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The field of meanings of childlessness in contemporary film culture

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THE FIELD OF MEANINGS OF CHILDLESSNESS
IN CONTEMPORARY FILM CULTURE

BY

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B.A., Millersville University, 1991
M.A., University of New Hampshire, 1994

DISSERTATION
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in

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This dissertation has been examined and approved.

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5 August 1978
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ABSTRACT

THE FIELD OF MEANINGS OF CHILDLINESS IN CONTEMPORARY FILM CULTURE

by

Susan M. Ross
University of New Hampshire, September, 1998

The purpose of this study is to examine contemporary cultural meanings of female childlessness and come to understand these meanings in relation to historical meanings of childlessness. The contemporary shifts in the meaning of childlessness reflect America's struggle with women's changing social roles, particularly since the mid-1960s. As more women are stepping outside of the domestic sphere and forging new nondomestic pathways, the meaning of childlessness is undergoing changes and reflects our culture's ambiguity about women's new roles.

In order to examine the shifts in themes regarding childlessness, this study focuses on the thematic analysis of 67 films released by Hollywood between 1980 and 1996. Films were selected based on three main criteria: (1) the presence of a leading female childless character over the age of thirty; (2) box office sales; and (3) a contemporary setting.

The thematic analysis of these 67 films reveals a field of meanings of contemporary childlessness that suggests a cultural ambiguity about childless women's roles in American society. One dominant theme suggests that childless women are a threat to the institution of marriage and want to destroy the private nuclear family. Such women are incapable of maintaining a marital relationship and most often allow their professional ambitions to
overshadow their personal relationships. The films also suggest that we are in the midst of a cultural shift away from the belief that childless women are spinsters who dedicate their sad lives to helping other people. Instead, new images of childless women include financial independence, self-confidence, sexual freedom, youthful vitality, and strong commitment to career. Perhaps the most striking feature of these films is the strong dichotomization of women into the two major categories of mothers (or future mothers) and nonmothers. Mothers and nonmothers differ in terms of personality characteristics and type of social roles they perform, with mothers assuming the responsibilities of caring for the future generation, while nonmothers, with the exception of nuns, are removed from personal contact with children.
INTRODUCTION

Think for a moment about the following films: Basic Instinct, Fatal Attraction, The Best Little Whore House in Texas, The Hand that Rocks the Cradle, Disclosure, and Misery. These films have a number of points of commonality. They are all high box office grossing films released by Hollywood after 1980. They are all stories about women without children who are over the age of thirty, and most importantly, each of the stories is about a childless woman who is a villain, femme fatale, or whore. Film critics (e.g. Faludi 1991; Walters 1995) and social scientists studying childlessness (e.g. Bartlett 1994; Lang 1991; Morell 1994) have suggested that it is no coincidence that childless women are generally portrayed as American culture’s villains, femme fatales, and whores. Faludi (1991) attributed the evil depictions of single working women to a cultural backlash against the feminist movement and subsequent feminist gains in the work force. Walters (1995) similarly suggested that America has entered a postfeminist era characterized by positive cultural images of family traditionalism and negative images of women who step out of the traditional domestic roles. Lang (1991), Bartlett (1994), and Morell (1994) have all attributed the negative images of childless women to the fact that America is a pronatalist society that pressures women to bear and rear children. While I agree that

---

1 Burgwyn (1981) defined pronatalism as simply “any attitude or policy that exalts motherhood and encourages parenthood for all” (p. 3). Pronatalism can be described as the multitude of small social and economic harassments and discriminations over a great number of occasions that culminate into a powerful social force. Peck and Senderowitz (1974:4) noted that harassments include items such as: little girls encouraged to play with dolls and to play at motherhood; statements such as “when you grow up and have children of your own...”; idealized visual (media) images of maternity; single women encouraged to
these assessments of the representations of childless women in contemporary American films are accurate, they are also incomplete. Think for a moment now about the following films: *Sister Act, Dead Man Walking, Sleepless in Seattle, Romancing the Stone,* and *Twister.* These films also have several points of commonality. They too are films released by Hollywood and are also stories about the lives of women over the age of thirty who are childless. The difference in these five films from the films mentioned above is that the childless women are portrayed in roles such as heroine, nun, virgin, and the girl next door. So while it is appropriate and accurate to talk about a cultural backlash in terms of films such as *Fatal Attraction, The Hand that Rocks the Cradle,* or *Basic Instinct,* this is an incomplete story of the images of childlessness. By limiting a cultural analysis to only a small subset of films with negative images, a less complete picture of the meaning of childlessness is drawn. The purpose of this research project is to provide a systematic analysis of a broader sample of American films in order to identify the themes associated with the representations of childlessness. A systematic study of the cultural images of childlessness reveals that rather than viewing childless women as the negative product of a cultural backlash, a more accurate view of contemporary childlessness includes a number of competing and contradictory representations of childless women. These representations include the roles of whore, villain, *femme fatale,* sex goddess, virgin, heroine, nun, and step-mother. Through a thematic analysis of 67 films released between 1980 and 1996, I suggest that rather than a consistent backlash in the face of traditionalism or pronatalism, there seems to be a cultural ambivalence with regard to the marry; married women urged to have children; pressures on men to produce sons; and even insurance plans and tax deductions that favor parenthood.
meaning of childlessness. By outlining the themes in the representations of childless women, my intent is to better understand the meaning of contemporary childlessness in American society.

