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## "You're Tearing Me Apart"! Investigating Ideology in the Image of Teens in the 1950s

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“YOU’RE TEARING ME APART”!  
INVESTIGATING IDEOLOGY IN THE IMAGE OF TEENS  
IN THE 1950S

By

Danielle Bouchard

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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In

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“You’re Tearing Me Apart”! Investigating Ideology in  
the Image of Teens in the 1950s

Danielle Bouchard

Honors Thesis

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For as long as I can remember, I have wished that I had grown up in the 1950s. From the clothing and hair styles, to the music and movie stars of the time, that period represented everything that I wished my life to be. As a pre-teen and teen watching *I Love Lucy*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best*, I imagined floating down the stairs on my way to a school dance wearing a full taffeta gown or going on dates to the drive-in and the soda shop, all to the soundtrack of dreamy Doo Wop music playing in my head. The 1950s to me was always a perfect place, a suburban dream where you were always happy and things around you seemed too good to be true. In college, I saw films like *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Blackboard Jungle* which showed a darker side of 1950s teen life and I wondered why there appeared to be such a discrepancy between the teens on television and on film.

Appearances, however, can often be deceiving. I wondered what an analysis of teens on film and television might offer under the surface, specifically what kinds of ideological frameworks support these texts? In terms of the dominant culture, what values or beliefs were being transmitted to audiences through these films and television programs? What did they have to say about the nuclear family, gender, gender roles, and sexuality in the 1950s? What were they saying about the relationship of teens to the dominant adult culture? This issue is further complicated by the introduction in the late 1950s and early 1960s of the “clean teen pics,” which presented a clean cut and well behaved image of teens distinctly different from earlier films of the period dealing with juvenile delinquency. How did the introduction of these films affect issues of gender, sexuality, and the relationship of teens to the dominant adult culture? Ultimately, to what extent do films and television programs aimed at or featuring teens reaffirm or challenge the dominant culture and its values?

Cultural studies offers a solid conceptual framework and methodology for dealing with such ideologically informed questions. A method of analysis deriving from Marxism, in terms of film, cultural studies aims to understand the relationship between film and culture by studying the dominant ideology in place at the time. According to cultural studies critic Claudia Springer, cultural studies “is concerned less with a text’s inherent literary value...and more with its articulation of ideological positions in relation to dominant culture” (6-7). Using cultural studies as a primary critical paradigm in studying film is an approach that has not been universally adopted. This becomes especially evident when conducting research on this particular topic. Cultural Studies is a valuable approach that could lend a great deal of insight to the representation of teens in film and television, and will hopefully begin to be used as a primary methodology of scholars in the near future.

In a study such as this, it is necessary to limit the number of films and television programs. I will focus on the quintessential juvenile delinquent film from this period, *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), as well as the quintessential clean teen film, *Gidget* (1959). For television, I will focus on the *Leave It to Beaver* series (1957-1963), a program that has received little scholarly attention over the years. The 1950s was a time of instability regarding gender, gender roles, sexuality, and the nuclear family, resulting in a need to reaffirm conventional models of these issues and promote conformity. It is therefore not surprising that these issues made their way into film and television texts of the time, if not on the surface level than clearly on the ideological level. Using cultural studies as my critical paradigm and ideological

analysis as my methodology, I hope to argue that gender, sexuality, and the nuclear family are core values around which these texts' ideology circulates.

Surprisingly, there is not a large and varied body of scholarship on this topic. The first serious academic studies of teens appeared in 1985 with David Considine's *The Cinema of Adolescence*. Coming out of the tradition of genre studies, Considine relies on content analysis, focusing on consistent plot patterns and themes in films from the 1950s dealing with teens. Discussing themes such as the ubiquity of juvenile crime and delinquency in "Rebels With and Without Causes 1950-1980," Considine concludes that "the movies seemed to be going out of their way to suggest that among American youth, delinquency, rather than being the exception, was the rule" (182). Using content analysis as his primary methodology hinders Considine's work, however, making it hard for him to break through the surface of these films and uncover their deeper ideologies.

There are traces, however, of what might have been developed into a cultural studies approach, moments when Considine seems to want to peer into the ideological operation of teen films. For instance, instead of simply describing the plots of *Rebel Without a Cause* and *East of Eden* (1955), Considine contextualizes the films in terms of social and economic history. He does the same in his chapter on the images of mothers in the 1950s, "Movies' Monstrous Moms." In this chapter, he surveys *Cosmopolitan* and *Colliers*, women's magazines from the early 1950s, to recreate the ideological framework in which women operated in the era. In writing about *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and how teens at the time reacted to it, Considine directly alludes to ideology, stating that "if Hollywood had seriously wanted to address an issue,

it seems that once again ideology had been lost beneath image” (123).

However, when it comes to analyzing this ideological level and drawing significance from it, Considine relies not on cultural studies but on sociological approaches to film that depend on reflectionist assumptions and methodologies. About women, for instance, he concludes that the “changing image of the American mother can be seen as a mirror of social change” and about the films that “fifties movies can thus be seen to echo social concerns and problems” (64). Only in his work on television does he break out of the reflectionist model. For instance, he writes, “[a]t home on the small screen, the parents of middle America had their own fantasies fulfilled.” But he does not develop this insight.

Following the work of Considine and in fact acknowledging its influence is Timothy Shary, considered the most prominent scholar writing on the subject of teen films. Disappointingly, Shary’s work, in such books as *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* and *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen*, and such anthologies such as *Youth Culture in Global Cinema*, comes out of traditional genre studies and relies heavily on content analysis. There is no attempt to place these films in any sort of cultural context or to study the film’s ideology. In the introduction to his most well-known book, *Generation Multiplex*, Shary writes that

I have viewed and analyzed hundreds of films that compose my primary texts of analysis and my main analytical method uses genre analysis to study social representation...[M]y study considers how American films about teenagers have utilized different techniques and stories to represent young people within a

codified system that delineates certain subgenres and character types within the “youth film” genre. (11)

With statements like this, Shary’s narrow focus and primary methodology become clear. He focuses on content instead of ideology, offering intricate categories for the various contents of the films he is studying without looking deeper to the ideological level. His work simply describes the plots of these films and points out patterns; that is about as in-depth and helpful as his research gets. There is no glimpse of the ideological approach that is hinted at in Considine.

Taking a different approach in his study of teen films is film scholar Jon Lewis. In *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture*, Lewis is much closer to cultural studies than either Considine or Shary, arguing that “one cannot study culture without attending to the re-presentations of that culture in the media” (3). In his thesis, Lewis addresses ideology, arguing that

of central importance to this text is the argument that despite stylistic, tonal, industrial, and by now even generational differences within the genre, teen films all seem to focus on a single social concern: the breakdown of traditional forms of authority: patriarchy, law and order; and institutions like the school, the church, and the family. (3)

In identifying and focusing on this breakdown of authority, Lewis discusses why and how these films deal with authority on the ideological level. Of *Rebel Without a Cause*, Lewis writes that the film “like so many other teen films, reinscribes the family ideal despite its apparent failure for the teenagers depicted in the film...[the film] is both a critique of fifties’ conformity



and a film about ‘a rebel’ conforming to some sort of family ideal, or ideal family” (27-28).

Lewis does not go in depth with the few films that he analyzes, and although his reading of *Rebel Without a Cause* is excellent, he clearly limits his analysis to those films that exemplify his thesis. As a result, one is left with the uncomfortable impression that he seems to choose his films based not on the readings he does on them, but whether or not those readings conform to his thesis.

