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The Inadequacies of Mothers



This ideal of a mother, praised and sung with so much enthusiasm by poets and artists, contrasts sharply with the experiences that psychiatrists and educators have with mothers today. In appalling numbers we find mothers the source of the child's maladjustment and misery. The exercise of mother love under our present culture seems to be a task demanding almost superhuman qualities. Mother love, far from being the blessed thing pictured in old poems, turns too often rather into a weapon of evil. Under the name and pretense of mother love, a discouraged and rebellious, frustrated and antagonistic woman may demand praise for what is actually selfishness, fear, and domineeringness.

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Yet there is no sense in blaming our mothers, because they are themselves victims. Women today face a struggle for their rights. They fear being the inferior sex. They are deeply disappointed in their relationships to men, in their marital experiences. For women have yet to win a place in our culture compatible with their talents and abilities. It is simply not true that women as a whole are not "mature," are emotionally unstable, are mentally or morally infantile or underdeveloped in comparison with men. What is sometimes described as feminine inability to think in abstract terms is actually a predilection for the functional; women have a particular



American children or 36.4 million of them, lived with both parents, and 18.2%, or 13 million of them, lived with a single parent, in 1998. This left 31% of the nation's children, or 22 million of them, living with neither parent.

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sense for usefulness, acquired from generations spent under conditions which limited their activities as the inferior sex and demanded usefulness from them in the service of men. As a consequence, women as a whole (as far as generalities are permitted at all) are more inclined to sense real values, and fall less easily prey to imaginative and frequently dangerous fictions which often victimize the best masculine minds. Why then do so many women fail as mothers so much more frequently today than a few generations ago?

In a disturbed relationship between mother and child, the corruption of all human relationships becomes visible. Human beings today make very little preparation for harmonious cooperation. We need not be surprised to find that increasingly fewer

women are prepared for the role of motherhood, which demands fully developed social interest.

A mother who is more interested in herself than in her child can never be a good mother. The deep love and affection which such a mother feels for the child is actually less concerned with the welfare and the development of the child than with her own satisfaction which she expects and demands. A child can give meaning to a marriage, which involves the relationship of several persons, but it can never be asked to provide meaning to one person's life. Yet just that is what some women, disappointed with life and somewhat estranged from their husbands, expect of their children. They want their children to belong to them and to be the purpose and meaning of their otherwise empty lives. Is this attitude love? Not at all. It is a compensation for uselessness. It is a demand for service.

Such a woman has not yet found her own place in the community. She may believe that she lives only for the child, but actually the child has to replace all other obligations which she would have to meet. Social contact, work and the opposite sex become meaningless through this peculiar kind of "love." How many women regard their children as an increase to their glory-an additional rung in the ladder of their prestige! Some try

to attract with their children the attention and admiration which other women receive for their legs. In more serious cases, the child has to provide an object for domination. He must fit, and often enough is brought up to fit into the personal life style of the mother. He is impressed with the danger of life, against which only mother love can give protection. By instilling fears and exercising domination under

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the pretext of an emotion which the mother, without any justification, calls "love," she begins a process of pampering and spoiling to bring the child under complete control and make him utterly dependent on her. In her own insecurity and distrust, she wants to be the only person trusted.

For a period of time, the child may find this overprotection agreeable, but sooner or later, the conflict begins. It may start, for example, when the second child is born and the mother becomes preoccupied with the baby. The first child feels deprived of the attention which previously had been showered on him. If the tragedy does not start then, the conflict is unavoidable when the child must go to school, when he must meet children of his own age. Fortunately, our present school system offers much help for pampered children in adjusting them to the social atmosphere and developing courage, independence, and social feeling. But all that does not solve the conflict with the mother. She either succeeds in keeping him close to her-then he never becomes adjusted to the group-or the child gains independence, and the fear and dominance of the mother expresses itself in open hostilities.