Hollywood films are not produced in a vacuum and tend to reflect, create, and maintain certain dominant ideologies within American culture. The films are created within an ideologically oriented society that includes patriarchal, capitalist, feminist, anti-feminist, pronatalist, and antinatalist ideologies, to name but a few. Any ideology of childlessness is constructed within the boundaries of these ideologies and most importantly, childless ideology is intimately related to American mothering ideology. Childlessness is a relational social category that takes on meaning in the context of motherhood. Women are assumed to be mothers. If this were not the case, the English language would contain a word to describe women without children that is not completely dependent upon the ideas of motherhood (Housenecht 1987; Ireland 1993; Morell 1994; Reti 1992). Unlike the term bachelor that refers to male singlehood and male childlessness, there is no similar word to describe women without children other than childless, child-free, not-mother, infertile, or barren. All of these terms denote that the woman without child is missing or rejecting a portion of womanhood. Ann Oakley (1974) noted that ideas about womanhood and motherhood in America have been socially constructed within the ideals of the dominant ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism. The

---

2 An ideology is "the conceptual system by which a group makes sense of and thinks about the world. It is a collective rather than individual product. Groups develop ideologies which are distillations of experience, and, because their experiences differ, so do their ideologies" (Glenn 1994:9). Glenn also noted that dominant ideologies such as patriarchy and capitalism attempt to exert and maintain power over other groups "by making the existing order seem inevitable."
result of defining women's lives within patriarchal and capitalistic ideologies is that several myths regarding women's lives have been assumed as natural laws. Ideals about motherhood and womanhood can be summed up in three beliefs, "all women need to be mothers, all mothers need their children and all children need their mothers" (Oakley 1974: 186). Although patriarchy and capitalism are perhaps the most dominant ideologies within American society, there are also competing ideologies such as feminism and anti-natalism. I argue that cultural artifacts created within these competing ideologies reflect the cultural struggles to define women's lives and the roles that women lead. Therefore, we will see through this study a field of meanings with regard to childlessness that reflect several ideologies including feminism, anti-feminism, patriarchy, mothering ideology, capitalism, pronatalism, and anti-natalism.

Despite about a 200 year movement in America towards smaller family size, women have continued to be responsible for the care and socialization of children through their primary role as mothers. Over the past three decades, however, the United States has undergone demographic, technological, and social changes that have weakened the need for women's unquestionable ties to the mother role. Among the changes taking place since about the mid-1960s are the decreasing birth rate, the rising median age at first marriage, the delay of child bearing, the corresponding growth in the number of childless women, advances in birth control technology, and qualitative changes in women's work patterns. While America has undergone earlier periods of similar demographic and social shifts, never before in the history of this nation has the birth rate been so low, the median age of marriage so high, and the number of women in the work force so substantial. More
importantly for this study, the rate of childlessness among American women has been on the increase since the early 1970s.\(^3\)

The purpose of this research is to look at cultural beliefs about the meaning of women's lives who remain childless because of personal choice or medical circumstances.\(^4\) If women's lives and activities have historically been defined by the mother role and mothering activities, what roles are available to contemporary women who remain childless throughout their lives? In other words, what happens to women's identity when you remove them from the role of mother? How are childless women represented in our culture, and what are the meanings of these representations? Social researchers have shown that the meanings and expectations of individual roles such as mother or father are socially constructed and change over time. Studies have been conducted to show the changes in expectations and representations of mothers (Degler 1980; Kaplan 1992; Thurer 1994), fathers (Gerson 1993; Griswold 1993), teenage pregnancy (Solinger 1994), and homosexuality (Greenberg 1988). Other research projects have shown how American beliefs concerning ideal family structure (Mintz and Kellogg 1988; Ruggles 1994) and women's right to abortion as a means of fertility control (Gordon 1990; Mohr 1978) have changed over time. Just as the meaning of these social roles and social issues has changed throughout American history, the meaning of female childlessness has changed. Elaine Tyler May's book *Barren in the Promised Land* documents the historical changes in the

\(^3\) While this pattern is most often viewed as a new demographic trend, it is more accurate to say that America is returning to the high rates of childlessness that characterized the first part of the twentieth century.

\(^4\) Cultural beliefs about childless women can be defined as the reflections of reality as well as the fears, hopes, dreams, and fantasies that are intertwined in the construction of the childlessness representations.
meaning of childlessness throughout American history. While this book provides a tremendous step towards a greater understanding of the lives of childless women and American views regarding women without children, the book's focus within contemporary culture emphasizes the changing meaning of infertility. This research project picks up where Tyler May left off and examines the cultural meaning of both voluntary and involuntary childlessness since 1980.

In order to examine contemporary cultural meanings of female childlessness, I conducted a thematic analysis of 67 films released by Hollywood between the years 1980 and 1996. I specifically chose to work with films because they are not designed to prescribe social behavior but instead reflect common understandings or stereotypes of social groups. Not only do films not specifically prescribe behavior, but they are also less susceptible than television programming and magazine editing to the direct influence of advertisers and advertisements about personal behavior and appropriate gender roles. Film culture is a convenient place to examine the social tensions that exist regarding gender roles and more specifically, the beliefs about the roles of women who are not mothers. Films involving a leading female character who was over the age of thirty and childless were selected for this study. Films were also selected on the basis of their box office sales, and were included in the study if they grossed over 35 million dollars. In conducting the thematic analysis, I raised questions about what types of roles screen writers and directors were choosing to include in the lives of childless female characters. 

5 This is not to say that I was evaluating the acting of a role by an actress, but was interested in how the film personalities were developed. What decisions were film screen writers and directors making in regards to the portrayal of childless female characters over the age of 30?
Were childless characters shown in roles such as daughter, sister, aunt, co-worker, employer, employee, wife, fiancée, lover, girlfriend, seductress, murderer, saint, heroine, villain, or friend? How were the childless characters performing the roles that were attributed to them? As daughters, how attentive were these women to the relationships with their parents? As career women, how did they interact with their co-workers, subordinates, and superiors? As wives were they committed to their marital relationships? Were they performing these roles up to other people’s expectations or rejecting the imposition of expectations on certain roles? In this sense I was not only interested in the quantity of roles ascribed to childless women but was also interested in the quality of the role performance.6 I also asked about what types of roles were being denied the childless characters. Were childless women shown interacting with children? If not, why not? Through the examination of the social roles attributed to childless women and their performance of these social roles, I was able to identify a number of themes that point to underlying cultural beliefs about contemporary childless women. I worked with film culture rather than personal interviews of childless women because I wanted to better understand the cultural meaning of childlessness rather than the lived experience of childlessness. A number of wonderful studies have outlined childless women’s lived experience of childlessness (e.g. Bartlett 1994; Burgwyn 1981; Campell 1985; Ireland 1993; Morell 1994; Veevers 1980), but no study to date has systematically analyzed any cultural medium to develop an understanding of the cultural contradictions of contemporary involuntary and voluntary childlessness. This study is the first research

6 Again, this is not the assessment of the performance of the actress, but the character’s performance of certain social roles.
project to analyze a cultural medium to better understand the meaning of childlessness in contemporary American society.