Film historian Thomas Doherty, in *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*, draws primarily on the economic history of Hollywood in dissecting the genre of the teen film. While he does not do ideological analysis per se, he does provide an extremely useful history of the phenomenon of the teen film. Doherty states that “the date of a phenomenon’s occurrence is a good index of the reasons for its appearance. The teenpic, then, begins around 1955, a product of the decline of the classical Hollywood cinema and the rise of the privileged American teenager” (14). Perhaps more importantly, though, he investigates the usefulness of genre study as a tool to understand these films. He writes that

the concept of genre is at once one of the most fruitful and contentious approaches in film criticism...genre criticism offers the tidy satisfactions of orderly arrangement and assured placement...at the same time, the definition of genre has had to be flexible enough to accommodate marginal applicants that fail to meet the agreed-upon standards but nonetheless seem qualified to fill the slot. (11-12)

His writings, although not completely pertinent to my work, bring the history of teenpics into clearer focus in terms of the economic history of Hollywood before and during the 1950s and

offers insights as to what ideologies were particularly powerful at this time and how they made their way into films. Doherty puts the evolution of the teenpic in a clearer historical and economic context.

An aspect of his research that I found to be especially helpful was the concept of the “clean teenpic.” Although there are hints of genre study seeping in as Doherty breaks teen films down into four different sub-categories- the Rock ‘n’ Roll Teenpic, the Dangerous Youth Teenpic, the Horror Teenpic, and the Clean Teenpic- Doherty’s work is groundbreaking in that scholars before him discuss the teenpic as if it is a monolithic phenomenon while Doherty argues otherwise. He writes that “most of the early teenpics showcased the underside of teenage life, portraying a reckless, rebellious, and troubled generation...the clean teenpics, by contrast, were light, breezy, romantic, and frankly escapist” (196). This “clean teen” category of the teen film not only helped me in choosing my films for this study, but broadened the way I thought about teen films and their relationship to television.

Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in James Dean and his films, specifically *Rebel Without a Cause*. In the past four years there have been eight biographies on James Dean, three books on *Rebel*, and a re-release of the film in 2005. No doubt due in large part to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in 2005, of both Dean’s death and the initial release of *Rebel Without a Cause*, this resurgence nevertheless produced key scholarly works that proved extremely useful for my research. While the field of teen film may be sorely lacking in scholarship, there is fascinating and useful material available on *Rebel*. Claudia Springer, in her 2007 book *James Dean Transfigured: The Many Faces of Rebel Iconography*, uses cultural studies in discussing and

analyzing the “rebel iconography [James Dean] helped create” (2-3). She writes about his life and the rebel image he became known for, and how his death created an entity separate from the James Dean that came to be recognized as the “cool” rebel. Springer writes that

James Dean became an industry, like Elvis and Marilyn, whose names got detached from their flesh-and-blood bodies to become instantly recognizable global brand names. What Dean’s name sells is “rebellion,” a vague concept that over time has lost any kind of political or social specificity, if it ever had any...his posthumous presence is felt most clearly in the ubiquitous teen rebel icon, which does not necessarily look like or refer explicitly to him but which carries vestigial traces of his influence. (16-17)

Springer goes on to discuss how the Rebel image has become ingrained in American, and even global pop culture, and although it has largely lost its intensity and original meaning, Springer’s mission in this book is to “analyze a sampling of films and fiction that revolve around a fascination with the rebel icon whose origins are in the fifties but whose identity is constantly being reinvented” (48). What I found most useful, however, was Springer’s ideological reading of *Rebel Without a Cause*. She writes that the film

can be read as a promotion for upholding gender and sexual conventions, and, simultaneously, as undermining those conventions...[the film] is typical of fifties melodramas that function as cautionary tales about maternal powers run amok...despite the film’s insistence on the necessity of maintaining conventional

gender roles, there are moments when a more sensitive and emotional type of masculinity is validated. (40-41)

Although not a fully developed reading, which she made clear from the start was not her goal, Springer offers some interesting ideological insights about *Rebel Without a Cause* that are worth noting.

Another fascinating book recently written on the film is the 2006 book *Live Fast, Die Young: The Wild Ride of Making Rebel Without a Cause* by Lawrence Frascella and Al Weisel. This book takes an in depth look into the production history of the film, discusses the lives and careers of the actors and director before and after the film, tackles the issue of homosexuality, and provides various other interesting and enlightening tidbits that took place behind the scenes of the film. Although not a scholarly work of film criticism, this book delivers what it promises: a rare glimpse into the drives and motivations of the people who made the film what it would become. Film is a multi-faceted medium influenced by its creators and its environment. Books such as this provide us with a much more detailed and enlightening look into how a film such as *Rebel Without a Cause* came to be, and also help to explain how certain messages and themes perhaps made their way into the film.

By far the most enlightening and pertinent book pertaining to my study written on the film is the collection of articles edited by J. David Slocum in his 2005 anthology *Rebel Without a Cause: Approaches to a Maverick Masterwork*, bringing together key scholarly articles written on the film, with two in particular directly relevant to my methodology: "Growing Up Male in Jim's Mom World," by Jon Lewis, and "Jim Stark's 'Barbaric Yawp': *Rebel Without a Cause*

and the Cold War Crisis in Masculinity” by Jon Mitchell. The articles present a wealth of information regarding various aspects of the film including its production history, its depiction of violence when compared to the other films of Nicholas Ray, its influence on teen films in recent generations, and its reception in Europe, to name a few. The articles are written by established, respected film scholars such as Timothy Shary, Claudia Springer, and Susan White which makes this book a quintessential read for any scholar researching this film.

There are two in particular that are directly relevant to my methodology: “Growing Up Male in Jim’s Mom World,” by Jon Lewis, and “Jim Stark’s ‘Barbaric Yawp’: *Rebel Without a Cause* and the Cold War Crisis in Masculinity” by Jon Mitchell. According to Lewis, “In Dean’s performance of teen anomie, we find a dramatic refusal to conform, a refusal to accept the basic principles of an adult society represented by the likes of Frank and Jim’s mom” (101). Both authors discuss various viewpoints from sociologists of the day who argued that the reason behind teenage rebellion and alienation was not a problem with the teenager but rather with the dominant culture; the discrepancy between the ideology of the dominant culture and the failure of teens to conform was not a psychological problem but rather a cultural one. No matter how flawed the dominant culture may be, and however hard an individual or group may believe they are fighting against it, it always ends up winning out in the end. As Lewis writes, “ultimately some sort of institutional authority is necessary. It always is in the teen film” (93).

Yet how hard are these teens truly fighting against the dominant adult culture? *Rebel* was released not as a “teen film,” that is a film aimed specifically at teen audiences, but rather as a big-budget picture starring teens, aimed towards adult and teen audiences as a warning regarding

the recent uprising of juvenile delinquency, especially in the “good families” of suburbia. As Lewis points out,

Teen audiences in 1955 failed to follow the conservative message of *Rebel Without a Cause*- its paean to conformity...if we stop here and look closely at the plot we see that what Jim Stark wants and what he gets at the end of the film is nothing short of a restoration of the fifties’ suburban ideal. He wants his father to act like a man...and he wants his mother once and for all to shut up. (94)

Mitchell’s argument in his article is much the same. He argues that his writing

will explore how the film moves from Jim Stark’s own view of his alienation from society, which he blames unquestionably upon his inadequate father, to his own identification with the benefits of a stable nuclear family, appreciated when he, Judy, and Plato play-act as a family...he is able to elevate himself above his own delinquency and reacquaint himself with the consensus culture of the 1950s. (134)

In searching for scholarship on *Gidget*, I soon realized that the field is equally lacking in resources. I was only able to find one pertinent scholarly article, “Surfing the Other: Ideology on the Beach” by R. L. Rutsky. Published in 1999, this article primarily tries to

examine how these anti-bourgeois and non-Western elements inflect the beach or surfing films in order to show how cultural criticism has often neglected the appeal of nonconformity and otherness in ‘conformist’ cultural products and how

it has denied the cultural critic's own involvement, pleasure, and fascination in the object of study. (13-14)

