

English 1000H

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### The Collapse of the Nuclear Family

The 1950s have long been hailed as a golden era of traditional family values and wholesome American spirit, yet the happy-go-lucky image of the time was a thin veil for the underlying struggles that often went unmentioned. Although the '50s saw the prosperity of a post-war nation and the safety of comfortable family environments, the decade's strong emphasis on gender roles often banished women to home life and men to the workplace, which led to turmoil within households and an eventual decay of the family relationship. *The Bad Seed*, a 1956 film about an ideal family faced with the reality that their "perfect" daughter is a serial killer, takes a liberal approach to the issue of family roles, uncovering the turmoil potentially caused by the ideals of the decade. It depicts the decade's separation of gender roles as suppressive to both men and women and destructive to the team effort that successful family life requires. Through its depiction of a family's slide into destruction, *The Bad Seed* highlights the problems created by the formation of idealized family roles in the 1950s.

The defining factor of the 1950s is its emphasis on a return to American normality and comfort that manifested itself in a regulated home life and the creation of specific gender ideals. The '50s, recovering from the devastation of World War II and celebrating

America's victory, sought to restore a sense of national security. United States Senator Joseph McCarthy, influential throughout the decade, emphasized the need for the American public to remain on the lookout for any sort of national subversion or communist activity that could potentially ruin the nation's recently gained, fragile sense of security. This constant suspicion of any outside threat to the American utopia, termed "McCarthyism," not only affected American culture but family life as well. As Arlene Skolnick discusses in Embattled Paradise, her study of the American family during the 1950s, McCarthyism pervaded both marriage and family life by singling out "the unmarried adult, the working woman, [and] the childless couple" for straying from the nuclear family ideal of the decade (65). Anyone who failed to meet the expectations of the 1950s family setup was perceived as a threat to the nation's conformity. America was eager to move beyond the turmoil of the war years and return to a sense of "normality," which included gender roles that everyone was expected to comply with.

The 1950s film, *The Bad Seed*, explores such gender roles through its illustration of married life during the decade, which shows the nuclear family mold as predictable and stifling. In the film, Mr. Penmark, the "big and strong daddy," as his daughter puts it, is the clear authority figure of the family, as typical fathers of the decade were expected to be. Like Mr. Penmark, men of the 1950s were given a heavy and unavoidable responsibility to provide for their families. According to John Sirjamaki in his exploration of twentieth century families, fathers of the decade were expected to be "the main support and buttress of their families," holding the title of primary breadwinner and head of family matters (88). By contrast, Mrs. Penmark, the docile mother figure, dutifully fulfills her role as a housewife, taking care of the daily household chores and

looking after their daughter, Rhoda, while her husband is away on business. She reflects the women of the 1950s who, “by virtue of their sex,” were “automatically cast as wives and as homemakers” and expected to deal with the homestead, which ensured that menial domestic tasks were completed without the help of men, who had more important things to worry about (Sirjamaki 89). As Sirjamaki goes on to explain, it was even seen during the 1950s that becoming a wife was a fate that women would “devoutly covet,” one that would help to “establish their place and worth in the family,” which essentially made women out to hope for nothing more in life than the ability to serve a family (89). Mrs. Penmark reflects the idea that women should seek nothing more than domesticity, as she rarely ventures outside the house except to buy groceries and to escort Rhoda to her various activities. Though Mrs. Penmark is clearly tired of attempting to look after her violent daughter, she never once questions her role as a woman. The construction of these gender-specific roles, which kept men in the workplace and women in the home, created the nuclear family ideal, centering on the American family as a compartmentalized, controlled unit with an overwhelming sense of duty and routine.

