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## The Return of the 1950s Nuclear Family in Films of the 1980s

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The Return of the 1950s Nuclear Family in Films of the 1980s

by

Chris Maltezos

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Dedication

Much thanks to all my family and friends who supported me through the creative process. I appreciate your good wishes and continued love. I couldn't have done this without any of you!

## Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

In the 1980s the cinematic nuclear family flourished again after the self-explorative 1960s and turbulent 1970s. This thesis explores the portrayal of the idealized American family in film between the 1950s and 1980s. The 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause* reflects the 1950s cinematic family model. My investigation includes the role of the father figure and the bonds in intergenerational relationships. During the early 1980s, films such *Ordinary People* and *ET: The Extraterrestrial* reflect the need to reevaluate the 1950s ideal nuclear family. My examination of these films continues to include the importance of the father figure and bonds between child and parents along with contemporary elements such as the use of psychiatry and rise of single-parent households. These movies' redefined portrayals of the idealized nuclear family represent the shifting dynamics of modern society in terms of single-parent households and highlighted importance of intergenerational relationships.

## Chapter 1 Introduction: Portrayal of Family in Films of the 1950s and 1980s

This thesis examines how idealistic, nostalgic films in the 1980's redefined the 1950's ideal of the nuclear family. Films such as *Ordinary People* (1980) paralleled the family structure and teenage angst explored twenty-five years before in Nicolas Ray's breakthrough film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). In addition, contemporary issues involving single parent homes surfaced in major blockbusters such as *ET: The Extra Terrestrial* (1982). The 1980's cinematic fascination with the nuclear family had resurfaced following the turbulent, restlessness of the 1970's.

The 1980's social and political landscape with their ideal of the nuclear family followed the defiance and individualism of the 1970's. Philip Jenkins explores the period following 1975 in *Decade of Nightmares* as the "anti-sixties" during which conservatism also evolved from shifts in American culture including reaction to economy, race and feminism. Unlike other scholars of this period (Bruce Shulman comes to mind), Jenkins includes historical markers such as Kent State, the Attica Prison Riot and the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* case as definite components of The Sixties and marks the 1974 resignation of President Richard Nixon as the end of The Sixties (Jenkins 4). After this time, according to Jenkins, "there was a marked change of the national mood bringing about a much deeper pessimism about the state of America and its future, and a growing rejection of recent liberal orthodoxies" (Jenkins 4).

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 brought about a return of superficial optimism and patriotism that affected the portrayal of families in the films for the next decade. In her

1991 book, *Embattled Paradise*, psychologist Arlene Skolnick examines the uncertainty of the American family from the 1950's to 1980's by posing the question, "Who Killed Ozzie and Harriett?" Skolnick contrasts the censored middle class norms portrayed in 1950's films to more sexually permissiveness in the 1970's. With the old 1934 "Hollywood Production Code" finally dismantled in 1968, Skolnick cites how sexual mores had transformed in an environment of legalized abortion, freedom to curse in films, outing of homosexuals and greater acceptance of sexual relationships outside the constraints of legalized marriage (Skolnick 4-5). By the mid to late 1970's the mood of the country shifted and a backlash against the liberation and revolution of the late 60's and early 70's counterculture reawakened cultural interest to blend with the new political interest in "old values" that swept Ronald Reagan into power at the beginning of the 1980's.

A post Watergate/Vietnam uncertainty seemed to resonate in the films of this period. Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) investigates corruption in 1930s Los Angeles in the political and public sector. Bruce Shulman examines in his book *The Seventies* how the film looks into society's core and finds it rotten (Shulman 149). Two years later, Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) focused on an isolated Vietnam veteran, Travis Bickle, who view New York City as a disgusting, vile environment that gives birth to humans who are "animals and scum." Bickle eventually decides to rescue a teenage prostitute from the grip of her pimp in an ejaculation of blood and violence at the film's conclusion. Paralleling the country's pessimism, Bickle is lauded a hero for his efforts. Shulman notes that since Bickle is far scarier than the filth he excoriates, a frightening question arises, "If Travis Bickle is a savior, then what kind of nation has America become?" (Shulman 149). A dark sub-text would also resonate in 1977's *Saturday Night Fever*. While remembered as a cultural phenomenon and breakthrough for leading man, John Travolta, Shulman adds how the film is a grim look at American life. The disco dancing emerging as an



escape and exit from a bleak existence of decaying neighborhoods, stifling families and pinched circumstances (Shulman 144).

As the 70s progressed a notable shift in cultural perception would occur. Shulman and Jenkins note a growing antagonism toward the liberalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s: hippies, anti-war protests, sex and violence on television, sex education in schools, forced busing, welfare spending and legalized abortions. Shulman notes how “northern white ethnics were hostile to forced busing; fundamentalist Christians disturbed by sex on television and taught in schools; anti-feminists frightened by the ERA; blue collar workers fed up with profligate welfare spending and right to lifers fighting against legal abortions” (Shulman 193). Americans elected Democrat Jimmy Carter with a hope of repairing a crushed faith in the government and its administration. Unfortunately for Carter, rising inflation, gas prices and post Watergate and Vietnam disdain led to the famous 1979 *Malaise Speech* in which the president acknowledged a sense of national failure and impotence (Jenkins 155). With the president admitting a worsening domestic situation, people became more uncertain of what would lie ahead. In *Saturday Night Fever*, as Travolta struts his famous walk during the title sequence song “Staying Alive”, The Bee Gees exclaim repetitively that “life going nowhere, somebody help me please” Those lyrics paralleled a general apathy toward and fear of an unknown future for the American Dream. Perhaps a return to a mythological, nostalgic past of family could provide the stability that seemed within reach.

As the 1970's came to an end, rising inflation and post-Vietnam and-Watergate weariness led to a dissatisfaction which precipitated Reagan's more nostalgic, optimistic vision for the 1980's. This political and cultural shift veered away from the countercultural movements of the 1960's and early 1970's, harkening Americans toward patriotism, unity and traditional family values. Critics had already observed the transition from the self-explorative late 70's to

the more conservative, materialistic early 1980's that signaled the resurgence of the nuclear, suburban family on film. Film historian and scholar John Belton claims in his book *American Cinema, American Culture* that films of the late 1960's and 1970's such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Graduate* (1967) and *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) dramatized the generation gap and celebrated the defiance of authority. He also demonstrates how nonconformist youth in *Alice's Restaurant* (1969) and *Zabriskie Point* (1970) struggle against the system and how children in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Badlands* (1973) and *Carrie* (1976) rebel against their parents (Belton 385). Belton notes that the youth of the 1980's, after a decade or so of defiance against the system and individualism, would seek to repair the damage and rekindle a relationship between themselves and their parents.

During this "anti-sixties" period, concerns and worries were also affecting parents in a more pronounced manner. Skolnick observes that families in the 1970's had to face the prospect of their children having a lower standard of living than themselves, a frightening thought for baby boomers. Middle class life as traditionally presented could no longer guarantee a good job and home (Skolnick 9). These fears along with growing concerns on child safety, moral values and security would lead to a longing for family happiness of an earlier time. Skolnick notes the danger of such a nostalgic lure can cause blindness in facing change and thus coming to grips with the problems formulated by that change (Skolnick 9). With the declining economy and decline of the American Empire (Watergate, Vietnam), there was no real clear vision of a better future as there had been in past decades. Skolnick states "that millions of people ambivalent about the changing mores and family patterns, uncertain about the present, resonate to denunciations of a corrupt present and join with critics in blaming current troubles on the loss of an idealized past "(Skolnick 9).

Family studies scholar Stephanie Coontz also investigates this late 70s/early 80s resurgence of “traditional family” in *The Way We Never Were*. She reflects that the period from the late 1970s until the early 1990s was a time of economic setbacks followed by cultural and economic recoveries that excluded many Americans leaving both winners and losers anxious and dissatisfied. With more people falling into poverty, children’s prospects worsened and the “crisis of the family became a key to explaining the paradox amid plenty, alienation in the midst of abundance” (Coontz 255-256).

With its nostalgic, conservative reevaluation of the 1950’s model nuclear family, the political and social culture of the 1980’s would both redefine that aspect of the American family and react against the non-conformist, individualistic defiance of the 1960’s and 70’s. Jenkins explores the media expansion toward protecting children from “a dangerous world” in addition to altering definitions of gender roles among men and women (Jenkins 14). This political and cultural shift veered away from the countercultural movements of the 1960’s and early 1970’s, pulling Americans toward patriotism, nostalgia and traditional family values and dramatized in films such as *On Golden Pond* (1981), *An Officer and A Gentlemen* (1982) and *Field of Dreams* (1989).

According to Jenkins, the social policy of the “Reagan Years” had its origins before Reagan took office. He cites 1980 as a year marking a significant shift away from the social liberalism of the 1960s (Jenkins 178). With this change the effect on American culture was momentous. Reagan’s history as an actor in motion pictures helped enhance his popularity and nostalgic vision for a return to “values” of yesteryear. American Studies professor Graham Thompson suggests how Reagan’s celluloid past made him a well suited U.S .President during the 1980’s. He cites Gary Wills’ view of Reagan’s hard-line anti-communism and rhetorical dismissal of the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” (Thompson 4), a resurrection of the 1950s

McCarthyism and Red Scare attitude. Wills states, "Reagan does not argue for American Values, he embodies them. He becomes literally the embodiment of postwar America in the way he is simple and mysterious as our collective dreams and memories" (Thompson 3). A quick look at many popular action films of the decade would reaffirm this trend. The *Indiana Jones Trilogy* and continuation of the *Star Wars* films defined the world with action heroes (the good) fighting against evil forces. In *First Blood* (1982) and its sequel *Rambo* (1985), Sylvester Stallone portray a disgruntled Vietnam Vet who ends up going back to Vietnam to claim trapped POWs and thus metaphorically winning the war in Vietnam. Stallone also defeats the Soviet Union in *Rocky IV* (1985) by eliminating a steroid, robotic mannered Russian fighter, the sport of boxing now disguised as slick bout between the good U.S and evil Soviet Union.

In his book of essays, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie*, Michael Rogin examines the manner in which Reagan merged his on and off screen personalities. According to Rogin, this "confusion between life and film produced Ronald Reagan, the image that fixed our gaze" (Rogin 3). Interestingly Rogin notes how Reagan would deliberately point out numerous film quotes to parallel his existence as an American Hero—notably Clint Eastwood's famous line from *Sudden Impact* (1983), "Go ahead, make my day." For decades many Americans have looked up to mythological Hollywood heroes and perfect Ozzie and Harriett families. With Reagan, these endearing fantasies would become a part of the 1980s culture blurring the line between fiction and reality. The President's ideology defining good and evil and nostalgic remembrances of American values would influence an already existing trend of conservatism in commercial films. Jenkins argues that with few exceptions, "films were expected to offer straightforward heroes and villains, morally unambiguous happy endings and usually the triumph of the young" (Jenkins 201-202). One quick look at the popular films of the time such *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *War Games* (1983) and *Rocky III* (1982) confirm this trend.

Labeled “Reaganite Cinema” by numerous film scholars and authors, commercial films of the 1980’s contrasted with the critically acclaimed non-conformist, auteur motion pictures of the late 1960’s and 1970’s such as *Five Easy Pieces*, *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Taxi Driver* made by socially conscious, younger filmmakers. In his book *American Cinema, American Culture*, John Belton views the American cinema of the 1980’s and early 90s in terms of the social, political and cultural landscape of the Reagan/Bush Administrations (Belton 375). A sampling of films from this time, including *Diner* (1982), *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982), *Terms of Endearment* (1983), *Back to the Future* (1985), *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), *Wall Street* (1987) and *Field of Dreams* (1989), distinguishes this more conservative movement with themes of nostalgia, importance of family and military strength and the value of materialism.