Rutsky argues that these films, while on the surface seeming to promote rebellion against authority and societal norms, are actually about the necessity of conformity. These films appear to be completely different from the "melodramatic stories of troubled youth that had become the standard teen fare of the 50s...they featured...kids having a good time and not getting in trouble," (12) yet they are quite similar to them ideologically. Rutsky argues that he does not disagree with the way previous film scholars such as Thomas Doherty and Gary Morris "characterize these films and their characters" (13). According to Doherty and Morris, the beach party movies "attempt to offer a reassuring conformity as an escape from the troubling social problems of the times" (12). While Rutsky does agree that these films are promoting conformity, he does disagree with "the all-too-common assumption that notions of conventionality, conformism, and normality, of reassurance and escapism, serve to 'explain' these films and their appeal" (13). He also has a problem with understanding how teenagers who went to see these films enjoyed identifying with such conformity when just a few years before they were identifying with films such as *Rebel Without a Cause*. Rutsky argues that there is no doubt that these films are promoting conformity and adherence to social norms and values, but at the same time they are also presenting a desire for nonconformity, albeit a mild one. Surfing and the lifestyle it promotes is presented as the key to nonconformity in these films, according to Rutsky,

with another key aspect of their appeal being the link to the allure of exotic non-Western cultures. Rutsky's final observations cement his valid argument that

in acknowledging and exploring the often buried appeal of otherness within the surfing films, and in popular culture generally, we can perhaps better understand how the comforting conformity of these films could coexist with the much more explicit representations of nonconformity, sexuality, and otherness of that time - and of our own time. Rather than simply dismissing these films and their audiences as conformist or appropriative or simply reactionary, we can see in them indications of a desire for something other than ideological conformity. (22)

Perhaps the most pertinent and enlightening book that I discovered as a result of this study was Nina Leibman's *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television*. Although Leibman uses textual analysis as her primary methodology, her argument, that 1950s film and television are ideologically similar yet visually quite different, is at the very root of my study. In searching for scholarship on *Leave It to Beaver* and 1950s television in general that prominently featured teens, I once again realized how limited this field truly is. While there is significant scholarship on the origins of television and its impact on the film industry, as well as various articles written on shows such as *Father Knows Best* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, the only piece of scholarship I found that conducted an in-depth study of *Leave It to Beaver* was Nina Leibman's book. In writing about her approach, Leibman states that

I consider the various systems of meaning production - narrative structure, visuals, dialogue, mise-en-scene-with an eye toward repetitions, gaps, and



contradictions...throughout, my approach was informed by the traditions of poststructuralist ideological analysis and feminist analysis. (11-12)

The main purpose of her book is

to construct a more complete history of the film and television media during a complicated decade of both institutional differentiation and generic overlap, toward an ultimate goal of understanding how the fictionalized family came to be the common arena of interest and exploitation. (12)

Leibman also argues that families portrayed in films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* may seem completely different from the families on television such as the Cleavers, but her book aims to illustrate “the very real similarities these film and television texts share in terms of familial crises and resolutions” (12). Leibman looks at numerous aspects of both 1950s film and television throughout her book in order to illustrate her argument regarding their similarities. In her section dealing with the recognition of each medium’s audience, and the development of a relationship between the two, Leibman argues that

the discovery that the film going audience was composed primarily of teens and young adults determined in part the filmic family melodrama’s predilection for youth-oriented stories in which teens or young adults were not only the central protagonists but also the voices of wisdom, tradition, and propriety...but while these characters seemed rebellious...they were in fact arguing for the maintenance of (or a return to) traditional values. (79-80)

She goes on to argue that “television was marketed as the ‘family’ medium, to be received in the home by the entire nuclear unit...unlike film, television sought *unified* families who would watch in the home, together. This resulted in a portrayal of television families as seemingly more intact than their film counterparts” (81). With the Hollywood studios marketing their films to the teen audience, the emphasis was placed on how the fragmented families that the teens were a part of worked out their problems and became an intact nuclear family.

Another aspect of the two mediums that Leibman analyzes in depth is the representation of gender roles that each offers. She argues that both film and television “place the father at the center of the dialogue” (120), while the mother “must be homemakers, adhere to the male ego, and be loving, but must not be possessive toward their children” (185). Leibman argues that

in feature films, paternal power is rendered quite differently from that of the television dads, but it is always understood as the crucial operative construct in ensuring familial success...while the television episodes depict good fathers practicing their good liberal parenting techniques, the films depict faulty fathers whose eventual mastery of these techniques provides the films with their ultimate resolution. (127)

Regarding the depiction of wives and mothers in film and television, she argues that

the negative treatment of housewives and mothers works as a crucial point of distinction between the television and film portrayals of family life. In the films, the mothers are, for the most part, either completely absent and unimportant to the

family domain or evil and the cause of its dysfunction. In the television programs, however, the mothers either operate as more active in the family situation, are reminded continually that they must maintain a patina of modesty and invisibility. (198)

Despite these apparent contradictions in terms of the presentation of familial melodramas in film and on television, Leibman, in her conclusion, wants us to recognize one final aspect of the two mediums in order to better understand how truly similar they are. She writes that

the film and television family melodramas of the 1950's were thus characterized by their consistent thematic emphasis on patriarchy, the devaluation of motherhood, and the reconfiguration of social problems into familial ones, and by their preference for middle-class values. The solutions for the problems within the texts rested with the families themselves, with love and communication being the answers to innumerable problems and burdens. (258)

Leibman's analysis of the depiction of families on film and television in the 1950s is the closest work to my thesis that I found throughout my research. Many of the examples and statements that she makes throughout her work mirror the conclusions that I came to while researching this topic. Her work is a valuable contribution not only to this particular area of film studies but to the entire field, and was a precious resource to me in my analysis.

While Nina Leibman's book focuses on the way different mediums of the 1950s, specifically television and film, dealt with the representation of the American family, "Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker" by Mary Beth Haralovich presents "an

analysis of a historical conjuncture in which institutions important to social and economic policies defined women as homemakers: suburban housing, the consumer product industry, and market research” (62). While Leibman’s book analyzes the depiction of women and gender roles that 1950s television and film presented, Haralovich’s article argues that these gender roles that women were expected to fulfill were created for them by numerous influences, including the television programs they viewed. She states that “one way that television distributed knowledge about a social economy which positioned women as homemakers was through the suburban family sitcom. The signifying systems of these sitcoms invested in the social subjectivity of homemakers put forth by suburban development and the consumer product industry” (74).

Haralovich discusses the presentation of middle-class suburban families that these sitcoms presented to audiences and how both the sitcoms and the consumer product industry went about creating the image of the homemaker. She discusses the changes taking place during this time in terms of identifying what the needs of the typical American housewife were; whereas “before the introduction of systematic market research, her ‘needs’ as a homemaker were partially determined by simply asking her what she wanted and then analyzing her responses” (70), by the late 1950s “market researchers sought to uncover the unconscious processes of consumption” (71). In other words, simply placing appliances and various other household items around the home at random was no longer acceptable and had actually become a detriment to the housewife and her happiness.

Haralovich argues that television shows during this time, particularly *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, perpetuated this definition of a housewife and showed American wives

and mothers the model that they should be emulating in their daily lives. By analyzing the locations where these two shows take place (the suburbs), the décor and layouts of the two houses and recognizing who dominates certain rooms (the mother has the kitchen, the father has the den), and the gender stereotypes that each character is expected to conform to, Haralovich makes the point that these shows and the atmosphere that they were created in placed the homemaker at the center of their marketing campaigns. The consumer product industry understood that the wife was the one responsible for purchasing household items and they took advantage of the fact that they could take “her deepest emotions and insecurities” (80) and have them “tapped and transferred to consumer product design” (80). Haralovich concludes by saying that

this brief social history has placed one television format-the suburban family sitcom-within the historical context from which it drew its conventions, its codes of realism, and its definitions of family life...the durability of the suburban family sitcom indicates the degree of institutional as well as popular support for ideologies which naturalize class and gender identities. (81)

This article is a key aspect of my research because it puts these television shows in an important cultural context that highlights aspects of them that have been overlooked. When viewing these shows in this way, the representation of gender, gender roles and consumerism become much more complicated issues than they appear on the surface. This article, and the work of Haralovich in general, is crucial in any in-depth cultural and ideological study of 1950s television.