**Organization of the Chapters**

Chapter 1 sets up the research questions in more detail and situates this research project in two separate bodies of research literature. First I discuss my work and its place within the research conducted on childlessness and motherhood. Secondly this work is placed in the context of the growing body of work on women’s representations in popular culture. A main point discussed in this section is that many cultural studies have looked at the representations of women in film, art, music, magazines, fiction, and television, but no study has placed childless women at the center of focus. Research projects have dealt exclusively with representations of mothers and mothering activities, but researchers have not focused on the contemporary cultural images of childless women. By placing childless women at the center of the research focus, this project is a unique contribution to the study of popular culture representations of women. Chapter 1 concludes with a discussion of role theory and my use of this theory to guide the questions of this study. The methodology of the research project is explained at length in Chapter 2 and includes a full discussion of thematic analysis, the sampling technique, my use of film, and the research techniques for data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Chapter 3 provides the historical context for this study. In order to understand the contemporary meaning of childlessness it is important to review the changes in the meaning of childlessness over time. Historical changes include the emphasis on barren marriages, spinsterhood, the Cult of Single Blessedness, the race suicide, and
psychological and physiological deviancy. Chapter 3 also discusses demographic shifts in the rates of childless marriages and singlehood over the past century and a half and shows that the current high rates of childlessness and singlehood are not new patterns in America. The increases in both childlessness and singlehood in late twentieth century America seem to be a return to the fertility patterns of the first part of the twentieth century.

The first of the chapters to deal specifically with the data that I collected for this research project is Chapter 4. Through univariate frequency distributions this chapter outlines the demographics of both the films and the childless characters. Chapter 4 also makes important distinctions between childless women based on their reasons for their childless status. This chapter also begins the examination of the social roles that are attributed to childless women such as daughter, sister, friend, or aunt. The actual thematic analysis of the 67 films begins with Chapter 5, in which I consider the differences in the meaning of childlessness based on the reasons for the childless status. Voluntary childlessness has different meanings, for example, than involuntary childlessness. In this chapter, I also discuss the dichotomization of personality and behavioral characteristics of women who are mothers (or women who want to be mothers) and women who choose not to be mothers. Chapter 6 deals specifically with the representation of single childless women and their relationships with men and other women. I show that single childless women are sometimes constructed as a distinct threat to the stable nuclear family, while at other times they are embraced for their sense of personal freedom and uninhibited

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sexuality. The most important finding reported in Chapter 6 is the abandonment of the spinster image that has historically defined single childless women over the age of 30.

Chapter 7 examines the ways in which childless women are portrayed in the role of wife. I found that an over-riding theme of the representations of childless wives is their inability to perform the role of wife in a satisfactory manner. This is perhaps the most subtle theme identified in this study. In all of the 67 films, there is not one example of a long-standing happy childless marriage. Most childless marriages in this study were characterized by negative aspects such as divorce, separation, hatred, and violence. Additionally a number of the childless wives experienced conflicts between their career aspirations and their marital responsibilities. Chapter 8 builds on the career woman images and examines the subset of films that dealt specifically with career women. The career films of the 1980s and 1990s also point to the dichotomization of women as either mothers or nonmothers. Career women, particularly those in high demand and high skill occupations, are almost exclusively held by women without children. If mothers do work, they work in a job rather than a career or pursue a career only on a part-time basis so as to place their families at the center of their lives. I conclude this study in Chapter 9 by summarizing the themes identified in Chapters 4 through 8. I then talk about these themes in terms of the meanings of contemporary childlessness. Historically the image of the spinster has been used first and foremost to describe single childless women, and women in childless marriages were defined as either barren or selfish. Based on the thematic analysis of the 67 films, it would seem that childless women produce a variety of reactions in contemporary America. The spinster image of the single childless woman seems to be
weakening and is being challenged by ideas about personal choice, sexual freedom, and personal happiness. While the negative image of the spinster is dissipating, the childless marriages of this study were most often characterized by selfishness, hatred, conflict, and murder. The number of different representations of childlessness reflects the ideological quandary in contemporary American culture about the meaning of female childlessness. Rather than having one over-riding meaning of childlessness such as spinster, there is a field of meanings associated with childlessness. The film cultural representations of contemporary childless women reflect feminist, anti-feminist, pronatalist, antinatalist, patriarchal, and capitalist ideologies about women's rights to choose social roles other than motherhood.
CHAPTER 1

SETTING A COURSE OF RESEARCH ACTION

Culturally Mandated Motherhood

Throughout American history, but especially since the post-Revolutionary years (Degler 1980), women's primary social role in life has been the role of mother (Mintz and Kellogg 1988; Ulrich 1980). Since about the mid-1970s, much research has been conducted by social scientists to try to understand contemporary women as they perform this primary role of mother.¹ A consistent finding within the research literature on women's mothering activities is that mothers, more so than any other social group (including fathers), have the principal responsibility to care, nurture, and socialize children. More importantly, Chodorow (1978) noted that not only have women throughout history performed the role of mother, but most women have wanted to mother children.² Some researchers (Ireland 1993 and Morell 1994) have suggested that the mandate to become a mother is so strong, that in American society the word "woman" has been collapsed into a synonymous meaning with "mother."³ The problem with the over-simplification of the