*Back to the Future* (1985) is a traditional (defining) example of a typical 1980’s nostalgic film. In the film, Michael J. Fox portrays Marty, a suburban teenager who is accidentally whisked back in time to 1955 and in the process befriends his teenage parents and comes to their aid in both past and present. The film employed numerous common “Reagnite” themes: nostalgia, strength of family unit and protection of patriarch and home by a mischievous but loyal child (a theme also explored in John Hughes’ successful *Home Alone* films). Ironically, in the film, there is a humorous scene that depicts a 1980s contemporary pornographic movie house that, in the 1955 sequence is playing a first-run Ronald Reagan film. With the shift in American culture toward family and moral values, *Back to the Future* became the biggest box office hit of 1985, spawning two successful sequels. Its popularity even resonated politically as Reagan himself used a reference to the film in his 1986 State of the Union Address: “Never has there been a more exciting time to be alive, a time of rousing wonder and heroic achievement. As they said in the film ‘*Back to the Future*,’ ‘Where we’re going, we don’t need roads’ (C-SPAN.org).

Prolific 1980's filmmaker John Hughes explores similar territory with popular films focusing on the growing pains of teenagers and young adults against the backdrop of white middle class suburbia. Communication scholar Chris Jordan states in his book *Movies and the Reagan Presidency* how Hughes' popular hit *The Breakfast Club* examines communal bonding (in this instance high school students in detention) united by coming of age experiences and their choices of age appropriate settings. Hughes regards the characters consumption habits and musical tastes to be read as a form of bonding between family members. "These habits of conspicuous consumption are also representative of a sense of community defined in terms of shared lifestyle" (Jordan 56). Hughes' 1986 film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* investigates similar bonds between three suburban high school students skipping school who are united through a series of adventures: driving a parent's valued Ferrari, dining in expensive restaurants and attending a professional baseball game. While Ferris and his friends continue to defy authority and rebel against school officials notably—a bumbling principal—their acts of defiance display materialistic desires (value of the Ferrari and dining in a five-star restaurant on a parent's credit card) that blend into 1980's economic ideology. Ironically, Ferris' largest concern toward the film's conclusion is arriving at home in time to continue to please his unsuspecting parents who naively believe he is ill.

This child/parent issue is extended in 1990's mega hit, *Home Alone* written by Hughes and directed by protégée Chris Columbus. According to Jordan, the film offers an extension of the yuppies-with-children cycle by playing into the idea that parents are so caught up in their own pursuit of material gratification they can overlook their parental responsibilities—in this case leaving behind their youngest child over a holiday break (Jordan 156). While this scenario summons up fears of latchkey children left unattended by working parents, it also focuses on the unattended child who protects his affluent home from a pair of idiotic burglars and

encourages a lonely elderly neighbor to reconnect with his estranged family. Jordan sees the film and its successful sequel, *Home Alone 2* (1992), combining two major themes in Reagan-Era cinema, “the idealization of America as a land of material ease and affluence that has an influence on the lifestyle parents focus on their children, and their kids ability to establish meaningful and lasting emotional bonds with others” (Jordan 157). One common theme in all the above Hughes films is the importance of the family in the lives of each character.

In the 1950s filmmakers Douglas Sirk and Nicholas Ray investigated elements of classic melodrama to help create the Hollywood family melodrama with such films as *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Film scholars John Mercer and Martin Shingler state in their book *Melodrama: Genre, Style and Sensibility* how these innovative directors used visual style, thematic content, performance and ideology to develop this ultimate style of melodrama that would serve as the primary vehicle for cinematic family drama. According to Mercer and Martin, film scholars and historians began to identify and define the constituent features of the Hollywood family melodrama during the 1970s. Mercer and Martin state “By the 1980s, a general understanding of what constituted the genre of the Hollywood had been reached and a basic model formulated” (Mercer and Shingler 9). They cite film scholar Thomas Schatz’s work in creating a basic model of the Hollywood family melodrama. Determined by such factors as ideology, psychoanalysis and feminism, Schatz’s basic model of family drama first and foremost concerns the conflicts and tensions of a middle class family. Usually this conflict is between the generations (*Rebel*, *On Golden Pond*, and *Ordinary People*). In addition this genre is characterized by its central protagonist, who tends to be privileged by a high degree of audience identification. Thus, the viewers can sublimate their own fears and anxieties onto the central character who is normally the victim of the drama (examples include Jim Stark in *Rebel* and Conrad in *Ordinary People*). Another frequent occurrence according to Schatz is an

emphasis on the direct portrayal of the psychological situation, which the audience is likely to share and understand from their own experiences of family life. One final characteristic of family melodrama is that of wish-fulfillment and the tendency to culminate in a happy ending (the reaffirmation of the family at the conclusion of *Rebel*) (Mercer and Shingler 12–13). Throughout the 1980s commercial filmmakers would use the elements of Schatz's model to begin to explore and redefine the "traditional family" for a new generation.

The resurgence of the family on celluloid would begin with the release of films such as the Oscar winning 1979 father/son poignant, tearjerker, *Kramer vs. Kramer*. Though released in late 1979, this film popularized the well-crafted family film celebrating intergenerational relationships and the return of the central patriarchal figure. In the film, Dustin Hoffman portrays Ted Kramer, a successful New York City ad artist who provides financial stability for his family but never gets to know them. When his wife Jo Anna suddenly decides to leave him and their nine year-old child, Ted is faced with parenting for the first time. Later in the film Jo Anna returns for her son and a messy custody case evolves with the fate of a child in the court. Ted is shattered as he fights to keep his son and the home they have made together. The core of the film is the exploration of the relationship between a once distant father and his son.

After the critical and popular success of 1979's *Kramer vs Kramer*, Hollywood films would begin to investigate family communication, specifically the roles of parents and their children and how they relate to one another. 1980's Oscar winning *Ordinary People* is an intense look at a family falling apart in an affluent, Chicago suburban neighborhood in the aftermath of a horrifying tragedy. In his book *The 1980s*, author and scholar Bob Bachelor conveys how "the film is a cautionary tale in regard to the evils of not communicating. (Bachelor 158). Although much darker in tone than other family issue films such as *Kramer vs Kramer* (1979) and *Terms of Endearment* (1983), *Ordinary People* is reflective of the 1980's trend of



children seeking out the acceptance of their parents. The film's look at the angst of a troubled teenager wrestling with survival in a dysfunctional family revisits many of the same elements investigated in 1955's breakthrough teenage film *Rebel Without a Cause*. *Ordinary People* adds a contemporary twist involving Conrad's psychotherapy (in contrast to James Dean's brief bonding with a police psychologist), yet with its similar look at a troubled teen's eventual bond with his father, *Ordinary People* would lead a decade in which motion pictures began to reiterate the traditional nuclear family illusion conjured up some twenty five years earlier.

Films such as *Kramer vs. Kramer* would start a trend of films focusing on the importance of the patriarch and the shame of the neglectful mother. This familial investigation dissected feminism in altered manner compared to numerous breakthroughs in the previous decades. In her look at the second wave of feminism from the 1960s to the early 1980s, Skolnick notes that The Reagan Revolution came to power on a wave of antifeminist backlash. Her quote from historian Ruth Rosen exemplifies this ideology: "Feminism has been blamed for the destruction of the family, women working outside the home, the high divorce rate, the neglect of children, lack of child care, the superwoman syndrome and the debasement of the nation's moral standards" (Skolnick 106). Skolnick theorizes that the 1980s backlash could not reverse the social and cultural transformations that had already taken place. She cites Reagan's 1981 appointment of Sandra O' Connor as the first female member of the U.S. Supreme Court as a prime example of the continuing progression of women in politics and the workplace (Skolnick 123). Despite this social optimism, she highlights the effect of the media's role in ridiculing the feminist movement and strong, powerful women. Countless films, television shows and commercials portray the Feminist woman as a frustrated, undersexed, man hating individual. Strong women in Hollywood are often labeled "bitches" while their male counterparts are innovators.

As the 1980s began, the cultural backlash against such liberation as feminism would be reflected in films exploring family relationships. Scholars Michael Ryan and Douglas Kelner note in their book *Camera Politics* how women came increasingly under attack in films as the late 70s/early 80s progressed. Ryan and Kelner explore the enormous success of *Kramer Vs Kramer* as an astute rhetorical exercise evolving the interaction between father and son. Director Robert Benton uses a variety of methods to convey this father/son bond. According to Ryan and Kelner this cinematic exercise involves the use of camera rhetoric, image composition and framing to position Hoffman's character, Ted as a superior being and to situate Streep's character Joanna as a silent, cold and neurotic presence. Ted's righteousness is established numerous times through dialog. Several times in the film, he silences Joanna with a self-justifying and accusatory remark. The camera then lingers on Streep's face as she absorbs the "great truth." Throughout the film, the scenes between father and son played by Hoffman and Justin Henry are filled with a humorous, irresistible charm leading to an intimate unification at the film's conclusion that condemns the mother, Joanna (Meryl Streep) as conducting a crime against her family, a verdict the audience is willing to accept (Ryan, Kelner 157).

The following year Robert Redford's *Ordinary People* followed the same path with Mary Tyler Moore cast against type (no hint of Laura Petrie or Mary Richards) as Beth, a cold, distant mother who resents her son Conrad's presence after her favorite child, Buck, dies in a tragic boating accident that Conrad survives. Through psychotherapy with a caring counselor (another male figure to bond with), Conrad is able to shed his guilt and bond with his overprotective and caring father, Calvin. Because his neurotic, controlling mother is unable to adapt to her son's progress, it's up to Calvin to keep the family together even at the cost of ejecting Beth out of their lives. Humorously, Ryan and Kelner describe *Kramer vs Kramer* as the film where "father does know best" and label *Ordinary People* as the "prototypical film of the era." Interestingly,

these critically acclaimed films won consecutive Best Picture Oscars in addition to popularity with audiences. This increased attention of the importance of the patriarch as central to the family unit would prevail in the media throughout the 1980's. During this time the rise of single-parent families created a cultural shift in the attitude toward male parenting. A glance at countless magazines' cover articles would include titles such as "Fathering in the 80s", "Saving the Family" and "Leading Two Lives: Work and Home." Ryan and Kelner also cite a number of films released in the late 70s and early 80s that focus on nurturing fathers and prejudicial images of selfish mothers: *The Champ* (1979), *Author, Author* (1982), *The World According To Garp* (1982) and *Table for Five* (1983) (Ryan, Kelner 157).

1982's *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* covers similar familial themes as explored in *Ordinary People* such as intergenerational relationships and life in suburban American in the 1980's. However, the suburban America in *ET* is brighter and involves a child's view of the adult world compared to the suppressed pain of *Ordinary People* and its look at the neglectful actions of the mother. In the film, ten-year-old Elliott lives in a middle class, suburban Los Angeles neighborhood with his mother, older brother, Michael, and younger sister, Gertie. Elliott's father has run off with another woman and his absence has created an underlying sadness and incompleteness in the family structure. The remainder of the film explores the bond between Elliott and ET and how all three children embrace him. Throughout the film until the heartwarming climax, the three children cling to ET as a father figure who provides protection and unity. The final scene where ET exclaims, "I'll be right here" to a tearful Elliott is an example of the father/son relationship attained through the course of the film.

Due to the rising conservative political and social culture of the time, the portrayal of the "traditional American family" flourished on film in the 1980s. The tumultuous 70s gave way to a nostalgic reaffirmation of the 1950s ideal nuclear family. While this cinematic resurgence

reestablished the patriarch as dominant in the family unit, the 1980s representation was not entirely a mirror image of the past. Nurturing fathers in *Kramer Vs Kramer* and *Ordinary People* reflected the altering definitions of gender roles among men. Rising divorce rates and increase of single parent homes fuel the intergenerational conflicts explored in *ET*. The factors help create an altered perspective of the idealized 1950s nuclear family prevalent throughout films of the 1980s.

## Chapter 2: 1950s Nuclear Family Portrayed in *Rebel Without a Cause*

1950s family often conjures up images of a two parent household headed by a hard working father. In this nostalgic illusion, the mother is a supportive wife and attentive care giver to her child, tending to household duties and making the home a comfortable haven to retreat to. The setting is white, middle class suburbia.