In my opening pages, I questioned what a possible analysis of teens on film and television in the 1950s might look like when approached from an ideological standpoint. I posed key questions for the analysis of my selected films and television shows, specifically looking for the values or beliefs that were being transmitted to audiences through these texts. What did these texts have to say about gender, gender roles, and sexuality? What were films or television episodes positing about the relationship of teens to the dominant adult culture, particularly in terms of the nuclear family? And to what extent did they reaffirm or challenge the dominant culture and its values? I chose to analyze the quintessential juvenile delinquency film, *Rebel Without a Cause*, as well as one of the quintessential clean teen pics, *Gidget*. For my television episodes, I will be focusing on the *Leave It to Beaver* series.

*Rebel Without a Cause*, released in 1955, was a landmark film for many reasons. Numerous studios were attempting to cash in on the recent surge of juvenile delinquency in America by rushing films based on troubled teens into production. Although *Rebel* was certainly not the first film to deal with this subject, with films such as *The Wild One* (1953) and *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) released previously, *Rebel* approached the subject in a different way. Director Nicholas Ray wanted his film to deal with the delinquency of teens in middle class families instead of the more common scenario of the lower class juvenile delinquent, and wanted this film told from the perspective of the teens themselves. He was tired of teen films that presented an image of teens from the view of judgmental and disapproving adults who dismissed the teens as hopeless instead of trying to understand them and their behavior.

The film, which takes place in a middle to upper class suburb, follows three teenagers throughout the course of a 24-hour period and shows us how their family situations affect their lives and behavior. Jim (James Dean) is a troubled teen with a history of violence that leads to his parents constantly moving the family to new towns. He finds himself once again struggling to fit in with his rough classmates at his new school: Judy (Natalie Wood), the popular girlfriend of Buzz (Corey Allen), the unofficial leader of the group that Jim meets on his first day at his new school, and Plato (Sal Mineo), the outcast who has resigned himself to the fact that he will never belong anywhere. What is interesting and different about this film is the fact that we are witness to what goes on behind the closed doors of suburbia. We see how Jim's mother and grandmother have complete control over him and his father; how Judy craves affection from her father, who is incapable of giving her what she needs; and how Plato's parents have abandoned him to fulfill their own selfish desires, leaving him to figure life out on his own. Jim ends up befriendng Plato, and is forced to prove himself to Buzz and the gang by engaging in various acts that are meant to prove his masculinity to see if he is worthy of their acceptance. One of these acts, the "chickie run," leads to Buzz's death, which ultimately leads to Jim and Judy falling in love. The film ends on a confusing note, with Plato's death seemingly resulting in Jim's parents' reconciliation and Jim and Judy being able to continue their relationship unbothered.

Among the cultural values being transmitted to and affirmed for audiences through this narrative are the reinforcement of the nuclear family and the necessity of stereotypical gender roles. One of the key ideological messages of the film is that juvenile delinquency is caused by absence and disruption in the nuclear family, whether it be in suburban, rural, or urban settings.

In the film, Jim rebels against his family, not because they are repressive, but because they are not offering him the idealized notion of what a conventional family should be. He wants to live in a happy home where he is supported and loved. More importantly, Jim expects everyone in his family to live up to the conventional gender roles that he has been taught by the dominant culture to believe in. The rest of the teens in the film however, have rejected these beliefs and have instead formed an alternative family where they give each other the love and acceptance that they are seeking. When Jim arrives with his conventional cultural values, which are inherently different than those of the gang, conflict is bound to arise. Buzz and his gang members, with the exception of Judy, who we suspect shares Jim's values and beliefs, are perfectly satisfied with the alternative family they have created for themselves.

We, as viewers however, are not satisfied with this alternative family. We don't ever see in any detail what this family situation is and so we are not invested in it. We view the teen gang differently than we do Jim, Judy and Plato, main characters in whom we are invested. We can understand why they behave the way they do, and through that understanding we come to sympathize and care for them as the film progresses. They believe that a nuclear family is the only way for them to achieve true happiness and success and because we want them to succeed, we want them to find a nuclear family as much as they do. In this way, we come to adopt their conventional values and beliefs about the nuclear family. The moment Judy, Jim, and Plato are alone together in the mansion, their true desires become understood. The first thing they do is to go about creating their own little family. Judy and Jim pretend that they are newlyweds, looking for their first home, and Plato becomes their child. They all lay down in the pool house talking,



and when Plato falls asleep Judy, fulfilling the role of mother, begins to hum “Brahm’s Lullaby.” This action demonstrates perhaps more clearly than any other, what is lurking beneath the surface of the film. These teenagers are trying to conform to the dominant culture and its values. They have all been presented with families that, for various reasons, fail to provide them with the model of 1950s family life that they need and want. They are not rebels fighting against the dominant culture; they are young adults trying their hardest to create that idealized notion of the nuclear family for themselves. In the words of Jon Mitchell, “these traits - delinquency, female independence, and deviance - were cast in opposition to the considered ‘right way’ to live as an American, which is encapsulated in the ideal of the stable nuclear family unit, silently held in high esteem in *Rebel*” (136).

The representation of gender, gender roles, and sexuality in *Rebel* is quite complex but works in much the same way as the representation of the nuclear family does. On the surface of the film, stereotypical gender roles are questioned, but on the ideological level they are affirmed. Men during the 1950s were struggling to adapt to the changing conventions of masculinity. When they returned home from World War II, they found their wives working jobs that before had been filled by men. This led to a crisis in masculinity that was just beginning to work itself out in the 1950s. On some level, the culture was telling men to adapt by incorporating stereotypically feminine traits, becoming more sensitive and even allowing themselves to display vulnerability. *Rebel* wants us to see Jim as a representative of this new masculinity. The first shot of Jim presents the image of a very vulnerable character; he curls up on the ground in a fetal position and, in a motherly gesture, covers up a little toy monkey he finds on the ground with a

piece of newspaper. Throughout the film, Jim never chooses violence willingly, but is forced into it as a result of those around him. When talking about his history of violence, for instance, Jim says that he only chose violence because the other kids called him a chicken. When the only way to prove your masculinity was by fighting, this was an unconventional trait for a man to exhibit. Later in the film, Judy asks Jim what kind of a person he thinks a girl wants, to which he answers, "a man?" Judy responds with "Yes. But a man who can be gentle and sweet. Like you are. And someone who doesn't run away when you want them. Like being Plato's friend when nobody else liked him. That's being strong." This new breed of masculinity that Jim represents is what draws Judy to him. On the surface, the film presents Jim as the new model of masculinity that all men should strive for, with an equal amount of both masculine and feminine traits.

This new breed of masculinity is set in opposition to two other types of males in the film, who represent the problems that will arise when men are either extremely masculine or extremely effeminate. Buzz represents a kind of hyper-masculinity, a retrograde model of masculinity. He never lets his guard down, never shows a vulnerable side, and in the end it is his leather jacket, the quintessential symbol of his masculinity and toughness, that kills him. Plato, on the other hand, represents another kind of man that was just beginning to emerge into the public consciousness in the 1950s; the effeminate, possibly homosexual male. He is killed as well. I believe that the film is telling us that these two models for manhood - one with too much masculinity and one without enough - must be destroyed in order to make room for the new hybrid model that Jim represents.

