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1990 Volume IV: American Family Portraits (Section I)

Changing Images of the American Family in Literature and Media: 1945-1990

Curriculum Unit 90.04.01
by Elizabeth Lawrence

Father is Coming

The clock is on the stroke of six,
The father's work is done,
Sweep up the hearth and tend the fire,
And put the kettle on.¹

As Americans, we are what we perceive ourselves to be. It is an often used cliché that life imitates art. The American social vision as represented in our literature is unique in its perception of the family in that it has represented the family to be a model of the greater society at large. A noted historian, John Demos, contributes in his book *Past, Present and Personal*, coverage of an entire span of American history of "family history"; to be sure, much was written in colonial or pre-modern times about the family but not on a scholarly level. Also, the eighteenth century American literature as witnessed by *The Coquette* by Hannah Foster places the woman in a less than important role.

The vision has been further complicated by the growth of television since World War II. The family, second only to the "western" has been the central focus of television programming. Until recently, television has fostered the myth of the "mainstream white American family" witness *Father Knows Best* and *Ozzie and Harriet* as examples. This being the media perception while at the same time Lorraine Hansberry offered the vision of "A Raisin in the Sun." This story centers on a Black family in the ghetto and the brilliance of a son who in spite of their stamina and how hard they tried, they still fail because of the institutional racism they face in society of the time. Hansberry posits two obstacles to success of the Black Family:

1. external pressures caused by the institutionalized racism;
2. sense of defeat which Black men have as a result of racism throughout the ages (ie: impact of slavery)

We see that the Black man in this story, although trying to rise above the obstacles, feels defeated, thus the myth of the strong matriarchal Black society take hold. Many families have different strengthened “roles” within but we must note that in American family life, the immigrant influence and the Black experience has contributed uniquely to cultural and familial variance.

In “Father Knows Best” (T.V. series circa 1960) the male role figure is the central force behind every show. It is he alone who rights every wrong and smooths over problems. Mother is an appendage to the family setting. She is happy to be in her one family home with the picket fence, perhaps baking an apple pie or two. Similarly, the theme in “Ozzie and Harriet” is a stylized image that is completely nonthreatening in its predictability. One of the upbeat additions to “Ozzie and Harriet” is the introduction of adolescence: the two sons, who although representatively speaking are the “all American boys” tend to pose some adolescent problems within the tranquil Nelson household. This is, of course, an over simplification of the show but it holds true of that type of television image of that era. The entire sphere of adolescence has been studied as a branch of social science unto itself and of course, in relation to family history. We have, for example, the work of the sociologist James Coleman and the educator Edgar Z. Feidenberg whose book *The Vanishing Adolescent* , published in the early 1960’s when society was discovering the teenage presence. Our own life time offers a different view of adolescence and its integral position within the family structure.

The most interesting statement of these television shows however, is that in spite of their support of the traditional, and in spite of their refusal to challenge the imagination, it was nevertheless the mother who was endowed with the actual wisdom and strongest contribution to resolving the difficult problems of life. As T.V. pointed out, when Dad had really fouled things up, mom invariably came to his rescue. This “happy ending” revolved around the traditional nuclear family and mom and dad were married to each other.

In *A Raisin in the Sun* the vision is reversed. The male figure has no actual power, and the decisions of life come only from the women in the story. The male figure is isolated and powerless. The women do not have their intelligence and power hidden behind cultural egotism. Indeed they must be stronger and smarter than their men in order to survive the world that deprived the males of power. There are nonetheless underlying common themes that run through the family stories in spite of the cultural differences. These ideals, while coming from different experience, speak to a peculiarly American ethos. The evolution of the story telling has been away from the traditional (father at the head etc.) to less traditional families probably no less mythological, but answering to a different set of myths that stand for the current model of ourselves. I strongly suggest reading *A Raisin in the Sun* as a basic text for his unit.

In art, as a typical media for family exposure, one can witness the painter’s evolutionary hand in depicting family life. Paintings in premodern times emphasized a stiff, more stylized version of the family. Families would pose in a way as to note the degree of authority and importance their roles held. In the modern era, Rockwell (noted American artist) painted children, men and women in amazing detail and with a “natural” feel which has influenced much of American art today. Guy McElroy, in a book of portraits, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art* depicts the natural beauty and cultural pride in the Black family and the images of Blacks in society. He too captures the natural inner beauty of the people he paints.