¹ See for example: Bernard (1974); Chodorow (1978); Fineman (1995); Glenn, Chang and Forcey (1994); Hays (1996); McMahon (1995); Rich (1976); Rossi (1977); Rubin (1984); Ruddick (1989); and Thurer (1994).
² See also Jessie Bernard's 1978 book *The Future of Motherhood.*
³ Actually, to state that all women should have children is an over-simplification of the pressures on women to become mothers. Some social groups of women are not encouraged to have children. Parental desirability has been judged based on race (see May 1995), sexual orientation (see DiLapi 1980 and Pollkoff 1987), and physical disability (see Finger 1985).
primary role of women as mother is that some women, regardless of the pushes and pulls exerted on them, do not or cannot become mothers. Recent research regarding women's fertility intentions (Abma and Peterson 1995) reports that while remaining a very small proportion of marriages, the number of voluntarily childless married women has increased from 2.2 percent of marriages in 1973 to 4.3 percent in 1995. Additionally, the number of women delaying marriage or forgoing marriage altogether has also been increasing in recent years (see Appendix Table B.2). With more women choosing marital childlessness or singlehood, the number of women living outside of the realm of the primary role of mother has been on the increase. Since women have historically been defined by their role as mothers, we might ask what social roles are believed to be suitable and available for women who are not mothers. The purpose of this research is to explore contemporary cultural beliefs about women who do not mother. The following questions guide this research project:

1. In the absence of motherhood, what social roles are appropriate or available for childless women to occupy?

2. Do these nonmothering roles differ for women who cannot mother because of health or infertility problems versus women who actively choose not to mother?

4 Using data from the National Survey of Family Growth, Abma and Peterson showed that in 1973, 2.2 percent of ever-married women were voluntarily childless. By 1990 the number of ever-married voluntary childless women doubled to 4.3 percent. The number of known involuntarily childless ever-married women remained fairly stable at about 2 percent. McFalls (1991), Popenoe (1993), Sweet and Bumpass (1987), and Westoff (1986) question whether we are seeing rising rates of intentional childlessness or the results of delayed child bearing. These researchers warn that delayed child bearing could possibly lead to involuntary childlessness through the onset of sterility or infertility.

5 As stated in the Introduction, cultural beliefs include reflections of reality as well as the fears, hopes, dreams, and fantasies that are held about a particular social group.
3. What are the meanings of contemporary childlessness? How do contemporary meanings of childlessness differ from historical meanings of American childlessness?

4. Are there differences in the meaning of childlessness for infertile women and voluntarily childless women?

Qualitative Interview Studies of Childless Women

Two recent research projects involving in-depth interviews with childless women, Mardy Ireland's 1993 *Reconceiving Women* and Carolyn Morell's 1994 *Unwomanly Conduct*, were instructive in their contribution to my thinking about woman as a separate category from mother. In each of these works, the researchers emphasized the importance of pulling apart the collapsed terms of “mother” and “woman.” Ireland (1993) stated:

Women who are not mothers threaten society with the loss of the presumed adult identity for women. By not ever becoming mothers and invalidating by their very presence the universality of this restricted female identity, they may also seem to undermine the bases of gender identity for men. This subtle, and perhaps deeper threat, helps explain why patriarchal society seems to have a stake in keeping the childless woman as the “invisible woman,” particularly when she elects her childless state with scant signs of anguish or deviance. Men who strongly identify with being the opposite of women-mothers will find these new women destabilizing. (Women whose identities are also firmly attached to the woman-mother identity need sameness rather than similarity in their relationship with women and will also have trouble finding a way to connect meaningfully with the childless woman.) (P. 133-134)

Susan Lang (1991) also touched on this subject when she stated, “some women think [ever-single childless women] symbolize a threat to certain people whose daily lives are largely mandated by their role as parent” (p. 185). Researchers have consistently shown that childless women are believed to have personal qualities that are fundamentally different from the qualities associated with mothers and mothering activities. Childless
women are typically assumed to be morally questionable, selfish, uncaring, materialistic, unhappy, alone, and unconventional (Callan 1983a and 1983b; Miall 1986; Morell 1994; Veevers 1980). Conversely when researchers have studied mothering ideology, they find that mothers are believed to be caring, loving, concerned, hard-working, selfless, child-centered, and conventional (Hays 1996; McMahon 1995; Thurer 1994).

A number of qualitative interviews with childless women have provided a strong foundation for the understanding of the lived experience of childlessness (e.g. Bartlett 1994; Burgwyn 1981; Campbell 1985; Lang 1991; Ireland 1993; Morell 1994; and Veevers 1980). While these interviews are instructive in learning about self identification among women who do not mother, the studies do have their limitations. Social life consists of at least three separate elements including: (1) social structure; (2) culture; and (3) human agency or individual action. The qualitative interviews of childless women that have defined the field of childlessness research help us to understand the human agency side of social life. These studies have noted that childless women who are single often feel pressured to get married, and childless married women are in turn pressured to have children. These studies have also explored childless women’s reasons for their childless status. Other interviews dealt with the rewards and the regrets of childless women, and we have come to understand how childless marriages are defined by equality, freedom, and intense intimacy. While qualitative interviews have provided us with a rich understanding of the experience of childlessness, they have only been able to point anecdotally to the larger culture that childless women maneuver within. With the lack of an intense investigation of cultural representations and images of childlessness, the
assertion by childlessness researchers that we live in a pronatalist society must be taken with some caution. Carolyn Morell (1994) understood the limitations of studying only the human agency side of social life and suggested that there is a need to focus research in other directions. She stated, “the desire to mother does not exist outside of or prior to language and cultural images of motherhood, but is brought into play by how we talk and think and represent both motherhood and childlessness” (1994:146). As a research community we must not only talk to childless women about their experiences, but we must also examine our cultural environment to help gain a better understanding of the meaning of childlessness. This research project is a first step in what I hope will be a long tradition of studying the cultural representations of childlessness to better comprehend its meaning. Social life consists of social structure, culture, and human agency. My research intent is to focus more exclusively on cultural representations of childlessness. By focusing on the cultural representations of childlessness, I limit this study to the cultural aspects of social life at the expense of human agency and social structure. In my concluding chapter I place the cultural representations identified in this study into the context of contemporary social structure, but I must leave a more thorough examination of social structure and its relationship to childlessness to future research projects. What I offer in this research project is an exploratory analysis of the meaning of childlessness in contemporary culture. My purpose is to systematically look at the representations of childless women in contemporary films to further understand the meaning of childlessness. Kristin Luker (1985) and Kathleen Gerson (1985) have both suggested that America is becoming a more divided nation in our beliefs about women’s appropriate gender roles. In studying the
representations of women who can not or choose not to have children, my hope is to contribute to the discussion about cultural beliefs of childless women and more generally about women’s gender roles.