On the ideological level, however, the film seems to be saying that there is definitely something wrong with Jim's "new" masculinity. At every turn, Jim seems to be rejecting his role as the representative of this new masculinity and appears unwilling and unable to accept it. The film seems uncomfortable with it, too. Jim "accidentally" walks into the Ladies bathroom on his first day at school; we are supposed to understand that Jim's new masculinity is confused and unstable. Jim seems genuinely miserable throughout the film, only content in the lengthy sequences in which he plays house with Judy and Plato, that is, when he steps into a more traditional male role. At the end of the film, he introduces Judy only as his "friend," backing away from an adult relationship to her. He reverts to being a child, unable and unwilling to accept adult responsibility or the new type of masculinity that has been thrust upon him. The film ends with Jim kneeling at the feet of his father. Jim has failed at this new hybrid model of masculinity, a task, it appears, that he never especially wanted. In the words of Jon Mitchell, "the major discourse in the film is thus the difference between the epistemology of masculinity and the ontology of masculinity, in other words the difference between the ideals of American masculinity and the realities of being a mid-twentieth-century male" (135).

An analysis of masculine representation of this film would be far from complete without an in depth analysis of Jim's father, Frank (Jim Backus). Perhaps the most obvious example of the "new" masculinity, Frank is gentle and kind and he helps his wife out around the house. His incorporation of stereotypically feminine characteristics are symbolized by his apron. Jon Mitchell argues that

whilst Jim sees his father as a failed model of masculinity, one might nevertheless read the film as a challenge to Jim's perspective in which his father becomes a model of a caring and encouraging masculine identity. This is a man who is rational, and not quick to lose his temper, a man who has an understanding of the female world, and who attempts to do his share in the domestic sphere. (141)

But on the ideological level, this new masculinity is continually undermined. Frank has no voice in his household. His wife humiliates him both in his home and in public, and he has provided a model of the new masculinity for Jim that he rejects. As Jon Lewis argues,

the film exploits the weak father figure to make its point regarding the failure of the suburban, nuclear family...his failure to provide an adequate role model for his son, his failure to establish and maintain limits and to assert his authority, leads to his son's rather desperate anomie, which, narratologically at least, is the logical extension of his failure of a man. (22)

The most powerful image of Frank's "new" masculinity and how it compromises him occurs when Jim arrives home after a knife fight, needing advice from his father about how to be a man, and sees his father on his knees, clad in his wife's apron, picking up off the floor the dinner that he was about to serve to his wife in bed. Jim, thinking it is his mother making the noise, calls out to her, to which his father answers, "You thought I was Mom?" This quote is significant for obvious reasons, and ultimately leads Jim out of his house and into the chain of events that leads to the deaths of two other teens. His father cannot help Jim; when Jim asks his father, "What can you do when you have to be a man," his father cannot possibly answer since

he doesn't know the answer himself. Jim wants his father to stand up and give him some sort of a reaction, a confident and stereotypically masculine response. In the words of Jon Lewis, "what Jim wants most is hardly the stuff of a rebel. He just wants his father to tell him what to do" (22). But his father is incapable of that response, rendered ineffective by the new masculinity. We are supposed to understand that Jim's actions at the chickie run are due to his father's inability to embrace stereotypical masculinity.

By the last scene of the film, however, after Plato's death, Jim cannot handle things on his own anymore. His father sees his son's collapse, and he is shocked into becoming the stereotypically masculine father that Jim wants him to be. Frank tells Jim, "You can depend on me. Trust me. Stand up. I'll stand up with you. I'll try to be as strong as you want me to be." The film has come full circle; whereas before Frank was the one positioned on his knees at Jim's feet earlier, completely incapable of fulfilling his masculine responsibilities, the film ends with Jim kneeling at the feet of his father.

The last few shots of the film are quite odd. Jim introduces Judy to his parents as his "friend" and when they walk off alone together, the mother immediately begins to protest, to which Frank, for the first time in the film, stands up to her and reclaims his "lost masculinity" by making a louder noise than she can. Instead of yelling at him for interrupting her like she would have done earlier in the film, she stops talking, looks at him, smiles, and they walk away together out of the film. We are supposed to understand that Frank has finally understood what it means to be a conventional man, which means dominating his wife, and as long as everyone understands who is in charge from now on, the household will be much happier and Jim will no

longer need to engage in delinquent behavior. The film leaves us with the impression that all of the events that took place were a result of poor parenting, the lack of a nuclear family, and the new masculinity, but as long as these three issues are worked out successfully, everything will be fine. Yet, according to David Considine, “given what we have seen of Jim’s parents, it seems unlikely that any role reversal could take place, an idea suggested if not by the plot, than at least by the mournful Rosenman score at the film’s conclusion” (89).

The representation of women in this film is quite interesting. The film offers two and only two types of women: the bitter, irritable housewives like Jim’s mom and the young, tough, highly sexual and yet vulnerable young women like Judy. The dominant ideology of the time positioned women where they “belonged” in the home; doing housework, taking care of the children, and getting their satisfaction out of realizing that they were doing what they were meant to do. *Rebel* wants us to see that women, like Jim’s mom, who step outside conventional gender roles and control their husbands and are incapable of performing their household chores with a smile, destroy their families. Jim’s mother is unable to create a proper home for her child and is the reason the film posits why Jim is becoming a juvenile delinquent. In one telling scene in the film, Jim’s mom, in her apron, is cooking breakfast for the family on Jim’s first day at school. Jim doesn’t eat it and wrinkles his nose when she tells him what she has packed for his school lunch. The one part of his lunch that he doesn’t seem to mind, the applesauce cakes, were baked by his grandmother. His mother is unable to make his breakfast or lunch, a symbol of her inability to fulfill her duties to her son. The film wants us to understand that the failure of Jim’s

mother to perform her role as housewife in the nuclear family is one of the factors that leads to the day's horrific events.

The other female character in the film is Judy, the sexualized female, and because of it, the most vulnerable on the surface. The first time we see Judy is at the police station after she has been picked up for walking the streets in the middle of the night. She is dressed all in red, the color commonly associated with sexuality and the juvenile officer asks her if she was "looking for company." Instead of acting tough, Judy tells the officer the story of Easter when her father called her a tramp because she was wearing makeup. The reason she is out walking the streets at night is because she is not getting love and affection from her father. The juvenile officer tries to psychoanalyze her and asks her if she engages in this type of behavior to get back at him and make him pay attention, and although her initial response is to say she'll never get close to anybody, that's what she desires most; an intimate relationship with a man to make up for the one her father is unable to provide her with.

On the surface, the film is showing us that this lack of a strong nuclear family has led to her escape into sexuality. Whenever she's with her friends she is the sexualized feminine stereotype. She smokes, she wears heavy makeup, she flirts with and kisses Buzz in public. The film presents the message that female teen sexuality is the result of the family's failure, which it wants to make clear is something to be avoided. Yet on the ideological level, the film wants to argue that the reason for this hypersexuality is her desperate need to be taken care of by a man. Her father was unable to fulfill his gender expectations to her by providing her with an adequate father figure, so she reverts to using her sexuality to attain what she needs from another man.

The film shows us that this is not the way to go about finding a suitable man to take care of you; when you attract a man by using your sexuality, you attract the wrong man. Judy and Jim, who is just as confused as she is regarding his own sexuality, each see something in the other that brings out their conformist side. When she's with Jim, the softer side of her personality emerges and she turns into the type of young woman that dominant ideology of the time presented as the ideal. It becomes clear that Judy does not want to be sexual at all; she merely presents that image of herself because it provides her with a false sense of rebellion. She uses her blatant sexuality as a front to mask what she truly wants; to be a housewife and find a man who will take care of her. The second Buzz dies and she and Jim can be together, she completely changes. Her makeup softens, her clothes become more conservative, and her behavior makes a complete shift. She has found the man who wants that ideal nuclear family as much as she does, and if they successfully fulfill their required gender roles, they can achieve it. Like Jim, Judy feels compelled to create a new, modern definition of conventional gender roles that neither of them want at all. Therefore, at the end of the film, their period of gender experimentation is over and Jim and Judy can finally begin working toward the creation of their nuclear family.