Part of my unit will consist of tracing the formation of families in our society. It will deal with family structure. By family structure I mean the changing roles each member of the family plays and how time and socio-economic factors have permitted the roles to metamorphasize. Some credit needs to be given to the Women's Movement for rescuing the mother from the kitchen and placing her in the world of work. However, one must also understand the economics of the twoworking parent families. While the two income family has always been with us, it is only recently that such families exist out of choice rather than out of pure necessity.

Families in which two incomes were needed to provide the basics of life are understandable from the point of view of survival alone and need not be looked at in this unit. Families in which both partners are professionals and have careers by choice are reflective of a major change in societal fabric.

I would like to concentrate on various media and their depiction of American life. The T.V. and film industry has merchandised family entertainment and in many ways has promoted the changing family style. Many family shows today react to this societal change. In "Full House" the audience relates to a family without a mother in which the family's central figure is a widower raising two girls and a dog. In "My Two Dads", two men raise a child. In "The Cosby Show" the father, a physician, is married to a lawyer. There is no issue as to the equality of the parents. This show is a wonderful illustration of the "new myth." The skin color of the Huxtables is not relevant. This is an American family. The image of strength, love, intelligence, and openness regardless of the position occupied is delivered directly to audiences everywhere.

Let us trace back for a moment to the late 1970's. Notably, the babyboom generation was growing up then and the importance of family issues were paramount. They shared the limelight with civil rights, women's issues, political, social, religious and artistic evolution/revolution of the times. In the late 1970's came still another awakening child abuse as a public issue. Until now, this subject was backshelved and not publicly discussed. After all, family related issues were considered personal and confidential and it was not polite to "air one's dirty laundry" in public. An article first appeared in 1962 entitled "The Battered Child Syndrome." This was published in the *Journal of American Medical Association* and started the ball rolling. The intrinsic power of the issue along with the notoriety of its medical experts made an enormous impact on society of that time. For years this problem, child abuse, went under the category of "known but not acknowledged"² and now all the horror was out in the open for everyone to read and comment on. Professionals and nonprofessionals alike were urging communities to deal with the blight of child abuse. As Demo's book, *Past, Present and Personal* states, "elected officials in state after state rushed to create legislation that would strengthen protective services to children."³

We must note that throughout the history of mankind children have always been abused. It is only during this century that we have developed a sensibility to this abuse and find it (in many ways) outrageous. We have entered the technological phase of the modern era of man, and with this the family has entered a new beginning as well. To many of my students, the nuclear family as tradition implies will not be relevant, a version of extended family is more realistic here. Also, although my students are classified as "minority students" a total historical immersion into the African experience will not be applicable as well. My students of Black and Hispanic background, are inherently "American" and they tend to deal with the situation of the here and now rather than in the past histories of ethnic or cultural background. Not that I will underrate the historical contributions of their roots, but I feel that understanding the American family (even if we use mainstream white families) will be easily understood if kept simple. By reading various literary essays n family history, poetry, and using parts of *A Raisin in the Sun* my students and I will get the importance of family issues via a literary showcase; by watching television, viewing slides/photos and paintings we will become familiar with impressions of the family in other media as well.

In the 1970's *The Waltons* (weekly T.V. show) portrayed the ideal American rural family including the extended family. That is, the grandparents were very much a part of the weekly plot line and they were included in the decision making of the family. Since all family members lived under one roof, it is the authentic example of extended family. Although *The Waltons* embodied rural Americana, the show had vision to change with the times. There is an interesting paradox here. *The Waltons* was designed to respond to Americans' nostalgia for simpler, older country life, but the problems it addressed were relevant to contemporary families. Judging by its popularity on television, the show captured audiences from all over the United States (urban and nonurban as well). The director was able to have each episode develop and coincide with the timelines for which it was geared to. So we do see the old fashion virtues side by side with modern day tribulations unfold. The show had wide national appeal, and like *The Cosby Show* it represented a true to life format to which the general audience could identify. The trials, joys, events and developments of the television characters could have been those of our own lives.

These same changing themes are reflected in all media. Literature and the visual arts show the same evolutionary trends over the last fifty years. A modern day book, *Maggie's American Dream* (published in 1989) by Dr. James P. Comer, is a personal account of a mother in a Black American household and her perception of family life. Divided into sections, this book represents a family's goals and aspirations (typical of Americans) but much more important, it portrays the individuals as real people and their roles as development of themselves.