The film’s negative depiction of traditional gender roles serves to highlight the chasm between men and women that came as a result of the decade’s idealization and enforces the film’s idea that a stable family involves spousal cooperation. In the film, Mrs. Penmark is unable to communicate with her husband when she faces disciplinary troubles with Rhoda, whom she discovers is responsible for the murder of three people. Mrs. Penmark sees her issues with Rhoda’s behavior as nothing more than a nuisance to her husband, whose pressing job in the Air Force holds far more gravity than the silly trifles of home life. Her feelings of inferiority are obvious when she tries, on multiple

occasions, to explain her worries to her husband but, each time, ends up pretending everything is fine, even as she slips into increasing feelings of depression and fear. Mrs. Penmark's inability to communicate with her husband causes Rhoda's violent behavior to spiral out of control, and Rhoda becomes unmanageable for Mrs. Penmark alone. Effective communication between the Penmark parents would have been helpful in preventing Rhoda from doing further damage, especially as men were expected to "retain sovereignty in their families," which gives Mr. Penmark the responsibility to involve himself in the discipline of his daughter (Sirjamaki 88). The film's depiction of Mrs. Penmark's inability to talk to her husband about her problems and her inability to handle Rhoda herself makes the point that a family will essentially crumble without the necessary communication that comes with the sharing of men's and women's roles.

The film's portrayal of Mrs. Penmark's slow descent into insanity emphasizes the expectations for women in the 1950s and the toll that such expectations took upon their mental health. The end of the film, which shows Mrs. Penmark attempting to kill Rhoda and take her own life, reflects the guilt Mrs. Penmark holds about possibly being responsible for passing on a gene that makes Rhoda more inclined to commit murder. Mrs. Penmark's assumption of guilt shows how women in the 1950s took matters of children and the household upon themselves. The film takes the stance that women's hefty domestic burdens would eventually weigh on them and cause them to go insane. According to research done on 1950s housewives by Melody Miller, Phyllis Moen, and Donna Dempster-McClain of Cornell University, women participating in roles beyond that of the typical mother and wife were generally happier and had higher self-esteem, which proved positive for overall mental health (565). The study reinforces the idea that

women allowed to pursue goals beyond the domestic front were more emotionally stable than those suppressed and confined to home life, as Mrs. Penmark is, which reflects the underlying irony of the 1950s. The decade's expectations for domestic perfection exuded the image of a healthy, organized home life, but often women's crushing burdens actually caused the decay of the family's strength. Because Mrs. Penmark cannot single-handedly maintain the house and keep Rhoda under control as she is expected to, her "perfect" image is compromised and she slips into a depression that eventually drives the family to destruction. Her attempt to take the life of both herself and Rhoda is symbolic of the household crumbling without the domestic support and happiness of both parents.

The film's ending, featuring Rhoda's death by lightning, highlights the susceptibility of the nuclear family to internal turmoil, which stands in stark contrast to the ideals of the era. The end of World War II brought the dawn of McCarthyism and ushered in a hunger for "a return to hearth and home and a 'normal' family life," which many '50s families hoped to achieve with the establishment of specific family roles (Skolnick 65). The nuclear family was perceived to be infallible, a perfect setup for nurturing healthy children and cultivating a safe and uniform society. One of the greatest fears of the time was the idea of deviation from this nuclear model; because anything outside the norm was perceived as a threat to the recently established American prosperity, Rhoda's murderous tendencies in *The Bad Seed* were every nuclear family's worst nightmare. The film's juxtaposition of traditional, role-fulfilling Mr. and Mrs. Penmark against wild, evil Rhoda stands as an ironic counterpart to the "perfect" nuclear family ideal. The Penmarks have all the ingredients necessary for a successful family, yet the film ends negatively, with Rhoda's unforeseen death by lightning and the family left

in shambles. The film's depiction of the nuclear family's slow descent into turmoil illustrates the idea that the closed-minded 1950s idea of family, with specific gender roles and little acceptance of deviance, was susceptible to strife and could actually inhibit the family's safety.

The nuclear family ideal of the 1950s, fueled by a desire to establish a sense of normality, caused expectations of gender roles to solidify, which effectively separated family members and destroyed the cooperation necessary for a stable home. *The Bad Seed* emphasizes the problems with '50s ideals through its depiction of a typical nuclear couple struggling to communicate with each other, which ultimately causes the family's demise, culminating in the death of the only child. Though the film takes an atypical stance on family life, it highlights an important point: societal ideals, though widely accepted, play a large and sometimes negative role in the way gender and family relationships are viewed. A strong family is one based not on compliance but on cooperation and a resistance to the pressures of American culture.

## Works Cited

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