This 50s family image is traditionally portrayed as a representation on television sitcoms and popular films of the time. But on superficial terms, this utopian perspective reflected numerous cultural and social changes of the decade. Family historian Stephanie Coontz describes how statistics in regard to family life justify this assumption. Rates of divorce and illegitimacy were half of what they are today and the birth rate for third and fourth children increased considerably from 1940 to 1960 (Coontz 24). In short, the institution of marriage and family ranked high in importance for American society. Coontz also examines how the post WWII period was bolstered by impressive economic improvements such as an increase of gross national product, significant boom in the housing market, and increase in salaried workers (Coontz 24). White middle-class families were moving out of urban areas to affordable suburbs (85 percent of the housing market according to Coontz). During this transitional time in America, the nuclear family prevailed as an essential institution. Coontz describes how a popular survey in 1955 confirmed that a majority of Americans felt they sacrificed nothing by marrying and raising a family. Her quote of a popular book at the time further reaffirms this trend “The family is the center of your living. If it isn’t you’ve gone far astray” (Coontz 25).

Historian Elaine Tyler May also investigated this domestic trend from the perspective of post World War II family life. She notes the security of the home provided a nest from the dangers of the outside world in the aftermath of World War II, and how as The Cold War began, “Americans were more eager than ever to establish families.” Demographic indicators supported this familial trend. According to May, Cold War era newlyweds were among Americans who lowered the age at marriage for both men and women, thus increasing the twentieth century birthrate to an all-time high. During this time the promise of suburbia was reserved for the white middle class. Between 1940 and 1960 various studies and the U.S Census confirmed a trend of younger adults marrying with fewer divorces across all race and economic lines. It appeared that “family fever” had now swept the nation (May 1-3).

Biskind describes how director Nicholas Ray’s films in the fifties followed a new trend of highlighting the psychological and mythic categories thus replacing the social and political themes prevalent to 30s and 40s films. In addition, Biskind adds how Ray in particular often dealt with the problem of reconstructing the family after the Second World War had taken the men to the front and the women to the factories. The emphasis on domesticity was well suited to the postwar era affected with the problem of surplus labor, performing two functions: It served to remind women that their place was in the home and it provided an emotional adhesive to bind the psychological and ideological wounds of the forties (Biskind 32-33).

Media studies scholar Nina Liebman reiterates this trend, referring to a quote by noted film historian Thomas Elsaesser: “The centrality of the family is a crucial defining characteristic of 1950s domestic melodrama.” Liebman adds, “The key system of discourse was now the family, the arena was the household, and social problems were made apparent only as they affected or influenced the familial structure” (Liebman 23-24).

Ray's 1955's *Rebel Without a Cause* cast up-and-coming star James Dean in the pivotal role of Jim Stark, a troubled teenager desperately pleading for the attention of his neglectful mother and mousy father. Starring a youthful cast, Natalie Wood (Judy) and Sal Mineo (Plato), the film examined the structure of the modern nuclear family through the eyes of three young protagonists. ). Coontz describes "Rebel" "a film that expresses the fears about youths whose parents fail them" (Coontz 33–34). Though culturally remembered for its look at these troubled young protagonists, the film delves deeper at its sub-text as an effective exploration of the idealized contemporary nuclear family.

Set in a suburban, white middle class Los Angeles neighborhood. The film focuses on three emotionally sensitive teenagers from dysfunctional families whose lives intertwine over a twenty-four hour period. The film is an intense and shocking (especially for its time) look at the intergenerational relationships between parents and their children and how they define representations of the nuclear family during the mid 1950s. At its core, *Rebel* attempts to reaffirm the 1950s idealization of traditional roles in the family unit: strong patriarch, supportive mother and well-adjusted children. These affirmations are reached by the desires and hopes of the rebellious young characters in the film.

According to film critic, Chris Wood, when asked about the goal of each character in *Rebel Without a Cause*, director Nicolas Ray responded, "the search for the father" (Wood 1). This is certainly evident through the film in the manner the characters react to their own paternal figures. Interestingly, Ray's vision of the 1950s ideal patriarch is liberal compared to the wholesome television depiction of *Father Knows Best* or *Ozzie and Harriet*. Each idealized trait of the perfect 1950s father (Strong, loving and dependable) is reversed in Ray's vision. In contrast to the all knowing/protective father of sitcoms; the patriarchal figures in *Rebel Without a Cause* are wrestling with problems that have a negative domino effect on their children.

Dean's character, Jim Stark views his father as weak and emasculated by his over domineering mother. He confesses this early in the film while being interrogated by a juvenile officer named Ray (shades of the director acting the role of father to his young cast) that he and his family are consistently running from town to town due to Jim's violent and emotional outbursts and mood swings, Jim shares to Officer Ray how his aggressive behavior is ignited by the being labeled "chicken." Wood theorizes that the mere word conjures up negative images of his father who is "hen pecked" by his mother (Wood 1). Because Jim imagines masculinity in a traditional 1950s manner (powerful man as head of the family), the thought of his mother dominating his timid father becomes a source of angst. This is reinforced in the script as Jim shares his rage in regard to the manner his mother "eats his father alive" and claims "If he had the guts to knock Mom cold once, then maybe she'd be happy....I'd never want to be him." It's apparent from this interaction that Jim's turbulent emotions stem from the communicative dysfunction he feels in the relationship with his parents notably his father who can't seem to represent him in a traditional masculine sense.

A prime example of this first occurs during the opening police station sequence. Director Nicholas Ray examines this intergenerational tension when Jim's parents are brought in to pick up their son. As a reaction to his parents bickering, Dean exclaims the film's signature quote "you're tearing me a part" sharing to the audience his disgust and confusion over the manner his mother is bullying his emotionally fragile father. As Jim continues to pour out his story to Officer Ray, director Nicholas Ray intercuts a shot of Jim's mother scolding her husband in the waiting area. This narrative shot device intensifies Jim's disdain for his father's plight during the examination. Once again Ray reinforces Jim's image of the idealized male figure.

Jim's overwhelming grief in regard to his father's emasculation is evident later in the scene preceding the "chickie-run" drag race between Jim and rival classmate Buzz. As Jim stops



home to clean up and change, he is confronted with the negative image of his weak father that is the origin of his violent outbursts. While approaching his bedroom, he notices his father is cleaning up a spilled dinner plate donned in a bright yellow, feminine apron. Skolnick investigates the contradictory male roles in 1950's where the ideology of the strong male was at odds with the ideology of togetherness. She notes while one magazine exclaimed that "every family needed a head and that meant the father not the mother" many other forms of literature and magazines deemed the strongest families and happiest marriages were *democratic*, "yet a film like *Rebel Without a Cause* could mock James Dean's "weak father" for wearing an apron and not standing up to his wife, thereby depriving his son of a "manly" role model" (Skolnick 71). Dean's reaction confirms Skolnick's statement. Upon seeing his emasculated father, he first laughs uncomfortably and exclaims that it is fine to let his overbearing mother see the spilled dinner plate. "Let her see it, what can happen?" The nervous laughter is soon replaced with a silent aversion as Jim grabs hold of his dad's yellow apron and softly mumbles "dad...stand...you shouldn't...don't." Nicholas Ray allows a moment for the two to glance at each other, Dean wounded and betrayed, his father confused at his son's reaction, before Jim storms off to his bedroom to prepare to defend his shattered masculinity with tragic results.

In the domestic situation involving Judy, the role of patriarch takes on a sexual/erotic stance, a definite contrast to the idealized 1950s parent/child model. The film seems to imply an intimate bond between Judy and her father is in danger of fading due to Judy's maturing teen years. During her interview with Ray in the film's opening sequence, Judy reveals her angst and confusion over her father's growing rejection of her. Her first words to Officer Ray are, "he must hate me, and he hates me." She further shares her perception that her once close father looks at her as "ugly", despises her friends and even thinks of her as a "dirty tramp" because of the new provocative dress and bright red lipstick she has chosen to wear to celebrate Easter.

Like Dean, Wood shares confusion and a multitude of tears confessing her pain to Ray. Chris Wood examines how for Judy, the lipstick has both pleasurable and painful connotations. "Her conflict stems from her wearing it and his rejection of it. Her desire to get her father's attention with lipstick is characteristic of the Electra complex she has for him. Instead of showing his approval, however, he smears it off her lips and calls her a tramp." (Wood 2). Judy's adolescent sexuality is odds with her father's resistance. His "little girl" has begun to grow and her girlhood crush is suddenly dangerous. Later in the film when Judy plants a kiss on her father's lips at supper, the look on his face is a blend of threat, shock and disgust. Similar to Jim, Judy is lonely, confused and searching for the ideal father. Biskind theorizes that it is finally Jim who has to redirect her Oedipal lustings after her father toward a more socially acceptable object, namely himself (Biskind 208).

With Plato, the patriarchal conflict stems from abandonment. His father has long since disappeared and his mother is nowhere to be seen. Instead, Plato is being raised by his housekeeper, the archetypal African-American "earth mother" prevalent in many films of the time such as *The Member of the Wedding* (1952) and *Imitation of Life* (1959). During the opening scene, Plato has been charged with killing a litter of puppies. His state while interrogated is emotionally subdued. Plato refuses to provide a reason for his cruel act, shutting down emotionally every time he is asked why? When questioned about Plato's mother, the housekeeper replies "Seems like she's always going away somewhere" and in reference to the father, she adds, "haven't seen him now in a long time." We do learn later in the film that the only manner Plato's father attempts a connection is a monthly child-support check. Chris Wood, acknowledges that Plato's shooting of the puppies is an act of imaginative, as puppies are eventually abandoned by their mother and never know their father. Wood reiterates that "Jim's

offer to give Plato his jacket (“It’s warm”) is subject to Plato’s scrutiny of and contempt for, any paternal pleasure of kindness (Wood 2).

As Jim, Judy and Plato struggle to cope with uncertainty and tribulations of the flawed patriarch figures in their life, the question then arises in regard to the identity of the “ideal father.” In this manner the film provides each character an idealized substitution in how they relate to given characters outside the biological family circle.

Nicholas Ray reminds the audience of Jim’s quest for a father initially at the start of the film when is Dean is seen fondling a toy monkey on the street in the title sequence. He lovingly covers it with newspaper to keep it warm as a father would to his young child. Of course, as the following scene in the police state reveals, Jim’s own father is unable to provide the strength and support Jim desperately needs. In contrast, Officer Ray (shades of the director playing “surrogate father” to his youthful cast?) is suitable replacement. During the interrogation scene between Ray and Jim, the juvenile officer makes an effective connection with a combination of conviction and caring. When Jim first enters Ray’s office he tells him to “get lost” and takes charge immediately with a disciplinary “hang loose boy, I’m warning you!” Jim tries to physically charge Ray who in turn wrestles him to the ground and demands attention and respect. Because Officer Ray is able to provide Jim the fatherly strength he so desperately desires, a trusting bond occurs between the two and Jim is able to open up to Ray . During these moments Jim is able to admit his fear, confusion and embarrassment in regard to his home life which he labels “A zoo.” Toward the conclusion of this revealing discussion, Ray has taken on the role of father figure to Jim, the powerful, trustworthy image that is missing from his own existence. Biskind adds, “Ray offers Jim all that is father doesn’t. He proves a stern yet understanding disciplinarian. Jim needs a strong and upright male figure with whom he can identify and is customary during the fifties, the police department supplies it” (Biskind 34).

Toward the beginning of the film, Plato's hope for the ideal father figure is revealed by a photo that appears in the door of his locker in high school. The photo is a shot of actor Alan Ladd as the title role in 1953's classic, western *Shane*. In the film Ladd portrays a gunfighter who bonds with a young boy who worships him as a hero. Ladd's rugged character is the epitome of masculinity at the time. This photo parallels Plato's own desire for the perfect father figure. Is Plato searching for a male role model to identify with? Is there a sexual subtext to the photo? With Dean's character, Jim, Plato will attempt to resurrect the missing patriarchal presence in his solitary world.

Nicholas Ray stages a number of scenes reflecting the father/son bond between Plato and Jim. In an early sequence during a field trip to the Los Angeles planetarium, an elderly lecturer explores an apocalyptic vision of our universe demise with a burst of gas, fire leading to eventual darkness. Interestingly, Plato is suddenly frightened by the cosmic presentation retreating to the floor of the planetarium in a fetal position and later reassured by Jim who helps Plato to his feet suggesting a father reaching out to aid his son. From this point on, Jim becomes a surrogate father to Plato. Biskind describes how unlike Jim Plato cannot satisfy his need for love through a woman. "Rather he relates to Jim as a father. Jim willingly reciprocates by viewing Plato as his son" (Biskind 35).

