

The Uneducation of Incest

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From the moments directly after birth, we begin to be taught what is wrong and what is right. After coming out of the womb, our own mothers might let us cry and whine, because at that moment, it's okay. Years later though, when we cry - it's considered a bad thing and we are told to toughen up and stop crying. We learn what is wrong and what is right through education - the education our parents received when they grew up, and the education they give to us as we grow up. In the case of incest, which is defined in Webster's dictionary as, "sexual intercourse between persons so closely related that they are forbidden by law to marry", our society has taught and educated generations upon generations that incest is an extremely taboo topic and is something that is not okay and should never be practiced. In the novel *Push: A Novel* by the performance artist / author Sapphire, the story is told of a young woman raped and forced to have sex (and also give birth to two children) by her own father. Although the story is seemingly far-fetched, it happens quite often in areas lacking in education and literacy - just like the 1980's Harlem, New York that is detailed in the novel. Incest, a taboo topic for most Americans, is still an issue internationally thanks to a lack of education and primitive views on family life.

The roots of incest can be traced back all the way to the 9th and 10th centuries,

where families with different surnames could marry but ones with the same could not. The naming scheme of the time had a lot to do with who could be romantically involved with another. There was the small, underlying idea that incest between direct family members was wrong, but because of a lack of understanding about what exactly happens when offspring come from an incestuous couple, the idea of intrafamily children were okay, if not frowned upon. As humanity made progress, science began to show the birth defects and other complications of having a child through incestuous parents. From down's syndrome, autism, to other complicated birth defects and disorders, incestuous relationships have been scientifically shown to be harmful to offspring. Some countries and regions, even today in 2012, allow incestuous relationships and marriages. For instance, those in eastern Asia, primarily in mainland China, are allowed to have incestuous relationships and marriages, whereas just north of them in northern Russia, only incestuous relationships are allowed. In the Western culture of the Americas, the United States and Canada prohibit any and all kinds of incestuous relations, but just south of us in parts of South America, relationships and marriages are allowed. Even after science and popular culture have shown that these ideas of incest are not okay, some countries take it upon themselves to lay low and let their citizens make their own choices.

In the United States, most cases of incest come from broken homes where the father will sexually abuse and rape the daughter, just like in the case of Precious - the main character of the riveting novel *Push*. Growing up with a child already birthed by her and her father that has down's syndrome, Precious lives with her verbally and physically

abusive mother in deep Harlem, New York. Struggling with her weight and self-image issues, Precious begins to try and take school more seriously when she is raped once again by her father, Carl, who does not live with mother and her. Finding out she is now pregnant once again, Precious' abusive mother begins to physically assault her and make her live a living hell. As the novel goes on, we see a unified theme start to surface. Precious, an illiterate teenager who doesn't know any better, her mother and her father Carl are all wholly uneducated and borderline illiterate. They don't quite understand that what they're partaking in and allowing to happen is not socially acceptable, much less legal in the state of New York. During the rape moments in the novel, Precious' mom allows and even watches from a distance of her husband, who has shown to be unfaithful even to her, raping young Precious on their bed. Precious knows that this isn't the man she wants to have sex with or be with, but the book doesn't make it clear if she wholly understands that this is a wrong, illegal, and immoral practice. This young woman is at the mercy of her parents, whom she relies on for all out-of-school education and knowledge, and the most she gets from them is acts of rape, abuse, and intolerance.

Precious begins her second pregnancy by going to an alternate school in Harlem where she meets friends and a teacher, Miz Rain, who begins to hear about the incest and rape going on in Precious' home. Through her commitment to her students, Miz Rain helps educate Precious about what's happening and begins to help her think better of herself by showing her the power of reading and writing. As Precious begins to become more literate and more educated, her overbearing and abusive mother begins

to take notice when her welfare gets cut off due to Precious switching schools.

“I tole you I was goin’ to school today.” “Forget school! You better git your ass on down to welfare!” “I gonna get a stipend for school.” “Fool fuck a stipend! What’s that. I said take your ass down to welfare NOW!” “Now?” She know I got to be there at 7 a.m. if I gonna get to talk to anybody.

Welfare very crowded nowadays. “I go in the morning first thing.” (96).

Precious’ mother has no idea what she is doing in school and actually wishes she not go to school, because she does not see the point in it. It’s this lack of simple knowledge and education that nullifies her role as a mother and as a facilitator for Precious’ education. Miz Rain ends up picking up the slack that Precious’ mother could not.

In today’s elementary and primary school systems, most districts choose to teach sexual education early on - even though it is a troublesome and controversial topic for most parents. The main consensus seems to be whatever will help the children, the earlier the better. Unfortunately, Precious did not receive this education in the 1980’s era of Harlem, New York which is what puts her further behind in her quest to remove herself from the controlling and disillusioning grasps of her father and mother. Towards the end of the novel, Precious goes to see the welfare office for the final time, and even arranges a meeting with her mother and the officer. This is the first time that the subject of incest is plainly talked about in the novel, and it is also the first time that Precious’ mother is accused of letting her “baby” Precious be abused and raped by her estranged husband. In Precious’ mother’s account of the first time Carl sexually abused her, Precious’ mother details how Carl abused their child and Precious’ mother felt

powerless to stop him.

