
Gender Confines and Growing Up: Exploring Sexual Identity in Ai's "The Kid"

Since its publication in 1978, Ai's thirty-two-line dramatic monologue poem "The Kid" has shocked and intrigued readers with its brutal subject matter of a murdered family. Within the poem, the speaker, who identifies himself as a fourteen-year-old boy, methodically annihilates his family, which consists of his father, mother, sister, and their horses. On the surface, one could argue that the boy is triggered by an event that drives him mad—possibly his "old man" yelling for him to "help hitch the team", (Ai 5) or his sister rubbing her "doll's face in the mud," (1). However, there is no one clear answer to the boy's mania that results in his killing spree, therefore the boy must not simply be crazy, but rather he finally snaps from the lifelong tormenting executed by his small-minded, abusive, and arguably homophobic family. As opposed to madness, evidence throughout the poem illuminates the juxtaposition between the boy's masculinity and femininity and how there is tension between anything that is not properly within its own gender confines. Through a psychoanalytical reading of the poem, one could argue that the boy suffers from the Oedipal Complex, in which he greatly admires his mother, identifies with her, and in a sense, wants to be her.

Within the poem, the boy is overcome by his identification with femininity, and his contempt for the domineering masculine authority (his father), and the larger significance of this concept shows that if one's true self is imprisoned negative events will transpire, which in the case of "The Kid" is the boy killing his entire family in order to escape their unaccepting and abusive environment. Throughout the text, the boy's Oedipal Complex becomes tied to his sexuality, and in order for him to be free metaphorically and sexually; the boy must first kill his father. In the poem, the boy fixates on the father yelling at him, snaps, and decides to kill him first with an iron rod which doubles as a phallic symbol. At the start of the second stanza, the boy's hatred for his father is emphasized: "I stand beside him, waiting, but he doesn't look up/ and I squeeze the rod, raise it, his skull splits open" (12-13). The phrase "stand beside him" (12) implies that the boy wishes to be his father's equal, or sees himself as his father's equal. But, his father "doesn't look up" (12) which suggests that his father does not see his son as his equal, and also generally does not seem to care about his child because he ignores him. When the boy realizes the inequality between him and his father he becomes furious, forcing him to "squeeze the rod" (13) raise it, and murder his father. For the boy, equality and acceptance is all that he wants at this point in his life, but he knows this is something he will never get from his father, which enrages him to the point of murder. The boy wanted his father to look at him in the eyes before he killed him, he wanted him to know that his own son was murdering him because of the mistreatment, abuse, and inequality that the boy was subjected to.

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In addition, one could also argue that the boy murdering his father lends easier access to the mother, because the father figure will no longer monitor or control their love, which furthers the argument for the Oedipal Complex throughout the work. Within the poem, the boy loves and idolizes his mother, but he kills her due to the fact that she was unable to keep him from the abuse of his father's violent masculinity. In the first stanza, there is a clear juxtaposition between positive connotations with the boy's mother, and negative connotations with the boy's father: "The old man yells for me to help hitch the team, / but I keep walking around the truck, hitting harder, / until my mother calls" (5-7). The old man yelling for the boy has a much harsher and masculine connotation, whereas the mother calling the boy has a much gentler, loftier connotation. In addition, the boy walking around the truck "hitting harder" (6) suggests that his father's voice angers him, and pushes him to perform masculine and gruff tasks such as hitting a truck, a symbol of masculinity, with an iron rod, which is also a symbol of masculinity and a phallic symbol.

However, the boy tries to reach out to his mother in his angered state: "I pick up a rock and throw it at the kitchen window, / but it falls short" (10-11). What is especially interesting about these lines is that the boy picks up a rock—something that is considered to be hard, rough, primitive, and even masculine object and throws it at the kitchen window, which is culturally associated as a feminine space. However, the rock "falls short" (9) which suggests that the boy's attempts to reach his mother and seek solace in his mother are unsuccessful, therefore making the boy feel completely alienated within the family dynamic. Once again, there is a tension between what would be considered feminine and what would be considered masculine. The boy is quite literally trying to throw away or suppress the extreme masculine image that his father has forced him to adopt. Since the mother was unable to save the boy from his domineering father, she must die too in order for the boy to be liberated metaphorically and sexually. As opposed to the death of the boy's father, the death of the mother is somehow merciful, it is less violent and appears to be less vengeful. The boy kills his mother by getting her "across the spine as she bends over him" (15). Hitting his mother in the spine brings attention to the fact that she was spineless when it came to interactions with her husband, she was in no position to defy him, and she was quite possibly abused herself. Once both the mother and father are dead, the boy drops the phallic iron rod—and therefore drops his masculinity and Oedipal Complex.

At times, a tension and juxtaposition between appearance and reality in concerns to extrinsic symbols and the construction of the boy's masculinity/femininity. The opening image of the poem is the boy's sister rubbing her "doll's face in the mud" (1); this image sparks the contrast between the doll's feminine beauty and the dirty and arguably masculine mud that obstructs the doll's beauty. Near the end of the second stanza, the doll is mentioned again. When leaving the house, the boy puts on his father's best suit, and in his suitcase, he packs his "mother's satin nightgown / and my sister's doll" (28-29). The fact that the boy is wearing his father's best suit

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suggests that this is the image he wants the world to see, a masculine, well-dressed heterosexual male. However, just like the doll in the mud, the contents of the suitcase reveal his repressed femininity and sexuality as a whole. In his suitcase are two very feminine objects, the nightgown and the doll. The doll symbolizes both ideal feminine beauty, but also childhood, which one could infer that the boy never had a proper or pleasant childhood, and now at the age of fourteen he is desperately trying to hold on to it. On the other hand, the mother's satin nightgown, which is a strong symbol of sexualized, adult, feminine beauty. Having these two contrasting objects tucked away in his suitcase suggests that the boy is in a liminal space, in concerns to both his sexuality, and his age—he is not quite perfectly feminine, or perfectly masculine, and he is also not a child, and not an adult. Despite the fact that the boy murdered his whole family, this situation of transition is familiar and relatable to anyone who has made it through their teenage years.

In "The Kid," Ai suggests that society's strict gender confines have negative impacts on those who do not identify as cisgender, heterosexual, or anything of that nature that is considered to be the societal norm. There have been great strides towards acceptance of those who are "different" in the eyes of society, yet, not everyone is quite there yet. Ai's "The Kid" illuminates the effects and consequences of a restrictive, unsupportive, and abusive family life on a child's mental health and development—all of which is still a present issue in society today.

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