Interestingly, the Judy/Father bond is not the lone erotic relationship in the film. This father/son bond between Plato and Jim is explored as both paternal and sexual as the film progresses. At one point in the film, Plato asks Jim to come home with him. He states, "If you want to come, we could talk and then in the morning we could have breakfast like my dad used too. If only you could have been my dad?" In the scene, Mineo's gaze is mix of hope and lust. It's an awkward moment, yet Jim politely declines the offer, instead reaffirming Plato with a promise "I'll see you in the morning, okay?" Scholar Christopher Castiglia theorizes Plato's

sexuality as an issue of intrigue as well as increasing doom. Plato becomes increasingly closer to Jim during the course of the film and as their bond tightens, his instability increases. This homoerotic fatherly bond between Jim and Plato is yet another reflection of the film's examination of familial relationships. Castiglia states, "The cause of the insanity, apart from Plato's implied homosexuality, is his failure to attain his Platonic ideal: The traditional nuclear family. Plato is associated with insanity and with a complete alienation from the familial unit, a position Jim himself is approaching at the beginning of the film" (Castiglia 32).

From the perspective of portrayal of parental roles, Ray's (the film's) examination of patriarchy in regard to Jim's tattered home life explores a variety of negative traits that stem from parental apathy, a common theme in melodrama's such as "Rebel." In her book, *Living Room Lectures*, media studies scholar Nina C. Leibman examines the depictions of wives and mother in 1950s films and television. These depictions include the absent or silly mother (1958's *The Long Hot Summer* and 1957's *Tammy and the Bachelor*), the overtly sexual mother (1955's *East of Eden*) and the mother who is deceased before the plot begins (1958's *Houseboat*). Of course, a common theme on both television and film during this time is the "perfect" mother who praises the patriarch as head of the family and realizes that any career is secondary to the fulfillment of domestic duties. This type of mother is reflected in television series such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Donna Reed Show*. However, Leibman examines another common cinematic depiction in the 1950s, that of the evil or detrimental mother whose overpowering demands or presence "castrates" their husband or sons (Leibman 208). Jim's mother embodies these traits and the film examines the effect her selfish, empowering manner has emasculated Jim's father and in turn giving birth to Jim's delinquent behavior.

It's evident during the opening sequence in the police station how Jim's mother (and grandmother) are over powering forces that control the men in the household. As Officer Ray

interrogates Jim's parents, Jim's father tries to converse with his son only to be consistently interrupted by his wife and mother-in-law in domineering manner. As a reaction to his parents bickering, Dean exclaims the film's signature quote "you're tearing me a part" sharing to the audience his disgust and confusion over the mixed messages he is receiving from his well-meaning but dysfunctional parents. Dean's method approach intensifies this moment with a screeching rage of anger and a rain of vulnerable tears. In a further attack against Jim's father, director Nicholas Ray places Jim's Grandmother symmetrically behind her daughter to boldly state "well you know who he (Jim) takes after." Liebman also notes that "Jim's paternal grandmother is an older-generation version of his mother dressed in formal attire, critical and sharp tongued (Liebman 208). As a reaction, Dean sarcastically states as he walks into Ray's office how" someone should put poison in her Epsom salts."

A pivotal scene enacting Mrs. Stark's behavior occurs after Dean returns home from the tragic "chickie-run." As director Nicholas Ray stages this section, Mrs. Stark embodies selfish and guilt educing behaviors leading to the eventual emasculation of her husband.

The consequences of Mrs. Stark's actions are effectively conveyed through Ray's staging of Jim's distorted view in regard to his family. Dean is shown lying on the couch with a bottle of milk in an upside down position thus seeing his parents' approach in an unnatural and hazy manner. In this sequence, Jim pushes his overbearing mother aside and pleads with his father, "I need a direct answer—I'm in trouble." Jim's admission of driving a stolen car to race Buzz elicits a fury of nagging complaints from his mother on how this latest incident embarrasses her and the family to which Dean sharply replies, "She doesn't care." As Jim desperately continues to plea to his father, his mother's interruptions increase with an eventual confession, "Do you

remember how I almost died giving birth to him and you say I don't care?" This isn't the only time in the film Mrs. Stark nags of her own woes. Liebman states how Jim's mother is criticized for the school lunch she prepares for her son, she gets ill and is unable to clean the house and needs pills to sleep. Liebman states that "when these women attempt to do their traditional maternal jobs, they fail. In films such as "Rebel" "the dialogue works diligently to ensure the spectator recognizes these mothers as evil or unnecessary" (Liebman 208).

With his mother and father at center stage, Jim painfully admits his participation in the drag race stemmed from being called "chicken." Dean gestures (he gives his mother a quick resentful stare before sharing his "chicken" story) and Ray's staging (both Jim's father and mother share a familiar look after hearing why their son chose to race) confirm Jim's violent streaks stemming from his disgust at his father's lack of masculinity. Ray reiterates Jim's feelings with tilted camera angles as Dean's ascends the stairs toward his bedroom beseeching to his parents that "they are all involved in Buzz's death" and he must confess. Throughout this sequence Dean is directing his plight toward his father (ignoring his guilt inducing mother) as a matter of honor. As the scene builds to a climax, Jim's mother reveals her intention to move the family again and encouraging Jim to lie to the police in regard to the race. His hope that his father will challenge his domineering mother is shattered once again by silence. Liebman reminds that the issue here is not love but control "and the simple narrative dilemma is that Mrs. Stark has too much of it and Mr. Stark too little" (Liebman 209).

In addition to establishing the dysfunctional intergenerational relationships affecting the young protagonists, the film highlights representations of the ideal family in a variety of manners. Biskind slyly states how *Rebel* sentimentalizes delinquents and blames the family for the ills of society. "Before too many frames have passed, it becomes clear that the breakdown of the family does not stand for some failure of society; rather the sick family serves *instead of*

the sick society, because in *Rebel*, society is just fine. It's not only fine it's better than the family" (Biskind 201). This is quite evident in the opening police sequence where Jim reveals his woes to Officer Jim. Unlike Jim's parents, Ray is able to calmly take charge of Jim in a caring yet authoritative manner.

Nicholas Ray creatively stages a fascinating comparison of the dysfunctional family in its relationship to the universe during the field trip sequence at the Los Angeles Planetarium. Jim joins Judy, Plato and Judy's rebellious friends including her boyfriend Buzz on the excursion. During the cosmic presentation, an elderly lecturer explores an apocalyptic vision of our universe demise with a burst of gas, fire leading to eventual darkness. Biskind likens this sequence as a cosmic resonance for the failure of the family with the elderly lecturer a rhetorical gesture (Biskind 36). Wood has a similar view of this scene by quoting Rebel expert and author, Donald Spoto on how the "lecture localizes the cosmic apocalypse in family dysfunction" (Wood 3). As the elderly lecturer implies, the individual has no control over the world in general. For Jim, Judy and Plato the journey has to begin within their own family and eventually inward to self. Because of the established dysfunction each character finds within their own families, this voyage will lead them to creating one of their own.

The inward familial journey that Nicholas Ray sets up with the planetarium scene blossoms towards the end of the film when Plato leads Jim and Judy to an abandoned mansion near the planetarium. Biskind's analysis of the film reveals the mansion as Plato's fantasy island where he can pretend that Jim and Judy are his surrogate family. "So strong is the domestic tug of this film that no sooner do they set foot in the door than Jim and Judy begin to play house" (Biskind 209). As the scene progresses, Jim and Judy take on the roles of husband/wife looking to purchase a home. In the book *A Family Affair: Cinema Calls Home*, while investigating the mansion sequence, Film studies scholar Nathan Holmes contributes his theory on playing



“house” in regard to the use of space. Holmes describes how when characters play house, they are in essence, relating to a space or “rather a role relating to a space” (Pomerance 256).

For Plato, it reflects the angst in regard to his shattered home life. He states, “As you see the nursery is far away from the rest of the house and if you have children you will find this is a wonderful arrangement. They can carry on and you’ll never even notice. In fact, if you lock them in (the nursery), you’ll never have to see them again, much less talk to them.” To which Jim and Judy laughingly reply, “Talk to them...nobody talks to children, they just sell them.”

Judy is able to resurrect her Electra complex by intimately connecting to Jim as both lover and father. This symbolized in when Judy joins Jim and Plato at the mansion’s pool deck. A warm, comforting familial triangle is arranged; Judy on a lounge chair with Jim resting comfortably on her lap and Plato (in the role of the child) seated on the ground. In this pose, Jim is centered in the middle as the strong, caring, assured father figure.” Judy is now important again with a strong male figure. Here happiness is expressed as she responds to Plato by stroking his head and humming a soft lullaby.

Wood notes how Jim becomes a surrogate father in this sequence for both Plato and Judy. He quotes English scholar, Vicky Lebeau “Jimmy’s effort to establish an alternative family with Judy and Plato is as much an attempt to put the emasculated father back into a position of authority over his wife and son as it is an investment in peer group solidarity as source of refuge from a persecutory, or alienating, parental culture.” (Wood 5) As they tour the house, Dean reiterates his character’s assumed father role by cleverly mimicking his father’s voice when questioned by Judy and Plato. What makes this vocal choice interesting is that it resembles Jim Backus’ Mr. Magoo character popular in the 1950s and 1960s rather than Backus’ actual vocal delivery in the film. Dean’s imitation is a further attack on the isolation Jim feels toward his father. Backus’ Magoo character is a vision impaired older gentlemen whose stubborn

unwillingness to admit his problem leads to misunderstandings and a public perception of lunacy. As Jim takes on the role of surrogate father in the mansion sequence, he also masks his own disappointment in his father by likening him to a cartoon character dismissed as an eccentric by society. Holmes cites how the mansion's abstraction of setting is necessary in order that the characters' alienation be brought to center-stage. "The source of their frustrations is clearly located in their homes, with their parents. It is the family exactly—it's neglect for Plato, it's sudden lack of affection for Judy, it's overindulgence and absent morality for Jim—that tears these teens apart; and so there is something frustrating in the characters' casting of the mansion experience as a reconstitution of family" (Pomerance 257).

What is fascinating to examine as the film reaches its conclusion is whether the characters have managed to resurrect their failed family. According to Biskind Ray's social criticism is superficial. He cites that the director's solution to the problem of the failed family is merely to begin again, with each family member, sadder but wiser, making minor adjustments to his and her roles (Biskind 37). These alterations are apparent in the final sequence.

For Plato, the fantasy of Jim as surrogate father is replaced by hysteria and emotion. The abandonment he feels toward his own mother and father is projected onto Jim. After shooting members of Buzz's gang in defense he accuses Jim of "running out on him" and exclaims "I thought you were someone else. You're not my father." It's apparent in this moment that Plato cannot make the alteration needed to move into the emerging nuclear family. He runs away from Jim (and Judy) to the planetarium. The space he feared earlier in the film with the elderly lecturer is now a barrier from the authorities that he distrusts. Plato is still a delinquent and rebel and he has no place in the family anymore. Biskind states, "Plato has to die. He's too rebellious, too disaffected. The nuclear family is exclusive and Plato has become a

liability (Biskind 210). Thus in true, Greek tragic form, Plato is shot by the police on the steps of the planetarium.

In contrast, Jim is now ready to head the family he has created. Plato's demise makes room for Jim's real son: his father" (Biskind 210). After covering his dead friend with his jacket, Jim is approached by his father differently and with conviction. His father helps him up and states" I'll try to be as strong as you want me to be." Liebman notes how Mrs. Stark has now been stripped of her narrative power to center the father-son bonding. "In other words, the hero's troubles emerge from her presence and the resolution lies in her absence (Liebman 209). Jim's real and ideal father now both exist although Jim, himself has reached that same idealized state and now head a stable family.

