A Family’s Nightmare
by Kody Rogers

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Nightmare on Elm Street, Wes Craven’s 1984 horror film, is the type of film that conjures up many horrifying images, the most common being Freddy Krueger, a horribly burned child-killer with razor-sharp knives for fingers who stalks and kills his victims in their darkest nightmares. There is, however, another image that is just as important to this film as Freddy: the family of the 1980s. In a 1980 speech about the state of the family, Edward Cornish, the founder of The World Future Society (a group designed to study how contemporary social trends will shape our future), described the traditional two-parent family as “the basic unit of society” (120). Cornish’s views echoed the thoughts of many social conservatives in the 1980s, who saw the traditional family as an essential component of a healthy society and single-parent homes as a growing social problem. Through A Nightmare on Elm Street, Wes Craven responds to this debate by suggesting that the perceived need for a traditional family is essentially misguided. By offering the audience examples of one traditional and two non-traditional families and revealing all of them to be inadequate, Craven claims that an individual’s quality of life is not determined by the type of family he or she has but by the quality of care and support that individual receives from his or her family.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, divorce rates rose all across the country, and women entered the workforce in high numbers. In light of these trends, social conservatives such as Cornish believed that the family unit was in danger of being “abolished” (Cornish 120). In January of 1981, not long after Cornish made his speech on the crippled state of family, Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency, bringing conservative ideas such as a “commitment to religion and family” into the oval office (Torr 18). Aided by the lackluster presidency of Jimmy Carter, Reagan was able to promote these ideas to a relatively wide audience. Regan had a special affinity for the traditional “nuclear family” (one with two married parents, a working husband, a homemaker wife, and roughly two kids), and his administration heavily promoted this model.

So why would social critics and the president want to promote the traditional family versus any other type of family? At the foundation of this argument is the idea that the “traditional family, based on ties of blood and marriage, is the ‘natural’ basis of society” (Cornish 120). In this view, any large-scale deviation away from the traditional model would result in a society that would be shaky at best and, at worst, would fail completely. This idea found particular support in the 1980s, when Americans saw success as the most
important virtue. The conservative Christian movement of the 1980s, which was closely tied with the conservative political movement, also promoted the traditional family view through their support of abstinence and their disapproval of cohabitation outside of marriage. Both of these beliefs promote marriage before starting a family, a view that naturally favors the traditional family structure. Between the efforts of the conservative political movement and the renewed Christian movement, this idea was at the forefront of 1980s ideals.

In keeping with their promotion of the traditional family, conservative politicians and social activists associated single parents, especially single mothers, with a range of negative images. According to historian Maxine Baca Zinn, many conservatives saw welfare and antipoverty programs “as the cause of illegitimate births, female-headed families, and low motivation to work,” all of which were linked to the “disintegration of the traditional family structure” (306). These ideas stigmatized single parents and created the widespread view that single parent households were a threat to American society as a whole.

*A Nightmare on Elm Street* explores these ideals of the American family through the three different family units presented in the film. Through Tina and Nancy’s families, the film seems to confirm many of the negative stereotypes associated with divorced parents, single mothers, and single-parent households. However, the traditional family presented through Glen seems no better. By presenting all of these families as inadequate, Craven seems to contradict the conservative view by arguing that no family model is perfect.

The first family the film depicts in any detail is Tina’s. Tina lives with her mother, and her father is never mentioned in the film at all. Although Tina’s mother only appears briefly in the film, her one scene reveals a great deal about Tina’s home life. In this scene, Tina wakes up from an especially terrible nightmare screaming, and her mother comes to check on her. She seems for the most part indifferent to her frightened daughter, even after taking notice of rips in her nightgown that were (unknown to her of course) caused by Freddy during the nightmare. In fact, all she says to the terrified Tina is, “you either got to cut your fingernails or you got to stop that kind of dreaming.” A man then comes up to Tina’s mother begging her to come back to bed, so she rushes back, unconcerned. The only other mention of Tina’s mother and her “boyfriend” is the following night, when they fly off to Las Vegas for a mid-week vacation. Tina is therefore left on her own to care and fend for herself.