**Cultural Representation**

In order to better understand childlessness in American culture, this research examines 67 films released by Hollywood between the years of 1980 and 1996. A number of researchers have noted that films provide a shorthand for understanding American social values (see for example: Gray 1995; Marsden, Nachbar, and Grogg 1982; and Merlock Jackson 1986). Films can be studied to ascertain a culture’s attitudes, fears, concerns, and fantasies about social groups such as childless women. However, films are not the only cultural artifacts that have been studied by social researchers, and there is a rich tradition of studying cultural representations of women in many different mass media genres. Examples of analyses of Hollywood’s images of women include Molly Haskell’s 1987 *From Reverence to Rape - The Treatment of Women in Movies*, Andrea Walsh’s 1984 *Women’s Film and Female Experience, 1940-1950* and Suzanne Danuta Walters’s 1995 *Material Girls - Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory*. Television was the main object of study for Susan Douglas’s 1995 *Where the Girls Are - Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* and Gaye Tuchman’s 1978 edited book *Hearth and Home - Images of Women in the Mass Media*. Women’s periodicals were explored in Jennifer Scanlon’s 1995 book *Inarticulate Longings - The Lady’s Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* and Judith Pomeroy’s 1998 doctoral dissertation *The

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6 In Chapter 2, I detail my decision to analyze films rather than magazines or television.
Social Construction of Feminine Sexuality in Women’s Popular Periodicals. Susan Faludi took on all areas of the mass media in her 1991 bestseller Backlash. A commonality of each of these works is that they analyzed women as a social category. Other research projects have focused more specifically on the representations of mothers and mothering activities. In their book For Her Own Good, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English (1978) examined the advice given to mothers by parenting experts. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey 1994 edited a book specifically looking at the social construction of motherhood in Mothering Ideology, Experience, and Agency. Representations of motherhood in art, literature and film were explored by E. Ann Kaplan (1992) in her book Motherhood and Representation - The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama. Finally, several centuries of shifts in representations, myths, and the ideologies of motherhood were explored by Shari Thurer (1994) in The Myths of Motherhood.

The works cited above have created a rich understanding of the cultural beliefs about women and mothers. To build upon this body of research, I would suggest that our understanding of women and gender can be enhanced by turning the focus of analysis to a different category of women - childless women. In her 1995 book Barren in the Promised Land, Elaine Tyler May reviewed the meaning of childlessness in America since the colonial era. While Tyler May commented on the meaning of both infertility and voluntary childlessness throughout American history, her discussion of contemporary

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7 See also Catherine Itzin’s (1986) work on the social construction of female ageism and sexism in women’s magazines.
8 See also Kaye (1985) for a discussion of cultural differences of the social roles of childless women.
childlessness focused almost exclusively on infertile women. The purpose of this research project is to pick up where Tyler May left off. By examining the representations and images of childless women in 67 American films released between 1980 and 1996, I hope to add to our understanding of women's lives. American society has undergone rapid changes since about the mid-1960s. Technological changes in contraception have brought about almost complete fertility control.9 The second wave of feminism has brought with it lower fertility rates, the highest median age of first marriage in American history, and distinct changes in women's work patterns. These technological, demographic, and social changes have helped lead to greater rates of delayed child birth and higher rates of childlessness. Ireland (1993) noted that childless women can threaten the traditional view of women's social roles in both the family and economic institutions, and I suggest that the meaning of contemporary childlessness is a complex field of meanings that point to the tensions of our changing society and the changes in women's social roles. My hope in undertaking this research project is to provide some evidence to better understand the meaning of childlessness in contemporary American society.

A Modest Research Goal

Culture Theory Directions

When a researcher chooses to undertake the study of some form of culture, there are a number of theoretical ways in which to situate the study (Schudson 1986; Thompson 1990). A researcher might be interested in studying culture as an interactive process. On the one hand, culture is created by individuals, but on the other hand, individuals may look

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9 The birth control pill allows women almost 100 percent prevention of pregnancy, but infertility technology has not enabled 100 percent control over the ability to have children.
to culture to help shape their understanding of reality (see Douglas 1995). Some researchers, such as postmodern sociological film theorist Norman Denzin (1992), view twentieth century America as becoming increasingly "cinematized." Therefore, it is important to study cultural objects because "art not only mirrors life; it structures and reproduces it" (Denzin 1992:138). A second approach to studying culture is used most often by researchers who work within the neo-Marxist concept of hegemony (Schudson 1986). Hegemony is a concept originally developed by Antonio Gramsci and is often used to describe the process through which the ruling class of a society influences citizens and maintain power subtly through mass media imagery (see for example Gitlin 1980). In this sense, mass media, including films, can be used as a powerful tool to create "commonsense understandings of the world" (Schudson 1986:45). Researchers might undertake a study of cultural images to ascertain how ideology is created by a ruling class to control the masses. A third theoretical direction for studying culture places the greatest emphasis on the ways in which cultural messages are received by those viewing or reading the cultural artifacts. The question of how individuals interact and make sense of cultural mediums such as books or television was the focus of research projects by both Radway (1984) and Press (1991).

