

Crap Parenting

Delinquency in The 400 Blows

The greatest comedies often have an element of tragedy within them. For example, Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* juxtaposes several farces of lovers' spats with the slaughter of game animals. This mixing of the genres allows for more complex themes to be explored within the film. Instead of merely giving the audience an hour's worth of laughs, the movie can both entertain and give the viewer something to think about.

François Truffaut's masterpiece, *The 400 Blows*, tells the tale of a juvenile delinquent having misadventures in the city of Paris. It is framed as a comedy, and it succeeds very well in showing the mischief that the protagonist, Antoine Doinel, and his friend René, get into at school and playing hooky. The film turns its eye toward Doinel's home life. This paper will examine the link between Doinel's delinquency and his relationship with his parents. We also get a glimpse of René's parents as well, and the reasons for his delinquency will mirror those of Doinel's.

Father

Julien Doinel is the name of Antoine Doinel's paternal figure. For ease of reading, I will refer to him as Father. Antoine is referred to as his last name Doinel constantly and his first name isn't really used, even at home. On the surface, it seems like Doinel and his father get along very well. The father has genuine affection for Doinel. They share small pranks, like Father spilling some flour on Doinel's nose.

However, it is revealed around the end of the film, in Doinel's confession to his psychologist (whom we never see, and from the perspective that it is the audience who actually receives the confession) that Father is actually his step-father. Furthermore, Doinel was sent to live with his grandmother and did not live as a family unit with both parents until he was eight.

We never see the grandmother, but it's said she became too old to look after Doinel. We can imagine that she couldn't properly look after a small child bursting with energy and curious about the world. Doinel probably learned habits of going off and having fun without parental guidance, which he repeats throughout the film. This habit is the heart of his delinquency. It isn't that he's a bad child, or possesses sadistic or destructive tendencies. He just doesn't see that he needs guidance. He sees authority and parental figures as being incompetent to provide that guidance, so he doesn't really listen to it. This is shown in the scene where Father, fed up with Doinel and his new crime of thievery, brings him in to the local chief of police. They are discussing sending him to an observation facility, but Doinel seems bored. Even Father makes a note of this.

Doinel only sees his father for a small portion of the day. When he wakes up in the morning, he immediately gets ready and leaves for school. When he gets home, he's alone in the apartment until both parents arrive. His mother comes earlier to make dinner. His father appears when it's ready. So Doinel only sees him for a few hours each day.

Father is also wise to Doinel's tricks. When Doinel asks him for 1,000 francs, he immediately guesses that Doinel is only expecting 500, so he only needs 300. Despite their good relationship, Doinel just casually steals his Michelin guide from him. We're not sure why, but later on he uses it to make spitballs, so it's safe to say he has no respect for his father's possessions.

Mother

Doinel's mother, Gilberte Doinel, puts in a worse performance as a parental figure than his father. She is perpetually annoyed at the way her life is turning out. She constantly relays this annoyance to her family. Doinel is a constant pain in the butt because of his trouble with school. Her husband is kind of homely in looks, especially compared to her beauty. He also isn't particularly motivated to succeed. So, they live in a small, cramped apartment. Doinel sleeps inside a tiny room the size of a large closet on a couch in a sleeping bag, which his mother says he likes better than sheets. Of course, it's much easier to clean and make up a bed with a sleeping bag rather than go through the toil of individual sheets and blankets.

For being an ambitious woman, Mother does not seem to put much effort into anything past her appearance. She considers math and science to be useless things that nobody needs in life. She also is suspiciously out working overtime without the usual cash payment to show for it. When she defends herself, she's quick to shift anger to Doinel, saying things would be better if he was gone. Doinel also relates a story about stealing 10,000 francs from his grandmother, and receiving a nice book the same day. His mother found out about the money and took his book away and sold it. Doinel doesn't say, but the audience is left to wonder if his mother ever returned the money or kept it, since she felt justified in selling the book.

We see a different side of Mother when Doinel, playing hooky one day, spies his mother making out with a strange man on the street. They do not talk about it, and even Doinel doesn't seem interested about his mother's infidelity, but she becomes noticeably warmer towards Doinel, talking affectionately to him and promising him 1,000 francs if his next school essay is graded as the top five in school. Doinel does not respond to this affection and whether he sees through his mother's insincerity because she fears the gossip actually more than being caught by

her husband or he's just bored by the antics of adults, he doesn't say. But he does put in some effort to create a good essay, even if it backfires, both as unintended arson and plagiarism.

Doinel says that he was never wanted by his mother. He was sent to live with a wet-nurse, and then his grandmother. There was a constant knowledge of being unwelcome when he did go to live with his mother. Furthermore, he overheard an argument between Mother and his grandmother that she wanted an abortion, but the grandmother did not allow it.

René's parents

Doinel, when having decided, for the second time no less, that he has to abandon his home, is invited to by René to live with him in his house. Unlike, Doinel, René's house is spacious and filled with stuffed horses and cats. It seems more like a dumping ground for René's parents than a home. Like Doinel's parents, René's are scarcely at home, and sneaking in Doinel to sleep and eat in his house is easy. His mother briefly comes downstairs to take money from her cache and leave. His father is more interested in the racetrack and men's clubs than his own son. René's home shows that it isn't class that separates good parents from bad. Being a bad parent is not a result of poverty.

Doinel's parents

Doinel's parents argue because they are two very different people. The father is very well satisfied with his life and his hobbies. His ambitions are modest. The mother knows that she would have made an excellent trophy wife, and is constantly hungry for a better lifestyle. She does not enjoy sharing pastimes with the father. The father exaggerates, telling her that his

clubs will make him vice-president, which she doesn't believe. Throughout these arguments, Doinel does not take sides. He simply ignores it, as he does normally with the world of adulthood. Neither have completed high school. The mother hints at running off for a love affair when she was a teenager, but they don't tell about how indecorous they were as children.

We do receive one happy moment in the life of the family, which serves to make the tragedy of its dysfunction more poignant. After the accidental burning of Balzac's shrine, the mother suggests a trip to the theater. The activity lets the entire family forget their troubles for an evening and they actually act pleasant towards one another.

At the end of the film, Doinel writes his father from the observation center, telling him of Mother's infidelity. Like most of Doinel's efforts, this backfires as well. His father washes his hands of him. His mother finds out about it and is livid, but pretends not to be. She claims all of the neighbors know and blames Doinel, but that isn't Doinel's style. Most likely is that Mother wasn't very discrete. She just wants a labor camp or reform school for him. This confrontation destroys any lingering filial bond that Doinel may have possessed, and he escapes the center in the next scene.

Conclusion

I feel like enough evidence has been presented in *The 400 Blows* that unloving, absent parents create delinquent children. The only character who sees this clearly in the film is the judge of Doinel's case. The mother comes in and asks for leniency, but the judge knows what kind of mother she is. He points out that the boy was left alone for the weekend. The mother tries to brush this off. It is obvious that while Doinel lies, his mother lies just as often. Doinel being rejected was as inevitable as the final domino in a long chain being toppled over.