Although on the surface, *Rebel Without a Cause* examines the effects of dysfunctional families and patriarchal roles in 1950's nuclear families through the eyes of angst ridden contemporary youth, the film's message reaffirms the traditional idealized nuclear family of the time. Biskind states that "despite appearances to the contrary, *Rebel Without a Cause* is a profoundly conservative film. Although it reeks with sympathy for the misunderstood rebel and issues with weak and venal parents, it nevertheless delivers him into their hands" (Biskind 37). This is evident at the film's conclusion where Jim reconnects with his father. His father is no longer in the shadow of his wife. In the final scene Mr. Stark is able to give his hand to his tearful son and help raise him to walk proud and strong (the idealized masculine man). The pieces of this scattered nuclear family are all in place again. Mr. Stark has become a real father, his wife silent and supportive by his side and their son able to introduce his parents to his girlfriend, Judy. The radical rebel (Plato) has been exercised and the ideal nuclear family lives on (through Jim and Judy).

After two decades (1960s and 1970s) of countercultural movements, uncertainty and turbulence, the idealized nuclear family of the 1950 resurfaced in several popular and acclaimed films of the 1980s. According to Liebman despite its curtailment in the 60s and 70s, the domestic family melodrama didn't altogether disappear. She cites that beginning in the late 70s/early 80s with films such as *Kramer Vs Kramer*, *Ordinary People*, and *Terms of Endearment* the family melodrama experienced resurgence with texts nearly identical to their 1950s predecessors, stressing the importance of the father and strength of the family unit (Liebman 263).

However, the two decades between the 1950s and 1980s brought about new perspectives to the family drama. With the increased acceptance of psychological studies, troubled individuals relied on the therapist couch rather than police station for support. Thus, alternative father figures such as Officer Ray appeared as psychiatrists such as Dr Berger in *Ordinary People*. The 'anti-sixties' backlash against feminism and cultural changes in roles of parents supported abolishment of neglectful, selfish mothers such as Beth in *Ordinary People* and Joanna in *Kramer Vs Kramer*. Rising divorces rates and single parent homes created a new dynamic in the nuclear family in regard to intergenerational relationships investigated in films such as *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). Was the 1980 cinematic model as identical to the 1950s as Liebman described or perhaps a somewhat altered version of the ideal nuclear family?

### Chapter 3: Ordinary People, the Ideal Family That Resurfaced in the 1980s

Film characters such as Jim Stark had taken many journeys by the time 1980s rolled around. In contrast to Jim's familial quest, counterculture era characters such as Dustin Hoffman's Benjamin Braddock in *The Graduate* (1967) and Jack Nicholson's Robert Dupea in *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) manifested their angst and alienation by running away from their families and rejecting society's norms in regard to domesticity. Seven years later John Travolta's Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) wrestled with his claustrophobic, confining existence with his family in a blue collar Brooklyn neighborhood. These characters expressed confusion and looked outside the family circle to achieve their individuality. By the 1980s, after years of turbulence and uncertainty, this defiance would wane bringing children back to their families, a trend Hollywood would reinforce.

Skolnick quotes sociologist Jessie Bernard, "The 1980s will be a time of putting the pieces together to develop family structures for this time and place, this day and age" (Skolnick 183). Cinematically this was apparent with the critical and popular success of 1979's *Kramer Vs Kramer*, a domestic drama examining the effects of a custody case on an upper-middle class family. *Kramer Vs Kramer* effectively reflected the growing trend of children in divorced families and the roles of gender in parenting—in this case the father. The film's exploration of the bond between a once distant father and his 6 year-old son struck an emotional chord with American audiences. Ryan and Kellner describe how the sentimental appeal of the love story between father and son easily allows Meryl Streep's character Joanna to be eliminated altogether.

Joanna reflects the 1970s independent woman who is searching for her own identity. As the opening scene conveys, she is an unhappy but loving mother who tearfully kisses her son Billy goodbye before announcing to her husband Ted that she is leaving both of them. "I'm leaving him (Billy) with you. I can't go back in there (their apartment). I'm a terrible mother. I'm not good for him." Later in the film, after she lands a good job and attains new self-assurance through therapy, a revitalized Joanna returns to claim her son. Joanna represents a contemporary mother wrestling with her desires to raise a family and attain a rewarding career. However, the film's focus is the bond that develops between Ted and Billy, thus Joanna's objective as a mother who puts her own needs before that of her family is seen as a detriment to the family. As Ryan and Kellner reiterate, "In the end the general audience is fully prepared to accept that she should give up the child", a sharp contrast to maternal ideology of the past (Ryan, Kellner 157).

As the 80s began, the families reconstructed on film were not entirely a mirror image of the 1950s ideal nuclear family. On the surface, the families depicted in successful films such as *Kramer Vs Kramer*, *Ordinary People* (1980), *On Golden Pond* (1981), *Shoot the Moon* (1982), and *Terms of Endearment* (1983) superficially resembled the ideal 1950s family model. Ryan and Kellner attribute the success of these films to a strong need for communal, supportive social arrangements in a post-1980 world where marketplace brutality reigned supreme. (Ryan and Kellner 164) The families reflected in film were a constant reminder of stability, comfort and happiness. These films effectively investigated the strength of the family unit including stressing the omnipotence of the father. However by the 1980s, the role of children in family films became more prominent. The old "children should be seen and not heard" standard separating father and mother from their children dissolved during the countercultural/individualistic 1960s and 1970s. Stronger bonds between one parent and their children flourished as films such as

*Kramer Vs Kramer* and *On Golden Pond* exemplified, thus the interactions and resolutions in 1980s family films differed from their counterparts in the past.

*On Golden Pond* merged these counterparts in a fascinating manner by exploring a free-spirited, middle aged woman's attempt to reconnect with her ailing, conservative elderly father. In the film, an elderly couple, Norman and Ethel Thayer await the arrival of their only daughter Chelsea to help celebrate Norman's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday at the couple's lake summer home. Chelsea surprises her parents by asking them to look after her finance's teenage son Billy over the summer. The film explores both the bond between young Billy and the Thayer's in addition to Chelsea's path of connection with her father. This multi-generational exploration is aided by the effective casting of real-life father/daughter Henry and Jane Fonda. Known for their own turbulent father/daughter relationship, the Fondas' presence reiterated the theme of the 60s counterculture generation (Jane) reestablishing a connection to their parents (Henry Fonda and Katharine Hepburn).

*Ordinary People* (1980) directed by Robert Redford gives a contemporary spin to some of the same territory explored twenty-five years earlier in *Rebel without a Cause*. Like *Rebel*, the film explores an angst-ridden young man trying to reconnect with himself and his family. Conrad Jarrett is struggling to retain his balance after the tragic death of his older brother in a boating accident. Tragedies appear at the center of both films: In *Rebel*, the tragic death of Buzz and Plato and in *Ordinary People*, Conrad's brother, Buck. However these similarities are only superficial. With Jim's aid, the Stark family in *Rebel* reemerges as an insular unit. At the conclusion, the Starks consist of strong father, supportive mother and son who are ready to exist as a sealed unit, protected in the safety of their own home. In contrast, the intergenerational relationships in *Ordinary People* are more complex, reflective of a modern 1980s family reaching outside the insular sphere for growth and stability.

Prior to the tragic death of Buck, the Jarrett home resembles the insular 1950s model of strong father, domestic mother and happy, content children. After the tragedy, the conflict stems from the dysfunctional intercommunicative relationships occurring within the home. Both Conrad and his father Calvin eventually seek assistance outside the protective sphere of their home for guidance and survival. However, Conrad's mother Beth resists any change, instead clinging to the 1950's nuclear family model. Sociology scholar Murray Pomerance describes The Jarrett family as a perfect screen family as least on the surface. The irony in *Ordinary People* is the film's dark vision of 1980s suburbia, the "perfect family" falling apart within.

In the film, Conrad Jarrett portrayed by Timothy Hutton is struggling to find himself and reconnect with friends and his family after being hospitalized for a suicide attempt following the death of his older brother. At the start of the film, Conrad's plight is the focal point of the story and his angst is investigated primarily through his counseling sessions with new psychiatrist Dr Berger. However as the film progresses, film scholar Jeffrey John Stein describes "a dramatic shift in the story" that involves the father's journey to command equal billing (Stein 76). Similar to *Rebel*, the son's connection to his father is a vital component to the story.

The film's look at the 1980s ideal father focuses on Calvin's struggle to nobly reach out to his suffering son. Similar to Dustin Hoffman's character Ted in *Kramer Vs Kramer*, Calvin represents the nurturing 1980s father who is emotionally in touch with his family. In one of his first sessions with Dr Berger, Conrad reveals how he wants to "be in more control, so people will quit worrying about him." When Dr Berger asks who is worried about him, Conrad replies, "my father mostly." Calvin is supportive of Dr Berger's guidance and even initiates Conrad's involvement early in the film by stating, "Have you thought of seeing that doctor?" Redford conveys Calvin's role as primary caregiver early in the film when Beth and Calvin are returning



from a night out. As both parents climb the stairs to retire, Calvin stops to check on his son as Beth nonchalantly walks into her room.

Unlike Jim in *Rebel*, Conrad doesn't resent his father as a weak, hen pecked "chicken." Both characters are struggling with troublesome, selfish mothers; however Conrad simply views his father as "soft". The "soft" description reflects a 1980s update of the idealized strong male representation explored in *Rebel*. At one point in the film he exclaims to his father "that everything is 'jello and pudding' to you dad, you don't see things." Throughout the struggles that occur between Conrad and Beth, Calvin desperately attempts to mediate. This futile attempt at bringing Conrad and Beth concludes with greater friction between mother and son. Redford explores Calvin's obliviousness in an early scene where Beth's parents are taking pictures of the family at their home. The normally joyous task of recording memories takes on a dimension of tension when Calvin asks Beth and Conrad to take a picture together. The emotionally detached Beth is clearly uncomfortable with the scenario and asks for the camera. To make matters worse, Calvin seems unaware of this mother/son conflict while he fumbles with the camera until Conrad brings him back to reality by exclaiming "give her the goddamn camera." This outburst surprises Beth's parents and the close up shot of Calvin reveals bewilderment. From Conrad's perspective, this scene establishes Calvin as caring yet oblivious to his plight. His father's "oblivion" reflects a softened masculine model for Conrad to connect to.

In contrast to the 50s family model, *Ordinary People* examines the empathy between parents and their children; in the case of *Ordinary People*, the bond between father and son. Redford exemplifies this quite passionately in a confrontational scene between Conrad and Beth after she learns that her son has quit the swimming team. Reminiscent of the post "chickie run" scene in *Rebel*, Redford effectively stages Conrad's revelation in the family's living room. Calvin

and Conrad have returned from Christmas tree shopping when a reserved Beth shares her embarrassment at learning of Conrad's decision through a friend. Beth and Conrad begin to argue. As a timid mediator Calvin asks Conrad to 'stop it.' Similar to his reaction in the picture taking scene, Conrad replies, "you tell her to stop it. You never tell her a goddamn thing." This of course, echoes Jim Stark asking his father to stand up for him in *Rebel*. Stein describes the similarity between the two cinematic fathers:

Both Mr. Stark and Calvin Jarrett are loving, concerned fathers, who are seen by their sons as being too soft and prone to avoidance. Calvin's avoidance, however, is more a result of the unwillingness to believe that with money and prosperous surroundings everything cannot be gotten back to that mystic past before all the loss of innocence and death of his son. The confrontation in the living room is Calvin's wake-up call (Stein 78).