While I agree that it is important to study how individuals take their cues from popular cultural to help develop their individual self identity or to study culture as a potential medium for social control, neither of these tasks are within the realm of my current research goals. It is not my research intent to understand how individuals receive or utilize the images of childless women represented in these films. My modest but
rigorous task is taken from sociocultural film scholarship which maintains the importance of interpreting and analyzing the images in films to examine the “underlying beliefs of the people who make and view them” (Merlock Jackson 1986:4). Perhaps Marsden, Nachbar, and Grogg (1982) represented this theoretical goal best when they stated, “to view an American film is to witness the dreams, values, and fears of the American people, to feel the pulse of American culture” (p. 5). Similarly, Gray noted that, “Commercial culture is increasingly the central place where various memories, myths, histories, traditions, and practices circulate” (1995:4). The purpose of this research is to better understand underlying cultural beliefs about childless women, which includes reflections of reality as well as fears, hopes, dreams, and fantasies. Film culture is a convenient place to examine the social tensions that exist regarding gender roles, and more specifically, the beliefs about the roles of women who are not mothers. After identifying a number of themes regarding childlessness, I situate the meaning of these themes within a historical framework to better understand the changes associated with the meaning of childlessness.

Allusions to Childless Media Stereotypes

Some researchers have already alluded to representations and stereotypes of childless women in popular culture. Susan Lang’s book *Women Without Children: The Reasons, the Rewards, the Regrets* addressed certain stereotypes of childless women. One stereotype (which seems to be fading, as will be discussed in the chapters to follow) is the aging spinster, a “sexually repressed woman who is stubborn but hard-working, devoting her life to helping others” (Lang 1991:63). Lang suggested that this stereotype characterizes women like Katherine Hepburn’s character in *The African Queen*, Jane
Fonda in *Old Gringo*, and Maggie Smith in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Agatha Christie’s mystery novel character Miss Marple is also, “so bland and invisible, she can snoop in corners and go totally unnoticed” (Lang 1991:63). Along with the spinster images, Lang also noted two more modern stereotypes which include the beautiful career woman who is completely dedicated to her work or the desperate unmarried woman frantically searching for husband and family. Jane Bartlett (1994) noted that childless women in films tend to fall into two categories, “the sad spinster and the neurotic career bitch” (p. 14). Researchers are not the only people to take note of cultural representations of childlessness. Childless women are acutely aware of negative cultural images and stereotypes represented in film and television. When asked to describe positive media images of childless women, Bartlett’s (1994) childless respondents answered in the following manner:

Childless women are given a terribly negative image: the spinster in the lonely apartment. (Jo, 39)

I can’t think of a single example, positive or negative. (Julia, 32)

Childless women are always portrayed as hard-bitten career girls, and men-haters. (Linda, 34)

Women who don’t want children are shown as empty headed bimbos only interested in hedonistic pursuits, or hard-driven but ultimately unfulfilled career women who regret their choice when it is almost too late. Young women in the soaps who say they want careers not children are soon taught how empty this way of life would be, usually by being involved in moving experiences with a supposedly adorable child, and allowing their ‘real’ feelings to show through. (Janet, 29). (Bartlett 1994:16-17)

These statements show that childless women can take note of the ways in which popular culture creates negative images of childless women and childlessness.
The Culture Theory Direction

The purpose of this research project is to move beyond anecdotal discussions of childless characters and systematically examine the representations of childless women in contemporary films. My research will show that there are negative representations of childless women, but these negative images are also intertwined with some positive images of women without children. The paradoxical images of childless women that are presented in this study are consistent with Douglas's (1995) argument that the media's representation of women, including popular film, is not simply a backlash (as Susan Faludi maintains), but a long-standing mix of contradictory expectations that intensified after the second world war. Douglas specifically argued that the media had portrayed an ideological war between "feminism and antifeminism that has reflected, reinforced and exaggerated our culture's ambivalence about women's roles for over thirty-five years" (1995:12-13). I argue that this ambivalence about women's roles can also be found in an examination of the social roles of childless women.

Rather than speaking of women as one gender category (as has been done by Douglas, Faludi, and Haskell), I argue that researchers should be aware of possible differences in the representations of mothers and nonmothers. In analyzing contemporary films, we also see a second war constructed between women as mothers and women as nonmothers, which may reflect an ideological struggle between patriarchy, capitalism, feminism, anti-feminism, prontalism, and antinatalism. As was pointed out in the introduction to this study, childlessness is intimately linked with mothering ideology. Although films do not specifically prescribe appropriate gender role behavior, they, like
any other cultural artifacts, are by their very nature political and ideological and end up making statements about women's appropriate roles as mothers or nonmothers. Cultural texts "always present a particular image of the world...and offer competing ideological significations of the way the world is" (Storey 1993:5). Whether done consciously or unconsciously, films attempt to win over their audiences to particular views regarding women's appropriate gender roles. Researchers have documented expectations of the role of mother; however, very little has been done to document expectations of the role of nonmother. What does it mean to be a woman who is not a mother? How do women who are not mothers differ from the portrayals of women who are mothers? What social roles do nonmothers perform? Through the examination of these questions using the 67 films of this sample, an ideology regarding childlessness begins to be uncovered.10

Role Theory

In order to explore the issue of social roles of childless women, I have relied on the theoretical concept of role-images as developed by Gladys Rothbell (1995). Before I cover Rothbell's work on role-imaging, a brief discussion of role theory will provide a useful background. Role theory, although deceptively simple at first glance, is a complex concept in sociology with a rich history of reconceptualization, redefinition, and expansion. Many introductory sociology students learn about the concepts of social status and social role as they were defined by Ralph Linton in 1936. Linton defined the social