The emergence of the teenage culture in the 1950s led to the formation of the "teenpic," a genre which featured teens and was targeted to the teen audience. Films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) were melodramas that featured teens but were aimed at and marketed towards the adult culture. A film like *Gidget* (1959), on the other hand, was part of the new genre of the teenpic that featured teens and were produced solely for the teenage market. The genre began with the juvenile delinquent cycle with films such as *The Delinquents* (1957), and *Reform School*



*Girl* (1957). The introduction of the clean teenpic in the late 1950s brought a different image of teenagers to the screen than previous films like *Rebel Without a Cause*. While earlier teenpics portrayed teens as rebellious juvenile delinquents, films such as *Gidget* (1959) introduced audiences to happy, well-adjusted, All-American teens. In the words of Thomas Doherty,

Whatever the packaging, most of the early teenpics showcased the underside of teenage life, portraying a reckless, rebellious, and troubled generation beset by problems of inner and/or outer space. Whether imperial and negative or indigenous and affirmative, they accentuated subcultural differences, resistance, and alternatives to parent cultural values...the clean teenpics, by contrast, were light, breezy, romantic, and frankly escapist. (196)

*Gidget*, released in 1959, spawned the hugely popular “Beach Party” movies of the early to mid 1960s. It focuses on Frances (Sandra Dee) or, as the surfers she spends time with refer to her, “Gidget” (girl midget). Gidget, who lives in an upper middle class suburb near the beach with her parents, is soon pushed aside by her girlfriends when she makes it clear that she is not interested in boys. Yet after her first ride on a surfboard, she finds herself fascinated both by surfing and the lifestyle that seems to accompany it and begins spending all of her time with the group of surfer boys that live on the beach. She soon finds herself in love with Moondoggie (James Darren), one of the surfers who makes it clear to her that he is not interested because a girl like her is “a real responsibility.” She comes up with a scheme to make him jealous and fall in love with her, and the film ends with him asking her to wear his pin while he’s away at college.

The cultural values being transmitted to and affirmed for audiences through this narrative reinforce both stereotypical gender roles and conservative definitions of the burgeoning new teenage sexuality. Gidget is an outcast among her girlfriends simply because she is not interested in spending her summer “man-hunting.” The girls appear to be completely obsessed with flaunting their sexuality and attracting boys yet the film never approaches the subject of what happens when they actually do. While the girls like to talk about boys, it is implicitly understood that none of them have actually had sex and it is clear that they will not at any point in the film. As R. L. Rutsky states in “Surfing the Other: Ideology on the Beach,” “even when these films did deal explicitly with issues of morality and responsibility, the resolution rarely seemed in question. No one could seriously doubt that Gidget would keep her virginity or that Moondoggie would return to college when the summer was over” (13).

The film presents us with two types of women: the sweet, innocent, attractive woman (Gidget) and the wild, sexually driven, carefree woman (Moondoggie’s girlfriend, Gidget’s girlfriends, and the girls at the luau.) While the film presents the sexually adventurous, carefree women as attractive in certain ways, we are supposed to understand that the innocent model is the ideal. Gidget would never have caught Moondoggie’s eye if she hadn’t become passionate about surfing, but at the same time, he would never have ended up with her if she wasn’t also innocent, virginal, and conforming to stereotypical gender roles in the end. Yes, he does date girls like Joanne who put on heavy makeup, wear tight clothes, and live a wild lifestyle, but the film stresses that those are not the girls that boys choose in the end. In order to get a boy like Moondoggie, a girl need only listen to her parents, who give voice to the ideological values of

1950s culture. Gidget's parents tell her that the boy must do the chasing ("the nice thing about being a young lady is it's not up to you, it's up to the young man.") He must show he's a gentleman by picking her up for a date and meeting her parents before she is allowed out with him; and, as the sampler knitted by Gidget's grandmother states, "to be a real woman is to bring out the best in a man." While the film wants us to see the appeal of surf culture and a bit of harmless rebellion, everyone, male and female, return to a conformist institution at the end of the summer, whether it be work or school.

In terms of the relationship of teens to the adult culture, the teens in this film, except for Gidget, have hardly any visible interaction with adults. They have created their own world to escape to and parents are not welcome in that world. According to Thomas Doherty,

most clean teenpics only nominally treated familial relations. Their real focus was the self-contained world of the teenager, where adults were sometimes inconvenient but more often peripheral or superfluous. The teenage crisis is typically peer-group puppy love, not parental pressure....adults were usually absent, but their values were always present. (195)

In other words, the parents don't need to be present to reinforce the dominant ideology; the teens may appear to live bohemian, alternative lifestyles, but that is only temporary. As soon as the summer ends everyone will return to their "normal," socially acceptable lives. The prime example of this is Kahuna (Cliff Robertson), who lives in a shack on the beach and is the unofficial leader of the surf bums. He tells Gidget that he travels around the world whenever he wants to, to which she responds, "When do you work? What'll happen to your future? Doesn't

everyone have to have a goal?" He asks her, "Who said?" She shrugs, and he finishes with, "There's your answer little one. Who said?" According to R. L. Rutsky, "[Gidget] is a good girl who serves to represent adult morality and responsibility - settling down, monogamy, family, work - in contrast to the irresponsible hedonism of the male characters" (14). Her job in the film is to show Kahuna that his lifestyle is wrong and that he must conform to social expectations, at which she succeeds; at the end of the film, it is revealed that he has taken a job as a pilot and we understand that it is because of Gidget that he has chosen the correct path for his life.

Gidget's relationship with her parents on the surface of the film appears completely different from the relationship in adult melodramas dealing with juvenile delinquency such as *Rebel Without a Cause*. Yet on the ideological level they are remarkably similar. In *Rebel*, the parents fail to provide a successful nuclear family for their children, resulting in their children's delinquent behavior. Gidget's mother is the 1950s ideal of the housewife; she always has her hair done, her makeup is flawless, she wears beautiful dresses, and she is either doing housework or tending to her husband and Gidget. Her father is the one who gives her the money for her surfboard; his love for her is genuine and when she is upset her parents fall over themselves to help her come up with a solution. When Gidget runs out of the house and takes their car to the luau, they don't sit at home and wait; they take action and go out looking for her. Yet why did she run away in the first place? Gidget, like Jim in *Rebel*, is rebelling by surfing and engaging in activities unsuitable for a respectable young lady. The film, on the surface, shows us that teenagers want to rebel, yet on the ideological level, just as in *Rebel Without a Cause*, the film is presenting us with teenagers who want to conform.

Although on the surface films like *Gidget* appear completely different from films like *Rebel Without a Cause*, they are actually presenting similar ideological arguments and reaffirming the same values and beliefs for teen audiences. The teens in *Rebel* look like delinquents trying to rebel (hence the title), but underneath they are simply trying to conform and yet are not able to, due to their lack of a nuclear family. The teens in *Gidget*, although similarly appearing to rebel against the dominant culture by surfing and living beach bum lifestyles, inevitably conform by either returning to college or obtaining a career. *Gidget* herself is able to show others such as Kahuna the way to conformity because of her happy and successful nuclear family.

The introduction of television in the 1950s brought a new type of entertainment into the American suburban home. Families could now watch programs from the comfort of their own living rooms that they used to listen to on their radios. Radio shows focusing on the family and the relationships each member had with each other, such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, successfully made the transfer to television in the early to mid 1950s. Perhaps influenced by the same trend occurring in films at the time, the family became the sole focus of numerous television series during this period. According to Nina Leibman, “[I]t was not just the social obsession with American family life that encouraged the explosion of the domestic melodrama [on television] between 1954 and 1963...There were a number of structural, marketing, and regulatory demands which not only encouraged this generic preference, but motivated its distinct permutations” (251). The focus on the housewife by the marketing industry led to a renewed focus on the nuclear family and its practices, a perfect topic for television to explore.

*Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963) was one of the major series to emerge from this trend. According to Mary Beth Haralovich, “*Leave it to Beaver*...shifted the source of comedy to the ensemble of the nuclear family as it realigned roles within the family” (64). The show focused on the Cleaver family, father Ward (Hugh Beaumont), mother June (Barbara Billingsley), and their two sons Wally (Tony Dow) and Theodore (Jerry Mathers), or “The Beaver,” as they lived their daily suburban lives. Each episode dealt with some minor problem that Beaver or Wally managed to get themselves involved in and, with advice from Ward and June, a solution was always found by the end of each half hour episode. The show also featured a cast of supporting characters, including Beaver’s friends Larry Mondello (Robert Stevens) and Gilbert Bates (Stephen Talbot) and Wally’s friends Eddie Haskell (Ken Osmond) and Clarence Rutherford (Frank Bank). Although it is never made clear exactly what Ward does for a living, he is a businessman, going to work every morning and coming home around 4pm every day. The only coworker of his that we are introduced to is Fred Rutherford (Richard Deacon), who is fiercely competitive with Ward and often tries to undermine him at work. June is a homemaker, and we are never introduced to any of her friends although we do sometimes hear her talking on the telephone to various mothers of her son’s friends. Viewers were supposed to see this family as typical of American families at the time, and also as a model to strive for in their own homes.

Like my analyses of *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Gidget*, my analysis of *Leave It to Beaver* specifically focuses on the representation of gender, gender roles, sexuality, and the nuclear family. I decided on three episodes that I feel deserve a closer analysis, two from the first season of the series and one from the second: Episode 33 (“Wally’s Job,”) Episode 22 (“The

Perfect Father,") and Episode 13 ("Happy Weekend.") Interestingly, I was unable to find a single episode that dealt with a specific issue related to June, while I found a number focused either on Ward or the boys. Nina Leibman, in the 100 episodes of the series that she screened for her research, discovered quite the same situation, writing that "seventeen of the 100 episodes screened deal explicitly with the father-and-son relationship... June is the subject of only one episode, and, indeed, in some episodes is completely absent" (126). This discovery speaks volumes about the surface representation of gender in *Leave It to Beaver*, pointing to the lack of importance the show placed on the suburban housewife and mother in the construction of the plots. However, the series had plenty to say about gender. I chose to focus on these three episodes, "Wally's Job," "The Perfect Father," and "Happy Weekend," because of their somewhat transgressive method of reaffirming stereotypical gender roles on the surface, and yet subtly challenging them ideologically. While most episodes in the series do present a conventional depiction of gender roles and the nuclear family, these select episodes work to ideologically undermine or at least question these values.

In "Wally's Job," we see what appears on the surface to be a reinforcement of gender roles, and yet a very subtle ideological critique of them appears to be going on under the surface. Ward makes a deal with Wally to paint their trashcans, but when the time comes, Wally acts as if he's no longer interested. Ward then offers the job to Beaver, but when Wally sees Beaver painting, he gets upset and wants the job back. Ward comes up with a compromise for the boys, only to have all three surprised at the end of the episode by June and her actions. This episode, in

terms of its surface presentation of gender roles, can be seen as typical of the series, reinforcing dominant ideologies about gender.

June is, on the surface, the ideal 1950s housewife, doing her housework in pearls, heels, and full makeup at all times while Ward goes off to work and earns the money for the family. She is always there to greet him with a kiss when he walks through the door at night, although she is usually busy preparing dinner or accomplishing some other household task at the time. According to Mary Beth Haralovich,

workrooms and garages are also arenas for male activity...the suburban homemaker does not have an equivalent private space. The family space of the kitchen, living room, and dining room is the woman's space. In typical episodes of *Leave It to Beaver*, June's encounters with family members generally take place in the kitchen, while Ward's tend to occur throughout the house. (77)

June is seen primarily in the kitchen and living room, making the boys their school lunches, and tidying up.

In "Wally's Job," June's role becomes a bit more complicated. When Ward gets home from work she is again at the door to greet him with a kiss, only this time she's sitting on the couch reading. He comes in, sees her reading and says, "I thought with all your housework you didn't have time to read anymore," to which she responds, "I'm reading a cookbook." He sarcastically ends with "good idea," subtly putting down both June's intellect and her housewifery. The fact that June is spending the few spare minutes she gets between housework reading a cookbook adds to her image of a simple housewife with no interests or needs of her



own. At the end of the episode, June is treated like one of the children, even after she has painted the trashcans herself, asking Ward if, as her reward, she can buy that hat that “You told me not to buy.” She needs his permission to purchase anything for herself, as if he is her father, and like the children, she is rewarded for performing an unwelcome task. On the surface level, stereotypical gender roles are clearly being reinforced here. Yet the fact that it is June who finishes the job of painting the trashcans, a job that all three boys (Ward, Wally, and Beaver) is significant. Ward assigns the job to Wally, who, when he decides not to do it, then assigns the job to Beaver. Beaver and Wally both begin painting the trashcans, but when Ward comes home from work, he sees that the job still has not been done. June informs him that there is a fire down the street Ward, just as fascinated by the concept of a fire as his sons, quickly leaves the house, and the unfinished trashcans, to join his boys, leaving June alone to finally complete the task. This episode, while clearly presenting us with stereotypical affirmations of gender roles on the surface, is working in subtle ways to challenge them.

The same applies for the depiction of the nuclear family in this episode. While on the surface their problems seem trivial (the family’s greatest problem that they face is who gets to paint the trashcans,) they deal with this problem as if it were the most serious and important issue in the world. This masks deeper, ideological issues that the episode deals with in subtle ways. The show, on the surface, is only concerned with how Ward is going to solve the problem; he doesn’t want to appear unfair in the eyes of the boys, and he doesn’t want to create any tension between them, so he must come up with a compromise to keep peace in his family. Yet in the end, Beaver, Wally, and Ward all fail to paint the trashcans. It is June who steps up and finishes

the job, which one might argue works on the ideological level to undermine conventional gender roles.

Whereas episodes such as “Wally’s Job” may appear more conventional on the surface in terms of its presentation of gender roles and the nuclear family, episodes such as “The Perfect Father,” and “Happy Weekend,” can be read as almost transgressive in terms of their critique of gender and gender roles. In “The Perfect Father,” Ward realizes that Wally and Beaver are spending all of their time playing at their neighbors, The Dennisons. Ward has been busy at work lately, and Mr. Dennison has invited the boys along on numerous weekend outings with him and his son, which begins to bother Ward. When he realizes that the Dennisons have a basketball hoop set up at their house, he decides to buy one for the boys to lure them back to their own home. Yet even after he has set the hoop up, the boys still prefer playing over at the Dennison’s, and it takes a chance conversation with Mr. Dennison to make Ward understand how to bring the boys back home.

The representation of gender and gender roles in this episode appears quite conventional; in this episode, June sets the table for dinner while Ward hovers over her, never offering to help but instead lifting up the lids of the pots on the stove and making comments such as, “That looks edible.” Later on, when he is up in Wally and Beaver’s room, he notices trash on the floor and says that “You shouldn’t leave all this trash around for your mother to pick up,” instead of either telling the boys to pick up their mess or picking it up himself. While Ward is outside with the boys on numerous occasions throughout the episode, we are given multiple shots of June standing at the kitchen window, peering outside at the boys’ activities. June isn’t ever invited

outside; while Ward feels that it is expected of him to show the boys how to play basketball because he is their father, all that is expected of June is to keep the inside of the house neat and tidy for when the men decide to come inside and spend time with her. Yet without June and that clean house, the nuclear family would be an impossible goal; every member of the family must therefore fulfill their expected gender roles in order to reach that goal.

The nuclear family is central to every episode of the series. In this episode, the reason that the boys are spending so much time at the Dennisons is because they are not getting what they need in their own home. Ward is not around enough to fulfill his fatherly duties due to work; therefore, the boys must search elsewhere to find a suitable father figure. This is where the episode becomes more interesting, even transgressive in its critique of Ward and his inability to live up to his required role of father in the nuclear family. The episode implies that even Ward cannot live up to the ideal of the perfect father no matter how hard he tries, and when he begins to realize this, he begins to panic. Ward overcompensates by making time for his sons and trying to show them some basketball tips, yet he tries too hard and pushes them away. As he says to June, "How can you try too hard to be a good parent?" To which she responds, "I don't know, but it looks like you've mastered it." Ward's failure as a father and his panic over his failure is pointed out by, of all people, June. While the episode tries to cover up Ward's failure (Ward goes to Mr. Dennison for advice, which appears to work), it cannot fully explain away Ward's confrontation with his inadequacies as a father.