In a contemporary update the 1950s juvenile officer as surrogate father is replaced by a psychiatrist in *Ordinary People*. In *Rebel*, Officer Ray took on the role of a caring, strong substitute father for Dean's character Jim. Dr Berger, however, is more a guide. In contrast to Nicholas Rays' hermetic family model in *Rebel*, Conrad reaches outside the family sphere for revitalization and healing. During these sessions, Conrad slowly reveals the causes of his pain and turbulent home life with a neglectful mother and timid father. In one of their first meetings, Conrad reveals how he and his mother "don't connect." The moments between Dr Berger and Conrad disclose intimate details of the communication (or lack of) in the Jarrett home. After the blow-up with his mother over quitting the swimming team, Conrad shares his fear that his mother's anger toward him may be warranted "due to the shit I've pulled." In this case, the "shit" meaning his suicide attempt. "I'll never be forgiven for that" cries Conrad, "You can't get the blood out of the tile. Christ, she fired the goddamn maid because she couldn't dust the living room right; you think I'm going to forgive (myself), I mean that she's going to forgive me!" Through this disclosure to Dr Berger, Conrad reveals the angst his mother's alienation

causes him and his own realization of guilt buried deep within him. He states, "I think I figured out who it is that can't forgive who." As witness to this confession, Dr Berger takes on the role of both therapist and surrogate father. At this point in the film, Calvin is still unaware how to effectively reach his son. By connecting with Dr Berger in a manner that he cannot with his mother and father, Conrad is able to shed the guilt he has over surviving the tragic boating accident that killed his brother.

Redford accentuates Calvin's empathy toward his son by examining the contrast that exists between Calvin and Beth in regard to their affection toward Conrad. This reevaluation begins to surface after the blow-up in the living room when Conrad reveals to his dad he feels his mother hates him. In the scenes that follow, Calvin appears withdrawn from co-workers and stumbles while jogging. Redford effectively conveys Calvin's haunted stance by interjecting flashbacks of Conrad and Buck as children and the night he discovers that Conrad has attempted suicide. Like Conrad, Calvin reaches outside the home front and decides to seek the counsel of Dr Berger. Therefore similar to the emotional exploration Conrad experiences, Calvin also attempts a connection with Dr Berger in hopes of achieving a catharsis. Redford stages this scene as Calvin's confession of what he witnesses but cannot contribute to at home.

Interestingly, Calvin shares that his intuition told him something was wrong with his son even before he attempted suicide but he disregarded it because he felt that "intelligent people could work out their own problems" Donald Sutherland effectively portrays Calvin's regret over this thought by reciting the statement with crackle in his voice followed by a pause. As the scene continues Calvin is able to confide to Dr Berger that he is sadly drifting in regard to keeping his family intact. He states, "I can see myself and I can see the two to them (his son and wife) drifting and I just stand there watching." At the scene concludes Calvin is finally able to admit to himself that Beth gives little attention to Conrad and may not be able to forgive her son for

surviving the accident over her favorite son, Buck. Calvin eyes are now open to the struggles within his family. He and Conrad are open to letting the outside world into the false security of their home.

With this new openness, the positive impact of the father is strengthened leading to a stronger bond with his son. In his book *Hollywood: From Vietnam to Hollywood and Beyond*, Film scholar Robin Wood agrees stating, "The son progresses toward identification of the father, achieving this with the help of psychiatry; the process involves the acquisition of his own woman. The inconvenient mother can then be expelled from the narrative, leaving father and son in the plenitude of their Oedipal reconciliation (Wood 235).

In terms of its portrayal of the mother, *Ordinary People* expands upon the idealistic, 1950s perfect wife/mother portrayed in *Rebel Without a Cause* and numerous television series. Similar to Joanna in *Kramer Vs Kramer*, the character of Beth follows the 1980s trend of cinematic matriarchs who are a danger to the family unit. Ryan and Kellner describe how a number of 1980s films portray images of loving, nurturing fathers in contrast to prejudicial images of selfish mother (Ryan, Kellner 157). However, unlike *Rebel* and *Kramer Vs Kramer*, Redford and screenwriter Alvin Sargent explore the character of Beth as representative of the traditional, domesticated housewife at odds over sharing her pain outside the walls of her family.

Redford casts popular television superstar Mary Tyler Moore effectively against type at the controlling, neglectful Beth. It's a brilliant decision to aid the portrayal of the distance Beth keeps herself physically and emotionally from her surviving son, Conrad. There is no hint of the mother Laura Petrie from 1960's *The Dick Van Dyke Show* or the sunny disposition of Mary Richards from the 1970s *Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Redford stated in numerous 1980 interviews that he wanted to bring out the "dark side" to Mary Tyler Moore and strip her of any TV

comedienne mannerisms. Moore's layered performance contrasts audience expectations in her motherly role and aids Redford's effective portrayal of the emotional distance that lies between Beth and Conrad.

Superficially, Beth is a cheerful, organized mother whose strives for perfection and efficiency hide a cautious and guarded interior. In a 1997 interview Moore stated that she saw the character of Beth as a "victim" who was "so brittle inside that she could alienate her own son" (Emmy TV Legends.com). Throughout the film there are subtle references to Beth's preference of Buck to Conrad. Calvin reveals to Dr Berger that although Beth shows little affection to Conrad, she loved Bucky as he was her first son. A flashback sequence also displays a playful exchange between Beth and Buck that borders on flirtation. The look on Moore's face toward displays sensual infatuation that hints underlying sexual attraction may have also existed between Beth and Buck. As the film progresses it becomes apparent Beth resents Conrad's survival over Buck.

Beth's connection to her husband and son is masked due to a superficial obsession with appearance. As effectively portrayed by Moore, Beth is a dynamic and determined upper-class suburban housewife who's selfish and controlling demeanor has rid her of emotion. The film implies that her love for her favorite son was so great that she seemed to bury all feeling with him. Therefore, she describes her son as distant from friends and family because "he provokes people."

Redford effectively stages a number of scenes to reflect Beth's detachment from Conrad. One of the first exchanges between mother and son occurs on as Beth is frightened by Conrad who walks in on her while she sits in Buck's eerily unchanged room. As they leave the room, Redford keeps the characters at a distance as Conrad reveals his grade on a trigonometry quiz. Beth at first appears interested but quickly drops the subject and retreats to her room.

Later Redford establishes the lone exchange between the two that Beth initiates. During the scene Beth notices Conrad sitting alone outside in their backyard. She approaches him with an offer of a jacket to keep warm and asks what he is thinking about. In one of her few acknowledgments of his attempted suicide, she remarks that “your hair is starting to grow out, it’s looking better.” However when Conrad shares an anecdote involving Buck wanting a dog as a pet, Beth freezes. Redford reinforces this by panning the camera on an uncomfortable Beth who quickly changes the subject, gets up and begins overlapping her dialogue with Conrad. To desperately gain her attain back, he begins to bark like a dog at his mother. The plea fails as it sends the distant Beth back into her perfect home. Throughout the remainder of the film all of Conrad’s attempts at reconciliation are rejected by Beth. The most painful of these occurs at the conclusion when rejuvenated Conrad welcomes his parents back from a New Year’s golfing trip. He states to mother that he’s glad she’s back and attempts to intimately embrace her. However, Beth is unable to retaliate and keeps her hands and arms at a safe distance. Redford close up of Moore’s emotionally vacant face is a shocking contrast to the portrayal of traditional mother in the film.

In contrast to Conrad and Calvin whose characters change throughout the course of the film, Redford subtly develops Beth’s mannered traits, keeping her illusionary perfectionism consistent throughout the film. Stein describes Beth as resistant to change, a Reagan Era throwback to the socio-mythic times of *Our Town* where everything was endlessly perfect (Stein 74). At the start of the film, Beth is seen setting a symmetrically perfect breakfast table for her husband and son. Eerily her connection to her dead son Buck is also without flaws. She keeps his bedroom the same as it was when he was alive. Nothing has changed and the room is a silent shrine to his brief accomplishments in life. Later in the film it’s revealed that she even corrects Calvin’s choice of tie and shoes while dressing for their son’s funeral.

When Calvin suggests to Beth they both see Dr Berger in order to better understand Conrad, she replies, "Don't try to change me, Calvin. I don't want any more changes in my life. For God sakes hasn't enough happened? Let's just hold on to what we've got" Stein states "The mythological function of relating change as necessary for life is set by establishing Beth as a complex figure who as a product of change is now the most persistent obstacle to any more of it" (Stein 74). The tragic irony for Beth is that her traditional, domestic attitude conflicts with a generation reaching outside the safety sphere of the home to connect.

Similar to *Rebel*, Redford explores the similarity of the matriarch and grandmother in terms of behavior and personality traits. Redford effectively examines this attribute during the family photo scene highlighting the tension between Beth's parents. Her mother is controlling the picture taking and barking orders to her laid-back husband who remains unaffected by her abrasive behavior. Later while Beth is helping her mother fix sandwiches, the audience sees subtle hints at the origins of Beth's personality. While discussing Conrad woes, Beth's mother sharply reassures her daughter that "he will be alright if you are firm with him." When Beth reveals to her mother that Conrad is seeing a psychiatrist, the mother abrasively replies "I thought we were all through with that." This scene exemplifies the both women's resistance to change in the perfect recreation of the home and family, a 1950s idealism struggling to survive in contemporary 1980 America. During this exchange, Beth accidentally breaks one of her mother's fancy plates and exclaims "you know I think this can be saved it's a nice clean break." This is stated while the camera focuses on Beth putting the evenly broken plate back together. Moore reveals in a Emmy Legends television interview that she does see Beth as "victim who wanted to do the right thing and was taught how to do the right thing" (EmmyTvLegends.com). For Beth that "right thing" may be a superficial desire to fix any issue within the constraints of

the home. In this short scene Redford brilliantly establishes the character of Beth for the audience. In her world when something is broken it can always be neatly put back together.

Beth's hesitation to move outside the insular, idealized home is further exemplified by her sarcastic, surprised reaction to Calvin's suggestion of a family visit to Dr Berger. "What does he know about me, about this family" asks Beth? Since they are in a restaurant, the controlling Beth scans the room to make sure no one hears this intimate conversation. "I don't want to see any counselors, I'm me. This my family and if we have problems we will solve them in the privacy of our own home not by running to some kind of specialist every time something goes wrong." Redford and Moore convey the resistance of the character in this moment as Beth is seen putting on a welcoming false smile to the server who interrupts the conversation to take their order.

The film's examination of the mother/son relationship is an ironic dichotomy. Beth's incapacity to connect with her son seems to stem from a combination of resentment and inability to move outside the insular sphere of her home. Subtle hints of Beth's preference to Buck are layered throughout the film (unchanged room and flirtation in flashbacks). In addition, her resistance to explore aid outside of the home has extenuated her son's alienation.

For Conrad this distance has created a fear that his mother hates him. In the scene following the blow up between Conrad and Beth, he cannot face his father while revealing his apprehension that his mother hates him, a conflict that Redford reiterates by shooting Conrad lying on his bed with his arm covering his face while conversing with his father. Conrad's repressed guilt and anger seem to surface more succinctly with his mother. His fear of her rejection is conveyed through deceitful actions and emotional outbursts. When his mother confronts him over quitting the swimming he states "that he didn't think it mattered if he told her or not." This exchange soon elevates into an argument as Conrad states "that the only



reason she cares, the only reason she gives a fuck about it is that someone knew about it first.”

At the conclusion of this exchange, Conrad cannot resolve his conflict with his mother and retreats to his room. Redford stages a majority of Conrad's inner revelations through the sessions with Dr Berger. With Dr Berger, Conrad is free to disclose the tiredness, fears and angst that prevent him from letting go the guilt he feels over surviving the tragic boating accident that killed his brother. He states to Dr Berger, “I got to, I got get off the hook for what I did, what I did to him” near the film's conclusion and with Berger's help, he is able to forgive himself, a first step in reconnecting with his family.

The tragedy for Beth is her connection to the 1950s traditional, domesticated woman who separates the bond with her children to that of her husband. Following the 1980s culture of parents bonding with their children effectively conveyed in *Kramer Vs Kramer*, *On Golden Pond* and *Terms of Endearment*, Conrad and Calvin are creating a relationship through the guidance of Dr Berger. Beth's resistance and resentment of this bond is evident at various moments throughout the film.