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10 While films are ideological by their very nature and an understanding of dominant childlessness ideology can begin to be constructed by examining the 67 films of this study, I do not contend that the cultural representations of childless women found in these films uncover the ideology of childlessness. This is only one research project within a host of research projects that is helping to uncover the ideas behind the intimately linked mothering and childless ideologies in American culture.
status as "a position in a particular pattern which is a collection of rights and duties" and the social role as the "dynamic aspect of a status [that] puts the rights and duties which constitute the status into effect" (1936:113-114). In other words, an individual occupies a status and performs the roles associated with that status. Since Linton's inception of social role and social status, several theorists have made additions to his theory including Goode's (1960) famous conceptualization of role strain and Merton's (1968) definitions of role-set and role conflict.1 1 1 A major limitation of the Lintonian conception of role and status as outlined by Lopata (1995) is that social life does not take place with the behaviors of just one person, but takes on meaning through interrelationships among several people. Social roles are not performed in isolation but are performed in interaction with other individuals. In an attempt to better understand the performance of social roles in social relationships, Znaniecki reformulated the concepts of social status and social role. This reformulation elevated the importance of understanding social roles and dropped, for all intents and purposes, the concept of social status. Znaniecki (1965) argued that the concept of status was:

"[an] abstract conceptual scheme by which social interaction between human agents is supposed to be guided. A role is simply a factual application of such a scheme by a particular individual agent. In short, this conception of status provides a way of classifying social roles without investigating what the particular individuals who perform them and those with whom they interact are doing" (p. 208).

11 The purpose herein is not to offer a complete history of the formulation of social role, but to provide a brief background of the key theoretical concept role-images. For a historical progression of the changes in the concepts of social role and social status see Helena Znaniecka Lopata's discussion of role theory (1995).
Therefore a status such as husband, wife, physician, or president can only be understood by understanding the social role, which according to Znaniecki includes four components: (1) the person occupying the role; (2) the social circle that the role is performed within; (3) the duties of the social role; and (4) the rights given to the individual in a particular role by the social circle. While not always adhering strictly to the four principles that Znaniecki claimed made up the social role, several theorists built their conceptualizations of role theory upon the ideas of Znaniecki and focused their theoretical efforts on the concepts of social role, role conflicts, role multiplicity, and role-imaging.

Rose Coser (1975) argued that individuals gain autonomy through their ability to participate in a number of roles which have numerous social circles. Thus, being confined to a single role with a single social circle can restrict an individual's intellectual or personal growth, while participation in a complex role set consisting of several roles with several social circles "enables considerable complexity of personality and intellectual flexibility" (Lopata 1995:6). In other words, an individual confined to a single role within a single social institution is likely to feel alienated or even stigmatized, while an individual who performs several social roles in more than one social institution can better negotiate

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There is confusion in the literature between status set, role set, and social circle. In keeping with Znaniecki's work and Lopata's work, I use the term role set to talk about what Linton and Merton would have considered the status set. But since, as Znaniecki points out, a status is an abstract concept that cannot be performed and a role is the status in action, the distinction between role and status becomes blurred. A complex role set could be exemplified by looking at an individual who may have the roles of mother and wife within the family institution and at the same time be a physician in the professional domain. Within each of the roles, the same individual has several social circles in which to perform these roles. The social circle of the mother might include husband, children, teachers, other parents, other children, and family members. The social circle of the physician role might include patients, other physicians, medical students, medical technicians, secretaries, nurses, and drug representatives.
through life’s changes as one role takes on more demands at different points in life than at other times. While men have been expected to successfully negotiate a complex role set, women have been warned of the inherent danger of role conflict when they try to engage in multiple roles that cross social institutions such as family and work.

Women are portrayed as experiencing strong role conflict and stress, and as harried, nervous and unable to perform their roles adequately...the implication behind this portrayal is that the worst conflict is due to only certain roles that women play, those which interfere with high level involvement in the “greedy institution” of the family...One of the consequences of such a view is that it tries to restrict a woman’s social life space during her whole life course on the assumption that she will become a mother...It ignores women who do not become wives or mothers, or who are not deeply committed to family roles. (Lopata 1995:6).

Restricting women’s lives to roles within the family institution further alienates childless women from accepted gender roles. If the childless woman does not take on the mother role within the “greedy institution” of the family, then what is she to do? Again, we ask the question, when you separate the role of mother from the adult female identity, what roles are left for childless women?

Role Images

Social roles of a particular group can be examined using Gladys Rothbell’s theoretical concept of role-images. Rothbell defines role-images as “the image that people have of the roles performed by another person or group” (1995:22). Rothbell has noted that there are two ways to use role-images to gain an understanding of cultural beliefs

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13Helena Znaniecka Lopata (1995) refers to complex role sets that cross over several social institutions as multidimensional social life space.

14 See Lewis Coser’s Greedy Institutions: Patterns of Undivided Commitment for a discussion of the greedy institution of the family for women.
about particular social groups. The first way to study role-images is to study actual people. Rothbell suggested, for example, that by studying the staged performances of political candidates, we can gain a better understanding of the importance of emphasizing family life for men while female candidates most often downplay their family roles. Male political candidates are consciously shown with their wives and their children. They might also be shown on the golf course, completing physical exercise, or attending regular church services. Through careful examination of the roles emphasized for male political candidates, we gain a better understanding of the meaning of a “good” man in American society.