Tina’s situation presents the alleged consequences of a single-parent household. According to the conservative view, working mothers and single-parent households create weaker bonds between parents and children, which prevents children from receiving the care and nurturing they need. Her mother’s indifference to Tina’s apparent fear shows this lack of nurturing, and Tina’s lack of surprise at her mother’s sudden vacation suggests that she’s used to this kind of behavior. Pat Gill, in his article “The Monstrous Years: Teens, Slasher Films, and the Family,” suggests that this kind of abandonment is also a common occurrence in many slasher films of the 1980s. Gill remarks that “parents… are generally absent” and tend to “go on vacations without the kids” (18). This depiction of absentee parents reflects a society that refuses to see the single-parent home in a positive light. According to the model promoted by President Regan and the conservative movements, only traditional families could provide children with the constant care they need, whereas single parents are inevitably disconnected from their children. Thus, according to stereotypes of the 1980s, a single mother cannot provide a solid and healthy home environment for her children, either because she works too much or, as in the case of Tina’s mother, she’s simply too careless and selfish.
Furthermore, Tina’s mother’s obvious sexuality could very well have influenced Tina’s choice to become sexually active at a young age. This has severe consequences in the context of a slasher movie. As Carol Clover explains in her book, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, “postcoital death... is a staple of the genre” (33). Clover explains that this custom of slashers dismembering their young victims after they have sex reflects society’s fear of teenage sexuality, especially teenage female sexuality (33). Following custom, Tina is brutally murdered directly after having sex with her boyfriend, Rod. Furthermore, while the abstinent Glen perishes later in the film, Tina’s death is depicted much more brutally and violently than Glen’s. Unlike Tina, the audience does not actually see Glen’s death at Freddy’s hands; rather, he is pulled into his bed during his nightmare, and immediately afterward blood gushes up from the bed into the air. However, Craven goes out of his way to show us the horrible fate that Tina endures, and the timing tells us that that this fate is a result of the sexual promiscuity she learned from her mother. Her mother’s sexuality reflects the growing independence of women during the 1980s and the fear that social conservatives felt towards single mothers. According to the conservative stereotype, single women, with their newly discovered freedom and independence from their marriage, would selfishly neglect their children in favor of their own needs. Tina’s mother does just this by modeling the sexual behavior that gets Tina killed and then taking off for a random vacation to Las Vegas instead of helping Tina to cope with her terrible nightmares.

The second non-traditional family in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (and also the most complicated and dysfunctional family in the film) is that of Nancy, the main character and lone survivor of the film. Nancy is the only child of divorced parents. Her father is the town’s sheriff, and as such he is charged with solving the murders of Nancy’s friends. Throughout the film, he remains stubbornly aloof to Nancy’s pleas for help and to her nightmares of Freddy Krueger, but despite this, Nancy’s relationship with her father appears to be held together by a much stronger bond then what is presented in the movie. This can be inferred from Nancy repeatedly calling her father “daddy” versus any other name for a father, which suggests a closeness between the two of them. She also continually turns to him for protection, even after she fails to convince him of Freddy’s existence. However, with Nancy living with her mother after the divorce, her father seems to have begun to disassociate himself from her. While he does express love for her, he manipulates her when she is most vulnerable: the morning after Nancy sees her best friend, Tina, covered in blood and torn to tatters by Freddy. To catch Tina’s fugitive boyfriend Rod, whom he believes is guilty of Tina’s murder, Nancy’s father uses his daughter as bait. Furthermore, he does so without regard to her well-being and without seeming to feel any remorse for his actions. He grows softer towards Nancy as the movie progresses, but his stubbornness remains throughout, which suggests that 1980s society viewed the single father with as much negativity as the single mother.

Nancy’s mother, Marge, plays a much bigger role in the movie. Unlike Tina’s mother, Marge is a working, single mother who seems to care for Nancy and have only the best intentions in mind for her. However, her behavior changes drastically when she learns that Nancy and her friends are having terrible nightmares about a man named Freddy. She tries to reassure Nancy that her nightmares are no more real than any of her other dreams, but she grows more secretive at the same time. Eventually, the viewer learns that Marge has a very deep connection to Freddy: years ago, she was among the parents in the neighborhood who gathered to kill Freddy Krueger, who was accused of killing at least twenty kids. After killing Freddy, Marge kept his claw as a disturbing memento in the basement of their
house. Despite knowing that Freddy Krueger was a real person who may remain a real threat to Nancy and her friends, Marge refuses to tell her daughter any of this until Freddy has killed Tina and nearly killed Nancy herself. Instead of helping her daughter to defeat a mutual enemy, Marge chooses to stay silent, which only endangers Nancy.

While the film presents Tina’s mother as selfish and Nancy’s father as manipulative, Nancy’s mother is portrayed as simply weak. When she should be assertive and help to battle Freddy with her daughter (particularly since it was partially her fault that Freddy was after Nancy and her friends), Marge turns away and hides her guilt with alcohol. This reflects a real concern for divorced women: according to a study conducted by Dundee Cramer, a professor in the Department of Social Science at Loughborough University, “[married women] [drink] significantly less than…divorced [women]” (Dundee 10). In the context of the film, though, Marge’s drinking and guilt turn her into another stereotype of the lazy, detached single mother. She spends much of the latter half of the movie lying on the couch, usually sleeping and doing anything she can to disconnect herself from reality. The only way Marge truly attempts to aid Nancy is by placing bars on every window in the house. This completely fails to address the problem, though, since bars can only protect Nancy from a threat outside the house. With a killer such as Freddy, who knows only the boundaries of Nancy’s dreamscape, putting bars on the windows actually aids his murderous quest by locking Nancy in her home, where she cannot receive any outside help.

Marge’s weak and misguided attempts at help, combined with her father’s aloofness, force Nancy to act alone in her fight, and this causes a transformation in Nancy’s role within her household. With her mother emotionally comatose and under a permanent alcoholic buzz and with her father relentless in his ignorance, Nancy assumes the role of head of household. As Gill observes in his article, this is also a fairly common occurrence in slasher films: [Parents] may constrain their children, but they never teach them. The adolescent heroes in slasher films are cool, resourceful, and independent, but the grim events that unfold suggest the psychological and physical price they pay for their freedom from parental intrusions and the precocious self-reliance they are forced to develop… [they] must face their horrors alone… they must save themselves and their world on their own (19).