Any attempt by Calvin to include Conrad in conversation or social plans is quickly dispelled by Beth. Towards the end of the film when Beth and Calvin are vacationing in Texas, Beth criticizes Calvin's wish to include their son on their next vacation by exclaiming “Do you do that on purpose or is it just a reflex. He controls you even when you are thousands of miles away. I'm surprised you haven't felt the need to call him today.” Through her statement, Beth reveals her fear of losing her spousal bond with Calvin to Conrad. In fact, the lone argument between Beth and Calvin follows this moment. Against the backdrop of an affluent country club golf course, Calvin expresses his anger toward Beth for her rejection of Conrad. “Can't you see anything except in terms of how it affects you? Start thinking about him for awhile. He just wants to know that you don't hate him.” Beth's passionate response to this is one of the few

times she reveals any emotion in the film. "God, mothers don't hate their sons. Do you see how you accept what he (Conrad) says without any questions and you can't do the same thing to me." It's quite evident from her response that the intergenerational relationships amongst the families cannot be shared.

It's interesting to note that in both *Rebel without a Cause* and *Ordinary People* the son is a major participant in guiding the father back to his role as the strong leader as head of the family. With the assistance of Dr Berger, Conrad is able to strip his guilt in regard to surviving the accident and return emotionally to his distant mother and welcoming father. Unfortunately his attempt at connection is rejected by Beth, a choice that contributes to her dismissal as a participating member of the family.

By the conclusion of the film both Conrad and Calvin have made a successful journey of change that allows them to join the contemporary 1980s society rather than hide in the false security of the traditional home. Beth's resilience to this transformation shreds the ailing bond with her husband. In one of the final scenes in the film, Calvin confronts Beth's ability to love and how she seemed to bury that passion with her son Buck. He states, "Maybe finally it was the best of you that you buried, but whatever it was, I don't know who you are and I don't know what we've been playing at. I don't know if I really love you anymore and I don't know what I'm going to do without that."

*Ordinary People* follows the 1980s precedent allowing the audience to fully accept the ejection of the mother to keep the family unit headed by a strong, nurturing patriarch intact. Stein states, "Conrad comes to a realization that whatever his father's failings, it is his father's enormous capacity for love that is life's saving grace." (Stein 79) This realization visually reaffirmed at the film's conclusion as Conrad states to Calvin, "You always made us feel that everything will be alright. I've thought about that lately. I really admire you for it." Calvin

replies, "Well, don't admire people too much, they'll disappoint you." Conrad then states that he's not disappointed and loves his dad. His dad agrees and the two embrace, reiterating the modern nuclear family strong with the patriarch and son together. This emotional contemporary father and son bond differs from the conservative image at the conclusion of *Rebel*. However, the film still reiterates a traditional representation in regard to the social norms of masculinity.

*With Ordinary People*, Redford reestablished the ideal traditional family for the 1980s. By the aid of psychiatry and the wiliness to move outside the insular sphere, the patriarch and son are able to blossom keeping the family unit strong and viable. Keeping true to its tagline, by putting the past in its proper place, the 1980s nuclear family can flourish. However, with an increasing number of single parent households with latchkey children, Hollywood would also begin to explore family households without the patriarch as head; this absence often calling for an appropriate substitute.

#### Chapter 4: ET and the Absence of the Father in the Single-Parent Household

The last chapter explored the manner *Ordinary People* reconstructed the ideal 1950s nuclear family at the start of the 1980s. The film began a contemporary examination of the bond between intergenerational relationships within the family unit. In *Ordinary People*, a troubled son and his father reestablish the modern American nuclear family after the ejection of the mother who refuses to look outside the constraints of the insular family sphere. The film reiterates how the contemporary family can remain stable and viable between one parent and a child. *ET: The Extra Terrestrial* (1982) expands this trend by combining science fiction and family drama to examine the effects of a divorce on children. With *ET*, director, Steven Spielberg further explores his obsession with broken families and flawed father and mother figures with a contemporary reflection of intergenerational relationships in a 1980s single-parent home. The fantasy aspect of the film (a stranded alien) provides the children of a broken family emotional shelter and an uninterrupted transition to adulthood. Similar to issues explored in *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Ordinary People*, *ET* investigates the ability of a family to be successful and sufficient in light of an absent parent. Thus, in addition to moving outside the safety of the 1950s insular sphere, the contemporary cinematic family must now tackle the reality of a home run by one parent.

Coontz examines the impact that increasing divorce rates and growing numbers of latchkey children had on modern family life in single parent homes at the beginning of the 1980s. She cites a 1989 psychological study by Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee claiming

almost half the children of divorced parents experience long-term pain, worry and insecurity that adversely affect their love and work relationships. Coontz adds that divorce creates stress for children both emotionally (changes in residence, neighborhoods, friends and distracted, unhappy parents) and economically (loss of income from the absent parent) (Coontz 220-222).

The popular and critically acclaimed 1982 film directed by Steven Spielberg explores a contemporary 1980s single-parent family's struggle to unite emotionally after the father's abrupt departure. In contrast to other similar films of the period, the family in *ET* is already broken before the film begins. According to film scholar Joseph McBride, "Spielberg's characters, while yearning for stable family lives, seldom manage to achieve that sense of security, and they usually struggle desperately to escape from the constriction, narrow-mindedness, and stultification of middle-class existence" (McBride 5). Arlene Skolnick states how the emotional effects of a divorce are a crisis for "all concerned." In regard to emotional damage to the children, she cites how a break up can often springboard various – psychological, social and academic – problems. However she reiterates, "The major factor influencing after divorce is the relationship with the parents. A child, who can maintain a warm, supportive relationship with one or both parents or other adult, has a much better chance of dealing successfully with the stresses of a divorce" (Skolnick 211). In *ET*, the major challenge is restoring the emotional security for the children caused by the lack of the father.

The overwhelming popularity of *ET* compared to any other family-themed film of the 1980s may stem from the emotional chord it struck with families and children experiencing similar circumstances. With the increase of divorce and number of single-parent homes, the film gave a reassuring but realistic depiction of a situation affecting millions of families throughout the U.S. In his review of the 2002 *ET* DVD release, film critic Ryan Cracknell sums up the probable reaction of many young children and adults who have viewed the film.

ET is the film that is etched in my childhood memories. Now, years later, I have come to see that I made an even deeper connection to ET. I was Elliott and ET was my story as it was for a generation of children raised in the absence of a father figure to look up to on a daily basis. It is a reminder of where I came from and the pain I went through. I have a deep personal connection with ET that I cannot share with anyone but myself. This is a film that goes beyond what I like and don't like. It gives me insight into who I am. (<http://www.movie-views.com/films/E/et.html>)

The film's focus is on the relationship between lonely ten-year-old Elliott and a stranded alien. Elliott lives in a suburban Los Angeles neighborhood with his recently divorced mother and older brother Michael and younger sister, Gertie. In this 1980s single-parent household, the children are left to fend for themselves after school while their mother is stressfully juggling work and home responsibilities; the children's bicycles being their lone form of transportation while their mother Mary is at work. It's evident from the early moments in the film that Elliott is lonely, trying to blend in with his older brother's friends and at ten too old to connect with five-year-old Gertie. Unfortunately, his mother's hands are full with work and she spends her limited time at home nurturing young Gertie. Ryan and Keller state that *ET* is an interesting attempt to show the demise of old family forms and the reality of divorce. In Elliott's current existence adult male role models are distant. To convey this Spielberg effectively excludes wide above waist shots of any male character until the conclusion of the film. Ryan and Kellner suggest a possibility that stabilization occurs when another male model role enters the family (Ryan and Kellner 263). In the film, ET serves as both male friend and masculine protector.

Wood asserts that "ET quite vividly depicts the oppressiveness of life in the nuclear family: incessant, bickering and one-upmanship" (Wood 157). But it is important that in contrast to *Kramer Vs Kramer* and *Ordinary People*, the conflict of the broken family in *ET* is the result of the father's defection. Spielberg examines the underlying tension of the absent father early in the film in a dinner scene following Elliott's discovery of ET. On the surface this scene

highlights how Elliott's family justifiably disbelieves his claim of seeing a strange creature in their backyard shed. However, at its subtext, this familial exchange accentuates the emotional uneasiness caused by the missing patriarchal figure. At the start of the scene, Elliott wards off his siblings' jesting by calling his brother Michael, "Penis breath." Mary's facial reaction to this outburst is a combination of scolding and nervous laughter. With this quick reaction, Spielberg and actress Dee Wallace reflect Mary's novice struggle to begin to raise her family alone. However, the father's absence is reiterated by Elliott. After being hurt by his family's teasing, Elliott's exclaims how "Dad would believe me." Mary hesitantly suggests he call his father. Elliott's truthful response, "I can't he's in Mexico with Sally", sparks an emotional reaction from Mary as she excuses herself from the dinner table. In addition, Spielberg pans the camera on a silent Gertie and angry Michael. This short scene serves as a catalyst for the film's examination of a single parent family uneasy with the lack of a patriarch as its center.

Another key scene exploring the void left by the children's father occurs in the family's garage while Elliott and Michael are looking for items to assist ET's plan to phone home. While searching through their father's tools, they discover an old shirt he left behind. The discovery floods the boys' thoughts with memories of times with their father. Elliott states "Remember when he took us to ballgames, movies..." Spielberg and actors Henry Thomas (Elliot) and Robert MacNaughton reiterate this loss by grasping on to the final physical presence he has left them, the trace of his aftershave scent on the old shirt. Mike fondly whispers, "Old Spice". Elliott's correction displays both happiness and angst, "no it's Sea Breeze." It's an affecting, painful moment that reaffirms the void that a missing father has left on his sons.

This void also leaves Mary with an unintentional disconnect with her children and the domestic surroundings of their home. Her character represents a new 1980s mother that breaks the 1950s myth of domestic housewife. She is emotionally distant due to time

constraints rather than selfishness, a contrast to the neglectful mothers in *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Ordinary People*. Mary displays strong connection to her children and valiantly attempts to provide the emotional assurance and time needed. Spielberg and Wallace effectively portray Mary as a divorced mother struggling to work and spend time with her children. This is evident in a scene that shows Mary passionately reading a bedtime story to young Gertie.

Coontz cites how institutions such as work, school and medical care still revolve around the 1950s myth “that every household has a full-time mother at home, available to chauffeur children to doctor appointments in the middle of the day, pick up children early on dismissal days or stay home when the child has the flu “(Coontz 215–216). This conflict is clearly defined in *Kramer Vs Kramer* when Dustin Hoffman’s character Ted is fired from his advertising job due to numerous absences from work to care take his son. Because this scenario was becoming more a societal norm for single parents and their children at the time, the audience is completely empathetic with Ted’s plight. It is “a strain” as Coontz reiterates “for one parent to raise a child as many factors make single parenthood especially traumatic—economic strain, parental conflict, lack of time and absence of a strong safety net” (Coontz 224).

A number of scenes early in the film depict the hurriedness of Mary’s existence. Without her husband’s support, she is now left to balance economic and emotional security to her children. Therefore, to reiterate this struggle the film depicts Mary’s daily juggling act; rushing to drop the children off to school on her way to work and arriving home by dinnertime to spend the evening with her family. The film alludes to the change Coontz states on the ability of parents to stay home with their sick children. During the scene where Elliott decides to fake illness to stay at home with ET, Mary’s response is “Are you going to live if I go to work.” But Mary’s presence is strong at the film’s emotional conclusion as she stands by her heartbroken children bidding farewell to ET.



Mary's distance from her children's world reflects the challenges of modern parents in single parent homes of the time in terms of multitasking. Her disconnect with her children's new friend/protector stems more from lack of time than lack of compassion. Throughout a majority of the film, Mary is oblivious to ET's presence. The film often displays this humorously as in the scene where Mary rushes around the kitchen on a break from work. As Mary quickly opens the refrigerator looking for a snack, the door knocks ET down and yet she doesn't even notice him as he wobbles past her because she is now fumbling through her purse.

Mary's emotional unavailability is merely not a result of her busy schedule. In the film, Spielberg is able to convey the emotional effect the divorce has had on her and emptiness she feels in the wake of her separation from her husband due to his infidelity. One key scene that reiterates Mary's loneliness is during the Halloween sequence. While the children are out trick or treating as a decoy to take ET to the forest, Spielberg includes a scene of a solitary Mary dressed in costume sadly blowing out festive candles, alone and teary. Her husband's abandonment has left a hurtful, emotional void.