In "Happy Weekend," we see the clearest example of an ideological undermining of stereotypical gender roles and the nuclear family. Ward decides to take the family up to a cabin

in the woods so the boys can experience everything that he did when he was a boy; hunting, fishing, hiking, and just being out in the wilderness. Yet he soon realizes that times have changed since he was a boy and Wally and Beaver would rather be at the movies or reading their comic books than experiencing the Great Outdoors. The boys eventually do realize how much fun it can be, and the episode ends with them convincing Ward to stay a little longer so they can build a raft out of logs and float down the river.

Out of the three episodes that I analyzed, “Happy Weekend,” provides us with perhaps the most stereotypical surface illustration of the nuclear family. The entire episode is centered around the family getting away together for the weekend and coming together to reconnect with each other. The family spends the whole time doing activities together (although June is surprisingly the one who spends the most time alone, due to the “manly” activities that Ward, Wally, and Beaver choose to do), but they spend much more time together as a unit than they would at home with school, work, and housework taking up so much time. Ward sees this trip as a way for him to show his sons the way he grew up, doing activities that the boys, living in suburbia, are not able to experience. He wants them to see a different way of life, and perhaps in learning more about their father’s childhood, becoming even closer to Ward. This episode is a classic example of how the series worked to idealize the suburban American family and show us not only teens that wanted to spend time with their parents, but parents who wanted to do the same. This episode wanted us to see that in order to create a successful nuclear family you have to work at it; spending time together is essential and ultimately, the key to making it work. Although the gender roles are still firmly in place in this episode, a curious thing happens as soon

as the family gets up to the cabin. Ward offers to fix breakfast for the family, something that would never happen if they were at home. There, it is assumed that June will cook every meal for them, but the cabin is Ward's territory and that means him cooking the breakfast of scrambled eggs and Canadian bacon for everyone. Certain rules and conventions collapse when the family is not in their normal environment. June changes into pants the first day that they are at the cabin (although the second Ward mentions going to the lodge for dinner, she rushes to get changed into her dress because they will be associating with other people), and Ward asks June if she wants to fish with them (she decides to go get her hair done; the rules and conventions can only bend so far.) This episode again is transgressive in terms of its presentation of gender and gender roles. In other television series of the 1950s, a reversal of gender roles would end in some sort of humorous moment or even a disaster such as Ward attempting to cook breakfast and it ending up unedible, or June trying to go fishing and falling in the lake, reinforcing stereotypical gender roles. In this episode, when the gender roles are reversed, remarkably, nothing bad happens. The boys, instead of engaging in typical masculine behavior such as fishing, hunting, or hiking, would rather sit inside like girls and read. Although these episodes show us a side of *Leave It to Beaver* that one would not expect to exist, and in some ways they can be read as transgressive, it is important to point out that the majority of the episodes did present a stereotypical image of 1950s gender, gender roles, and the nuclear family to viewers.

In looking at each text separately, it is remarkable how truly similar they all are when compared to each other. Each text works in its own way, on the surface level, to affirm and idealize these notions of exactly what it meant to be masculine or feminine, and promote the

importance of a nuclear family. In looking at each text from an ideological standpoint however, it becomes quite clear that each text works in its own way to undermine and challenge these conventional notions of gender roles, sexuality, and the nuclear family, and although they may appear drastically different on the surface, they are inherently similar and working in their own ways to promote the same beliefs.

The comparison of the representation of gender, gender roles, sexuality, and the nuclear family in *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Gidget*, and *Leave It to Beaver* is what first inspired this study. At first glance, *Rebel* and *Gidget* appear to present a completely different view of these issues than *Leave It to Beaver* does, yet when analyzing the ideological level of these texts, some interesting insights emerge. *Rebel* presents us with the most drastic example of the consequences of gender confusion, unrestrained sexuality, and lack of a nuclear family, and therefore is the text that includes the most blatant ideological reaffirmation of them. In terms of the representation of gender, sexuality and the nuclear family, *Rebel Without a Cause* presents the emergence of a new type of masculinity, yet at the same time shows us the misery that this “new man” experiences. We are shown that the only way to prevent juvenile delinquency and unhappiness is to conform to these gender roles and create a successful nuclear family, which is the key to happiness for everyone. *Rebel* demonstrates what happens when men and women such as Jim’s parents do not conform to their required gender responsibilities; it results in misery and death. Only when the parents finally fulfill their roles can the film end, showing us that this is the only correct way forward.

*Gidget* presents female sexuality in a similar way to *Rebel*. In both films, women use their hypersexuality as a way to attract men, yet they do not want this sexuality. They simply want a man to take care of them so they can fulfill the 1950s stereotypical homemaker role and create their own nuclear family. Judy exemplifies this in *Rebel*, and Gidget does the same. *Gidget*, while on the surface presenting us with a much different depiction of teens, is ideologically presenting the same thing. The film posits that there is nothing wrong with a bit of harmless rebellion such as surfing, as long as everyone realizes that they must inevitably return to a conformist institution and fulfill the requirements of the stereotypical gender roles in place for them.

*Leave It to Beaver* presents us with the most conformist surface depiction of teens in the form of Wally and Beaver. Yet on the ideological level, this is perhaps the most “rebellious” text. This series, in certain episodes, subtly works to undermine gender conventions and stereotypes, providing us with a text that is more transgressive than it first appears. Therefore, *Leave It to Beaver* is, on the surface, perhaps the most conformist text. June is clearly being presented as the idealized 1950s housewife, not having a life outside the home and solely focused on her children and husband. Ward is the breadwinner of the family, going to work each day and coming home expecting his dinner ready on time. Wally and Beaver enjoy activities such as building forts, playing baseball, and very rarely causing trouble on purpose. In watching this series on the surface level, it would be hard to discover anything transgressive and nonconformist in it

Yet when viewing *Leave It to Beaver* on the ideological level, there are times when gender roles and the nuclear family are undermined. Ward is shown as unable to live up to the role as the perfect father, a realization that causes him great anxiety and discomfort. June proves to be the only one capable of finishing a job correctly, recasting her in an active and pivotal role, undermining her usually subservient and passive role and alluding to her role as the indispensable member of the household. When gender roles are reversed in one episode, no disasters occur and everyone in the family appears to have a great time. I found *Leave It to Beaver* to be more transgressive than either of the films. Whereas one might assume *Rebel Without a Cause* to be the most nonconformist in its presentation of gender, sexuality, and the nuclear family, I found it to be the most conformist out of the three.

The representation of teens in 1950s film and television provides a rich site for analysis of gender, sexuality, and the nuclear family. These films and television episodes were created during a time of intense ideological and cultural change in America. Conventional models of gender, sexuality, and the nuclear family were questioned and ultimately reaffirmed in important cultural texts such as film and television. In viewing these texts on the surface level, these issues and the way they are being presented when compared to the ideological level become quite contradictory and complicated. In *Rebel*, the surface level shows us rebellious juvenile delinquents, yet the ideological level shows us teens who simply want to conform to conventional gender roles and create a nuclear family. In *Gidget*, the surface level presents us with a group of teenagers living unconventional, rebellious lifestyles, while the ideology of the film shows that the teens must inevitably conform in terms of their lifestyles and their beliefs. In



*Leave It to Beaver*, the surface presents us with a stereotypical image of 1950s suburbia while the ideological level shows signs of nonconformity and hints of transgressiveness. In digging beyond the surface of *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Gidget*, and *Leave It to Beaver*, the ideology of these texts becomes exposed and it becomes clear how deceiving appearances can truly be.

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