It was at this moment that his mother lowered his existence by entitling him to a new name to be addressed by: an It. “There is nothing you can do to impress me! You are a *nobody!* An *It!* You are nonexistent! You are a bastard child! I hate you and I wish you were dead! Dead! Do you hear me? Dead!” (Pelzer 140).

Having lost the kind mother who had loved him, Dave was dependent on his father to save him from his mother's hands. Dave viewed his father as his own hero, but like his mother, he too disappointed Dave. Although Dave's father had argued with his wife about the unfairness of how Dave was being treated by his mother, his father always walked away from their arguments with defeat hanging heavily over him. After every argument, I felt as if Dave's father was giving up on Dave little by little because he kept giving in to his wife's demands. The arguments became so exhausting that Dave's father started to withdraw from their family and stayed away from the house for long periods of the time until he finally just gave up altogether on trying to fix the situation between his wife and son. "Even before he opened the closet door, I knew what he was going to do. I knew why he had come home...Where's my Hero? What happened to him?" (Pelzer 149).

With the seconds passing by and his father resuming to pack away his clothes in a small overnight bag, it feels as if Dave has lost everything. His caring mother had already been gone for quite some time, and the man that he had idolized all his life had just walked out on not only his mother, but him as well. Although his father had promised Dave to take him away from his mother's grasp, he broke his promise and left alone as soon as he possibly could without looking back at the son he had left behind. There was no longer anyone in his life who would sneak him food to eat when his mother decided to starve him for long periods of days, or someone there to help be his shield to protect him from his mother's abuse. From this moment on, Dave was left to fight for his own survival alone. I envisioned Dave's father to be the savior who would take Dave away from his mother, but he disappointedly never came back for his son.

At this point, it becomes very nerve-wracking to continue reading further about what will happen to young Dave now that he has been left behind with his mother. However, Pelzer spares

his readers from the gory details about the rest of the abuse that he faced after his father had left. However, the words his mother spoke to him after his father moved out of their home left plenty of room for the imagination. “You are all mine now. Too bad your father’s not here to protect you” (Pelzer 152).

In the very first chapter, it is made clear that Dave will later be freed from his mother’s clutches. The staff at his school finally took action after noticing the continual wounds that Dave kept receiving across his body, and helped him to leave her household. It was relieving to know from chapter one that Dave was able to be liberated from her endless torture. Yet the eight long years that Dave suffered under his mother’s house was not so quickly forgotten. The life that he endured is best described as torture, and it is a true miracle that he was able to survive his mother’s intense form of abuse until he was finally taken away from her.

I expected Dave’s escape from his mother to be glorified like so many authors describe their novels to be, but he was suffering until the day a police officer came to take him away from her. His mother never saw her faults or came close to explaining why she was abusing Dave. I was continuously expecting for a reason behind her actions, but never got an explanation. It is frustrating that there is no answer to how a normal mother became so twisted in such a short amount of time.

Dave was able to describe his life in a way that made readers sympathetic with what children around the world are facing with physical and emotional abuse. *A Child Called “It”* focuses slightly more towards the physical abuse that Dave endured, and the description of the torment he faced served as a great visual for readers to understand what this form of maltreatment is actually like since this book is based on a true story. Readers are able to see the brutality that abused children face, and receive some insight on how much it impacts their ability

to make decisions towards their own future, or the lack thereof one. Not only is abuse depriving these young children of their innocent childhood, but it is also chipping away their chance of paving a steady future for themselves. It amazes me how sane Dave is after this traumatic experience. I thought he would somehow be left with a mental illness or a disability due to the intense abuse his mother inflicted on him. What's even more impressive is that he is able to have the courage to relive his torture by writing this autobiography. It makes me believe that there is hope of surviving even when the impossible happens.

Works Cited

Pelzer, Dave. *A Child Called "It": One Child's Courage to Survive*. Markham: Fithenry and Whiteside, 1995. Print.