Issues such as divorce, single parenting, death, adoption, serial monogamy and inter racial relationships are an integral part of this unit. For when one discusses family history, one is aware of family changes as well. I have listed in the *Bibliography for Students* various books I have previewed. These readings, I feel, will greatly assist the educator when discussing sensitive issues in family life. Early adolescence is such a perplexing time already and for these young adults to cope with the death of a parent, loss of a parent or any other change in their family unit, could result in long term emotional damage. It is our duty as teachers to provide perhaps the only real stability in their lives. These readings will then become a springboard for classroom and/or individual discussion. Most of the books listed are written with a young audience in mind and they give a straightforward message while dealing with issues such as death and divorce. These are the same issues facing our children in the New Haven community and the same issues that sociologists claim plague the inherent "health" of a family. This unit will also include slides of paintings I found helpful to share with the students. These painting and photographs depict the "changing" family. The suggested readings and students' bibliography is attached. Lesson plans are included with the unit for guidance and use by the educator.

Thus, this unit's desire is to unleash in the educator a creative approach to teaching urban middle school children the importance of the family and the family's focus in the media.

LESSON PLANS

The following three lessons are prepared with the 6th grade student in mind. The educator may wish to adapt these plans to suit his/her individual needs.

Lesson #1: Create A Family Tree

Students take great pride in their individuality especially now, as 6th graders, they are in the early adolescent stage of their lives.

Goal: To have students understand the position each family member has in the family structure. To realize that the family is an integral composition of their life.

Objective: To create with pen and paper a family tree. Students will utilize their own family photos or draw family member's pictures. Each student will list family members on their tree in order of importance and the role each plays in relation to them.

Materials needed: Large construction paper, photos, glue, crayons or markers, rulers and pens/pencils.

Before passing out the materials, explain the project. This of course should be a culminating project after a lesson on "what is the family?" and all details should be stated clearly at the beginning of the project.

Children should bring in their baby photo, and/or photos of their family. They are placed at the "trunk" of the tree because this tree evolves from them. One side is the paternal (father's side) and one side is maternal (mother's side). Allow for variety grandmother may supplant "mother", stepfather may fill in for "father" and so on. All close relatives should be on the tree and positioned the way the student sees them in relation to himself/herself.

Lesson #2 : Viewing Slides of Paintings and a Critique

These slides will be available the teacher to borrow. I will have them at Roberto Clemente Middle School. However, if the teacher wishes to make her own slides or perhaps use the students' photos to make up slides, that is a fine idea.

The slides on hand are various "family portraits" in American history.

Goal: To introduce students to a pictorial media and have them become familiar with the differences among families.

Objective: To enhance students' awareness of self, and of others. To promote group sharing of ideas, critical thinking skills and oral participation. To involve students in an artistic overview of the subject matter.

Materials needed: Slides of families, various roles in the family, diverse families; pen/pencil and paper, slide projector and screen.

Pass out paper to your students. Tell them that, for now, all they need do is look carefully at the screen and then you'll give them a few minutes after each slide to jot down something they liked about the slide, a comment, or any idea that "pops into their head" while viewing each slide. Tell them that you are not collecting these notes but there will be a critique session after viewing the slides.

Push for full classroom participation. Even the quiet child will have something to say. Guide them along with slide #1. Perhaps with how the mother looks, her hairdo, the fashion of the day, how she holds her baby, what the baby is wearing etc.

Lesson #3: Create A Poem

This is a literary attempt to put into words, one's feelings about a member of the family. After reading some childrens' poetry, discuss with the class your plans for having them write their own poems about a sibling, mother, father, grandmother, aunt or uncle or even a family pet.

You will be amazed at the creative energy that poetry unleashes!

Goal: To have students read and understand poetry. To interpret feelings in a positive, humorous, and/or sensitive way. Students will write their own poems and read them aloud at a poetry fest in the room.

Objective: To initiate writing skills. To be able to compose a short poem dealing with a member of the family unit. To read aloud in front of their peers and participate in a sharing of common ideas.

Materials needed: book.... Poems Children Will Sit Still For, this is an excellent introduction to children's poetry or if you prefer other children's poems please use those. Read one or two on the first day, then on the second day, choose a student or two to read some more poems. Discuss those read. What are they feeling? What is the poet trying to tell us? etc. Then pass out paper and tell the students you are giving them 10 minutes to write down anything at all about a member of their family, for example a little brother or an older sister (usually sibling rivalry gets things off to a good start). Next, tell them to take what they jotted down and write it as a poem. Select a day as a "poetry fest" day and each child will read aloud their poems. Then display them on the bulletin board. Reward—a pizza party for the entire room.