*ET* follows a 1980s cinematic trend of investigating the contemporary family against a fantasy backdrop (*Poltergeist* (1982), *Back to the Future* (1985) and *Field of Dreams* (1989)). Ryan and Kellner observe that family films often are popular at the same time as fantasy adventure film. They describe the early 1980s as a "time when America's loss of confidence in the economy and in politics probably reached its nadir and the economic function of the family was now a stabilizer and means of survival" (Ryan and Kellner 263). Because the film effectively blends fantasy along with the reality of this situation, ET becomes a combination playmate and adult caregiver for the children, especially Elliott. In interviews at the time of the film's release in 1982, Spielberg said that with *ET* he wanted to explore his childhood fantasy of a best friend

or “special friend” that rescues a young boy from the sadness of a divorce (ET VHS Documentary).

Film scholar Marina Heung theorizes how both the biological and surrogate family exists side by side in films such as ET. The bond between Elliott and ET creates a surrogate nuclear family as a counterpart to the broken family introduced at the start of the film. Heung examines how this co-existing unit in family relationship films of the 1980s offers hope in regard to preserving the nuclear family.

Composed of members brought together by circumstance or choice, rather than through blood connections, the surrogate family is elevated as the counterpart and alternative to the biological family. Thus, through the notion that such a surrogate family can be formed and sustained, these films affirm a continuing faith in the validity and continuation of the nuclear family (Heung 82).

However, it is important to note that in ET, the alien’s parental duty is accomplished as another childhood friend to the children. This is first conveyed when Elliott decides to adopt the alien early in the film. Elliott provides a temporary home for ET in his closet amongst his other playthings; action figures, movie toys and a peanut bank. Later in the film when ET experiences his first Halloween, the children disguise him as a ghost complete with white sheet in order to smuggle him out of the house. With their divorced father frolicking in Mexico and mother juggling parental duties, the children cling to ET for companionship as they would a best friend. Spielberg reiterates this youthful bonding visually by shooting a majority of the scenes from a child’s perspective.

As this childhood relationship deepens, ET’s ability to provide emotional security to Elliott and his siblings as a father figure increases. Mathison states on the DVD’s documentary that when the filmmakers asked children in 1981 what power would they like to see an alien have, the majority answered the power to heal. This answer seems to reflect a new generation of children whose lives may not include the old “1950s nuclear family model”, yet still need a

stable parental figure to heal and reassure. ET first displays this ability when he is able to fix a cut on Elliott's finger. In addition to his healing powers, he also is able to resurrect dead plants and flowers. In this aspect ET's magical abilities reflect his role as protector for the family. Later in the film as Elliott and his friends flee government agents, ET is able to magically levitate their bikes to guide the children safely to the forest and away from danger. For Elliott and his siblings ET's amazing powers replace the gap left from an absent father and overworked, oblivious mother. Metaphorically, ET's ability to heal may resurrect Elliott's family.

The bond that develops between Elliott and ET is the central relationship explored in the film. When Elliott decides to adopt the stranded alien, he provides a temporary home for ET in his closet. Since ET is able to adapt to his immediate environment, he begins his rescue of Elliott by immersing himself in Elliott as they begin to share and experience as one being. Film scholar and critic Vivian Sobchack describes this interdependence between the two as structurally satisfying and extraordinarily successful. She describes ET as a "transported and transformed father whose ability to function as both innocent childish friend and wise, technologically powerful adult allows him to escape the traditional patriarchal form without sacrificing traditional patriarchal power and thus is able to reside in domestic space and serve as Elliott's surrogate father." (Penley and others 20–21) Humorously, Spielberg projects this bond in a scene where ET gets drunk from accidentally drinking countless beers. As the alien stumbles intoxicated through the empty house, Elliott begins to display the same drunken effects at school complete with burps. This first shared beer experience strengthens the male relationship that exists between the two characters and for the rest of the film the two begin to connect with each other doing typical masculine rituals that occur between male friends or father and son: eating, drinking, sharing a bedroom and riding bikes. As Elliott's best friend and parental figure, ET effectively fills the space left empty by Elliott's natural father.

A major theme of the film is saying goodbye and moving on. It becomes sadly evident that ET must eventually go home, thus Elliott faces another possible departure of a trusted male figure. Elliott conveys his angst to E.T tearfully stating "I thought we could grow up together." Regardless of ET's role as friend or father, the poignant significance of the statement lies in Elliott's hope and expectation that his missing father's void will be filled throughout his childhood. McBride describes the moving conclusion as "more bitter than sweet as the children have to face the loss of a best friend, father figure, a painful step in the maturation process" (McBride 10). Despite the sadness conveyed in this moment, ET compassionately reaches out to his friend to wipe away his tear. This is a contrast to Elliott's non-communicative father and a gesture that displays loyalty and love.

As the film nears its conclusion, Elliott's broken family is able to psychologically heal and once again function as a complete family unit due to ET's profound thought transitory presence. A key scene exploring the manner he unites the family occurs during ET's "death scene. In this sequence government officials and medical experts are desperately trying to resuscitate the fading alien and sever his physical bond with Elliott. As Elliott comes back to life, he is faced with letting go not only a friend but of a newly found family member, Of course, since the central relationship in the film exists between Elliott tearfully delivers a painful goodbye to his dying friend. However, as ET is slowly passing away, the filmmakers also effectively address Gertie and Mike's emotional connection to the alien and their inner angst. While ET is shown fading away, Mike is seen exploring a place to nap in the house and eventually choosing ET's space in Elliott's closet. As he lies down on ET's blanket, a mixture of both content and despair are evident in his face. Moments later when ET has died and doctors are desperately trying to revive him, instead of keeping the focal point on Elliott, the camera pans on a tearful distraught

Gertie reacting in silent horror. It's a powerful reminder of the effect ET has had not only on Elliott but on the entire family.

Despite the psychologically damaging effects of a broken home, the 1980s nuclear family in *ET* is able to succeed and restore emotional security. Ryan and Kellner state that in *ET*, "the broken ego (or family) is reintegrated through the fantasy of regression and enabled thereby to engage once more with the world (Ryan and Kellner 261). By providing needed emotional security ET is able to dissolve the problems presented at the start of the film; the need to return the natural father to his family. Ultimately this security is reiterated by the family's ability to move on without him. Heung effectively sums up why the film is able unite the family and heal its members, "The lesson that E.T. teaches is that to grow up, one learns to relinquish what one loves more specifically, one learns to accept the loss of one's father" (Heung 81). Similar to *Ordinary People*, *ET*'s examination of a contemporary family in the 1980s is revisionary. Interestingly, the view of masculinity remains a conservative representation. Although the family is able to heal due to *ET*'s profound influence, the eventual forgiveness of the missing father reiterates a societal norm in favor of the father's adulterous actions. However, by the film's conclusion the family in *ET* can gradually accept the devastating, emotional effects of a divorce and learn to bond together as a whole family reaffirming the preservation of the nuclear family despite such obstacles as a missing parental figure.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

This thesis has examined the manner the traditional American family has continued to flourish and reestablish itself in film between the 1950s and the 1980s. Using classic elements of melodrama, an idealized nuclear family image surfaced in popular films and television of the 1950s decade including 1955's breakthrough *A Rebel Without a Cause*. The countercultural and turbulent 1960s and 1970s brought about a short gap in the cinematic portrayal of the idealized family unit. However, the cinematic nuclear family would redefine itself in the 1980s. This reevaluation continued the nostalgic 1950s family model, but with an emphasis on child relationships and the single-parent home. Films such as *Ordinary People* and *ET: The Extraterrestrial* are working out of these dimensions.

In both the 1950s and 1980s the role of the father figure resonated in the families of these films. In *Rebel*, the objective of each major character is the quest for the ideal father. Although the patriarchal figures in *Rebel* cause a negative effect on their children, Jim Stark's tumultuous transition into adulthood confirms the resurrection of the strong father figure by the film's conclusion. In *Ordinary People*, the son is also a major influence in the reaffirmation of the strong father as leader. Throughout the film Conrad's attempts at reaching out to his mother are rejected. Therefore, the newly formed father/son bond can only continue with the ejection of the mother as part of the family unit. *E.T.* examines a child's reaction to the absence of the father due to a divorce. Through the use of a fantasy surrogate father figure, a family is able to overcome the devastating effects of a broken home.

The decades of the 1950s and 1980s differed in the portrayal of the father to his spouse and children. As examined in *Rebel Without a Cause*, Jim Stark wrestles with grief over the emasculation of his father due to an over-domineering mother. Over the course of the film, Jim's angst-filled journey leads him to create a family of his own. He has created a spousal bond with Judy and allowed his parents to exist harmoniously with his father once again, a strong leader of the family. With this newly created family, the film effectively defines the ideal 1950s nuclear family, consisting of happily married spouses in which the husband is dominant and the children are content. In this idealized family, the parents have a stable marriage with a distance from their children thus keeping the generational bonds in perspective.

As the nuclear family is portrayed in its resurgence in 1980s films, the role of the child to parent is integral to the success of the family unit. The bonds between fathers and sons are highlighted in popular films such as *Kramer Vs Kramer* and *Ordinary People*. However, in contrast to *Rebel's* emphasis on the strength of the stable marriage as anchor of the idealized nuclear family, the 1980s cinematic family directs the focus to the children. Throughout *Ordinary People* Conrad's noble attempts at emotional connection with his mother are rejected, drawing father and son closer together. As the film progresses, Conrad's journey to reconnect with his family after a tragedy leads him to bond with his father who is able to provide him a capacity of love. In contrast to the 1950s nuclear family model, the child to single parent connect is enough to keep the family unit whole. Unfortunately for Beth her dismissal of Conrad establishes the need for her departure to keep the family strong and stable; a verdict contemporary audiences were willing to accept.

By the 1980s, the successful family is portrayed in the media as aided by forces outside of the home. Films such as *ET: The Extraterrestrial* (1982), *Poltergeist* (1982), *Starman* (1984),

and *Back to the Future* (1985) blend family melodrama with fantasy elements to investigate contemporary family issues. The use of psychiatry to assist struggling families is encouraged and accepted. Unlike the insular nuclear families of the 1950s, which are supposed to be content with the security provided within the home, the cultural milieu of the 1980s reflected a need for families to venture outside the insular home to aid stability and success. The tragedy for Beth in *Ordinary People* is her resistance to changing with the times—instead, she is clinging to the traditional image of the domesticated housewife. By contrast, Dr. Berger, Calvin and Conrad are able to create a strong bond to each other and by the film's conclusion are able to make a successful alteration that allows them to create a successful, modern home.

The 1980s cinematic family also reflected the pain associated with rising divorce rates and the increase of single-parent homes. 1982's *ET* successfully investigates a single family's attempt to unite after the departure of the father. In the film, a stranded alien is able to become a surrogate father/friend to the children of a broken family, thus providing not only emotional shelter but a transition into accepting family life without the presence of the missing parent. In addition to the plight of the children, *ET* explores the pressure of a mother raising her family without the economic and emotional stability of a spouse. This void reflects the trauma involved for a parent raising children alone. The film effectively depicts Mary's struggle to juggle domestic and work duties while painfully reiterating the emotional emptiness of reestablishing a single existence. Through *ET*'s presence the family is able to heal and regain emotional security as a stable family unit. Ultimately, the film's central theme is about saying goodbye. Through his bond with the family, E.T. is able to teach Elliott to accept the loss of his father and once again connect with his family. Despite the fantasy aspect of an alien, this realistic cinematic depiction resonated with young audiences of the time, thus accounting for the film's overwhelming acclaim and popularity.



Following the turbulent 1970s and marked by the election of Ronald Reagan, the cultural landscape of the 1980s provided a ripe period for a reevaluation of the ideal nuclear family. Although concerns and worries about child safety and moral values pushed parents to assume more traditional roles, the depiction of the family in contemporary film had to reflect an ever changing and growing population of both single parent households as well as households needing to connect outside the home for survival. As these aspects were becoming a part of the social culture of the 1980s, American films such as *Ordinary People* and *ET: The Extra Terrestrial* became a representation of the shifting dynamics of the modern American family examining single parent households and increased importance of intergenerational relationships.

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