In the context of Nightmare on Elm Street, this parental neglect represents the harshness with which 1980s society viewed divorce and the single-parent home. Both of Nancy’s parents prove to be incapable of caring for their only child at this pivotal and dangerous moment in her life. This is especially true for her mother, since it is her home that Nancy lives in, and, in fact, the movie suggests that Marge deserves the most blame for Nancy’s predicament. Marge’s apparent weakness allows Freddy to get closer and closer to Nancy, to the point where Nancy must not only protect herself but also her incapacitated mother. While Nancy transforms into the epitome of a strong, independent woman, her mother remains the inferior, stereotyped 1980s single mother. Based solely on the examples of Tina and Nancy, A Nightmare on Elm Street would seem to reinforce the conservative fears regarding nontraditional families that were prominent in the 1980s. The film’s one traditional family, Glen’s, would initially seem to support this view as well. Glen’s parents are married, relatively happy, financially stable, and it can be inferred that his father is the primary provider for the household. They seem to care for their son and have a good relationship with him. Glen’s financial needs are taken care of, and he even has some creature comforts that his friends do not, such as a car and a portable TV. Furthermore, Glen himself seems more well adjusted than his friends. Unlike the promiscuous Tina or emotionally troubled Nancy, Glen appears to be a wholesome teenage boy with good social
standing, and he is not sexually active. Granted, this abstinence is only partially voluntary—there is a scene that suggests that he wants to become sexually active with Nancy, but she refuses. However, Glen refuses to seek a sexual relationship with anyone else during the course of the movie, which suggests that he is committed to his girlfriend, and this allows him to retain his virtuous teenage boy persona. All of these aspects set up the stereotype of the nice, traditional family: married, loving parents who produce an abstinent, emotionally stable son.

But even within this ideal family structure, we see alarming imperfections. For example, Glen’s parents have trouble accepting his maturation and try to overprotect him at a time in his life when he needs to have more freedom. They refuse to acknowledge that Nancy is his girlfriend, instead referring to her as his “friend.” On the surface, this seems like a good thing, as it shows their desire to protect their son from maturing too fast, something that Tina’s mother fails to do with disastrous consequences. However, their refusal to accept that Glen is mature enough to even have a girlfriend suggests that though they care and provide for him, they still see him as a child and not someone who is approaching adulthood. This may not seem disastrous, but in the context of the Nightmare story it results in Glen’s bloody death.

Nancy and Glen form a plan to keep each other awake, but Glen’s parents interfere with this by disconnecting Glen’s phone, thereby preventing Nancy from reaching him and saving his life when he falls asleep. His parents do this because they refuse to believe that the threat in Glen’s dreams is real; instead they conclude that their son just needs sleep. Again, this seems like simple parental concern, but in the context of the movie it makes them no better than Tina’s mom or Nancy’s parents. As Tony Williams claims in his book, Hearths of Darkness, the parents in A Nightmare on Elm Street are “weak, manipulative, and selfish” (229). Glen’s parents can definitely be viewed as manipulative and selfish, since they contradict his own wishes out of a belief that they know what’s best for him. When Glen really needed his parents to listen, they chose to ignore him and Nancy, which led to his death. Glen’s family reveals that even the traditional family can have negative aspects. If parents try to shelter and restrict their children too much, they can actually endanger their development rather than nurture it.

The examples of Nancy’s weak and manipulative parents, Tina’s selfish mother, and Glen’s overprotective parents present the notion that no family is perfect. This provides a concrete contrast to the perfect image of the traditional family promoted by Reagan, Edward Cornish, and many others in the 1980s. However, I believe that Craven is attempting to do more with his film than simply assert that all families have flaws. Rather than focusing on the status that comes with being married, being a parent, or being both, the film argues that we need to concentrate on providing a strong home environment that promotes strong family dynamics. As the film reveals in an extreme way, when we fail to do this, not even the celebrated traditional family stands a chance against the darkest and most sinister of evils.
While the film offers no example of a model environment for a family, it does offer many examples of poor family environments that we should avoid.

In the 1990s, America would lean away from the conservative ideals that dominated the 80s. With a Democratic president in office for the majority of the decade, liberal approaches to parenting like those First Lady Hilary Clinton promoted in her book *It Takes a Village* began to catch on. A ripple effect of this can be seen in our sitcoms of today. Sitcoms like *Modern Family* offer us examples of many different types of families, all of which have flaws but also provide a stable, nurturing environment for their children. The commonality between these sitcoms is the belief that a strong home environment is best, no matter what type of family creates it. While social status remains as or even more important to us than it did in the 1980s, the images of family we see in today’s sitcoms are a stark contrast to *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Perhaps we have learned to accept the wide variety of families we see in our society, rather than denouncing them because they are not a certain type. This can only be credited to an evolving society that has come a long way since *A Nightmare on Elm Street* was released twenty-seven years ago.

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**Works Cited**