Lesson #4: Role Play and Critique

To critique a television show and role play the characters in class.

Goal: To introduce roleplay to students. To have students become aware of positive and negative aspects of human behavior.

Objectives: Students will view a T.V. show (i.e: The Cosby Show) and list in critique form the elements of the show. To have students write a short critique.

After reading the critiques which should be no longer than 1 page, the teacher will assign roles to each student. For example, if a problem arose at the Huxtable household—one student can portray Dr. Huxtable and how he would deal with that problem. Another student would take on the role of the child, the mother, the sister, etc. In reenacting the plot, students will be able to feel firsthand what the characters actually felt and in so doing can comment further on how the "problem" was handled and/or solved within the family unit.

Notes

1. John Demos, *Past, Present and Personal*. New York, Oxford Press, 1986, p. 76.
2. Brandt Steele, "Psychodynamic Factors in Child Abuse" also see Kempe and Helfer, eds. *The Battered Child*, 3rd ea., 4985
3. John Demos, *Past, Present and Personal*. New York, Oxford Press, 1986, p. 87

STUDENTS' ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aliki— *The Two of Them*

The loving relationship of a grandfather and his young granddaughter. "She knew that one day he would die. But when he did, she was not ready, and she hurt inside and out."

Arnold— *What We Do When Someone Dies*

Explains different customs of dealing with death and remembering the dead—funerals, burials, cremation, wills and memorials.

Bartoli— *Nonna*

An empty swing, an unfinished quilt, and a lonely garden are sad reminders that Nonna is gone. This warm hearted story shows how life goes on even when a beloved relative dies.

Boyd— *Breadsticks and Blessing Places*

12 year old Toni experiences the death of her best friend Susan.

Blue, Rose— *Grandma Didn't Wave Back* , Franklin Watts Inc., New York, 1972

This book deals with the subject of aging and how a stroke can change the grandmother. A once active older citizen is confined and how her granddaughter reacts to all of this.

Danziger, Paula— *The Divorce Express*, Delacorte Press, New York

This book is written with the teenager in mind and deals openly with issues of divorce. An honest, straightforward story and an entertaining plot for a teen to enjoy.

DeRegnoers, Beatrice— *Poems Children Will Sit Still For*, Citation Press, New York, 1959.

A collection of poems for the primary grades (38) with helpful hints from the author about each poem. Catchy, interesting, scary, and humorous poems are all included.

Pitts Walter, Mildred & Lothrop, Lee— *My Mama Needs Me*, Shepard Books, New York.

Written by a Black author, this delightful book gears itself to a 4th/5th grade reading level. It is beautifully illustrated and a wonderful introduction to responsibility of being the holder sibling".

Thorne, Jenny— *My Uncle*, Atheneum, 1982, New York.

An easy reading book, combines great illustrations with a genuinely motivated plot. Explains the love a child feels (admiration) for a special uncle. Position or role in family structure clearly shown.

Vigna, Judith— *Daddy's New Baby*, New York Press, 1982.

When a father remarries and he father's a new baby, his daughter from the first marriage is quick to react in a negative way. This book helps children cope with stepparenting and "new" arrivals. They ultimately see that

father loves each child in a special way.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Demos, John , *Past, Present and Personal*. New York, Oxford Press, 1986.

Comer, James P., *Maggies American Dream*. New American Library, New York, 1989.

Hansberry, Lorraine, *A Raisin in the Sun*. New American Library, New York, 1966.

SUGGESTED SHOWS/FILMS TO VIEW

Television Series

“Ozzie and Harriet” Nickelodeon Station

“Donna Reed Show” “

“Brady Bunch” “

“Father Knows Best” “

“Who’s the Boss?” ABC/NBCTelevision

“The Cosby Show”

“My Two Dads”

“Full House”

“Amen”

“The Simpsons”

Films

Kramer vs. Kramer (modern drama)

Porgy and Bess (musical)

West Side Story (musical)

A Raisin in the Sun (drama)

* The Americana Collection of Paintings at the Yale Art Gallery, New Haven is a wonderful exhibit to visit—it depicts American life and its evolvment. Very good field trip to enhance unit’s subject.

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