“So he on me. Then he reach over to Precious! Start wif his finger between her legs. I say Carl, what you doing! He shut your big ass up! This is good for her. Then he git off me, take off her Pampers and try to stick his thing in Precious. You know what trip me is it almost can go in Precious! I think she some kinda freak baby then. I say stop Carl stop! I want him on *me*! I never wanted him to hurt her. I didn’t want him doing *anything* to her. I wanted my man for myself. Sex me up, not my chile. So you cain’t blame all that shit happen to Precious on *me*. I love Carl, I love him. He her daddy, but he was my man!” (136).

Through the detailed and gory account of what happened, the social worker - Ms. Weiss - is in disbelief that a family could believe that things like this are okay. Precious says it best when she states that “Mama one hundred, not ninety nine, percent crazy” (136). This is the most pivotal part of the novel, when it is revealed that Precious’ mother allows the abuse to start and in turn lets it happens for years because she feels powerless over her husband, and she feels contempt towards her daughter, who she firmly believes “stole” her man. She believes that even though Precious was wearing Pampers at the time, that she should’ve known better than to let Carl rape her and told him to stop. This lack of education is passed down to Precious through the years, and it is only when Miz Rain takes it upon herself to save Precious’ life through literacy, that the uneducation of Precious comes to a screeching halt.

Through my research on the topic of incest, I came across a very moving piece

by professor Elizabeth Breau, who wrote a piece for the Third Space feminist journal that detailed her struggles with the topic of incest in college and even as a professor herself. During a lecture on Freud and his theory of people's fantasy with incestual sexual abuse, Breau nearly leaves the classroom because of her disbelief that others in her class weren't questioning that Freud's patients' wanted to be sexual with their fathers and mothers.

"That day, I only had my stomach-clenching, hands-trembling, there's-no-way-I-can-say-this-without-losing-it reaction to go on, and it just wasn't enough. Already deeply in crisis from my own memory-recovery process, I went to see the professor, Jay Clayton. I even asked him to close the door. I started to cry as soon as I started to speak, but I managed to gasp out the words. I wanted to write my term paper on incest, on my incest, but could not present it to the class as required. He changed the requirement. He was the only one who read my paper." (Breau).

This was an obvious life-changing moment for Breau - an educated woman on the cusp of become an educator herself. Had her professor, Jay Clayton, not handled her situation accordingly, it's quite possible that we might not have had another stellar educator of literature in the world today. Through the words that she writes in her piece, Breau makes it clear that her incest and sexual relationships have had a crushing impact on her throughout her life; however, it is her education that saved her and allowed her to become more than just another statistic. Driven to be a teacher of literature, Breau describes the perfect balance between male-formed and

female-formed literature, and how to be careful and mindful of your students and their possible experiences. Throughout her piece, Breau begins to bring her thesis to life, which oddly mirrors the one I have chosen, “Since I know that there are many decent men in the world, including Jay and my husband, I choose to believe in the value of education. Since I don't claim to have all the answers, I instead focus on asking questions. What does it feel like to be a rapist? Why does raping a child make a perpetrator feel powerful?” (Breau). Understanding that the pivotal difference between those who practice incest and those who do not is simply education, Breau makes the case in her piece for what she calls “good men” - those who realize that rape and incest are wrong and are counter-productive to society.

Through free-writing, researching, and preparing for writing this paper, I came across a counter-argument that really stuck with me. The idea of two, consensual, of-age adults, who just happened to be brother and sister, wanted to engage in a mature, sexual relationship - who were we as society to try and stop them? What about those that are actively practicing incest in northern Russia, or even Brazil - where the practice has been decriminalized and not investigated? They are surely aware of the scientific evidence against having offspring, but what about those who use modern “safe sex” methods like oral birth control tablets for women, condoms for men, and even forced infertility. The argument for incest is very similar to arguments that have been seen in support of gay marriage. Billboards and subway advertisements in New York City were seen in the last few years with the simple wording, “If you don't like gay marriage - don't get gay married.” The idea of letting members of society practice

whatever kind of sexual activity they want to, or fall in love with whoever they want to - is a respectable one indeed.

Unfortunately, if we as a society allow incest to occur, even in the most recreational and mature of ways, the idea that it is okay to engage in will spread to those countries where it is illegal, taboo, and the last topic of conversation at the dinner table - much like our own country of America. That idea might infest itself into the minds of young people with extended families, and situations like the heart-breaking one described in all 140 gripping pages of Sapphire's phenomenal novel *Push*, might just become more than a novel. The reality is that incest is scientifically wrong, morally wrong, and the effects of incest have only been shown as negative throughout the years. No evidence has come out in support of incestual relationships that portray them as positive. The reason for that is because all incestual relationships are usually the product of rape, control, and abuse. Elizabeth Breau is a living example of this, as is Precious, who was developed as a character after the author Sapphire had met a young woman while teaching in Harlem with a similar situation. Incest is alive and well in our day and age, and the only thing to cure and quell these painful and unfortunate series of abuses reported throughout the world is education. Simple, plain and unequivocally put: education is the answer in the question of incest. The more education the denizens of Earth receive, the less incest and rape and abuse that is likely to occur.

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