A second way in which role-images can be useful in gaining an understanding of cultural beliefs about social groups is through examining the role-images that are created in the mass media. Rothbell suggested that role-images of individuals or social groups can be created in the media to produce stereotypical personalities. In keeping with Rose Coser’s notion of the importance of multiple roles, Rothbell stressed the importance of examining both the number of social roles attributed to a particular social group and the quality of their performance of those social roles. The role-images created in cultural artifacts are subject to manipulation and distortions and can be manipulated to enhance the image of the group. Additionally, role-images can be distorted to tarnish the image of the group. Rothbell provided the example of the culturally created role-image of the “cheap Jew.” As far back as Shakespeare’s plays, writers have dehumanized Jewish men through the representation of them in a single, money-emphasized role such as the greedy accountant. In the case of the “cheap Jew,” not only are they attributed only one social
role, but the role is meant to denigrate this particular social group. Conversely multiple roles attributed to groups portrayed in cultural artifacts can create a sense of intellectual development, increased autonomy, heightened self-image, enhanced prestige, and access to new resources. Multiple roles are also desirable because viewers or readers are more likely to identify with at least one of those roles and generate empathy for the group or individual. Rothbell suggested that even though having multiple roles is generally a positive aspect of an individual's life, there are certain social roles that can stigmatize or weaken a reputation. Some roles such as prisoner, mental patient, spinster, or divorcée are specifically attributed to groups to create offensive or stigmatizing images of the group. The most damaging of all role-images is created when characters of a certain social group are given only one social role which also happens to be a stigmatizing role.

In addition to the number of roles and types of roles attributed, the quality of the performance of a role is also an important aspect of role-images. Creating a character with a valued societal role such as mother and then having the individual perform that role inadequately can diminish the image of the character and their social group.

A Slight Variation on Role-Images

Rothbell focused her attention on the cultural construction of role-images, and there is an implicit understanding in her work that the producers of these images are aware of the role-images that they are creating. I use this theoretical concept in a slightly different manner. It is my belief, consistent with sociocultural film analysis, that examining

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15 Note that the performance by an actor should not be confused with the concept of the quality of the role performance which refers to the writer's ideas about how well the character handles their attributed roles.
the role-images of childless women can help to illuminate underlying beliefs about childlessness and childless women. These beliefs may not even be apparent to the writers and the producers. While the writers and producers of these films do create role-images as Rothbell suggests, I do not believe that there is a conscious attempt to create a certain role-image of childless women as a social category.\textsuperscript{16} For the most part, these films were not an orchestrated effort by Hollywood to create specific cultural images and statements about childless women. Instead, the themes that I discuss throughout this work in regards to the roles of childless women reflect both \textit{conscious} and \textit{unconscious} hopes, fears, and fantasies about childless women. This is not to say that within a specific film the writer and director are not trying to produce certain feelings or images about a particular childless woman. Seventy-five female childless characters are examined in this research, and the underlying framework for the study is the analysis of their ascribed social roles.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The stories found in the 67 films of this study are a shorthand way to examine the meaning of childlessness in contemporary American society. Through studying the social roles written for childless women, we can better understand social structure and women's place within that social structure. Rather than studying the representations of traditional women who assume first and foremost the role of mother, this study looks at the cultural representations of nonmothers. Nonmothers can upset the traditional social order of both the family and economic institutions. Within this study, we will see that there are a number of contradictory images of childless women and even competing social roles

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16} In fact, 75 percent of the films in this study never mention the woman's childlessness as part of her character development.}
attributed to women without children. I suggest that the contradictory images and the competing roles help to identify points of tensions within contemporary American society.

In the chapters to come, we will see a distinct dichotomization of personality and behavioral traits for women who are mothers or want to be mothers and those women who have rejected the role of mother. There are also competing images of professional childless career women. Additionally, childless women are constructed as a potential threat to family men and the private nuclear family, but are conversely shown at other times as a great source of rejuvenation for aging men. What I have found through this study is that rather than discovering “the univocal meaning” of contemporary childlessness, there is an ambiguous field of meanings associated with childless women. This study details those ambiguities.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the thematic analysis of the representations of childless women in 67 contemporary films. The purpose of this chapter is to elaborate on the methodological procedures. Within this chapter I discuss the principles of thematic analysis that guided the research process, the justification of the use of film, the selection process of the film sample, and the data collection, coding, and analysis procedures.

Thematic Analysis Principles

Richard Boyatzis (1998:1) suggested that thematic analysis is “a way of seeing” which leads a researcher through three phases of qualitative research inquiry, including: observing data, encoding data, and interpreting data. Thematic analysis is not unique to sociology and is often used by scholars in many different fields of inquiry including art, astronomy, biology, chemistry, cultural anthropology, economics, history, literature, mathematics, physics, political science, and psychology (Boyatzis 1998; Crabtree and Miller 1992; Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Marshall and Rossman 1989; Silverman 1993). The focus of thematic analysis in sociology is the discovery and interpretation of themes and patterns contained in social artifacts. Boyatzis (1998) defines themes as:

A pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon. A theme may be identified at the manifest level (directly observable in the information) or at the latent level (underlying the phenomenon). The themes may be initially generated inductively from the raw information or generated deductively from theory and prior research. (P. vii)
Since thematic analysis uses the content of cultural artifacts to develop themes, thematic analysis is somewhat similar to content analysis research methodology. In fact some researchers have used the terms thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis interchangeably (Gotham 1992 and Woodrum 1984). To confuse matters all the more, other researchers have used terms such as interpretive interactional reading (Basic 1992), content analysis (Hall and Stolley 1997), latent content analysis (Griffin 1994), feminist interpretive content analysis (Reinharz 1992), and qualitative media content analysis (Hijmans 1996; Paalman 1997) to essentially describe very similar research projects. Within the field of qualitative social research, there seems to be no standard set of principles that differentiate thematic analysis, qualitative content analysis, latent content analysis, feminist interpretive content analysis, and media content analysis. To help weed through all of this and find a suitable descriptor of my research methodology, I took Harry Wolcott’s (1994) advice. Wolcott stated that a researcher should choose a qualifying term for analysis that most accurately identifies the particular subset of technical procedures utilized in a study. Wolcott identified at least 59 different descriptors of data analysis, and examples of these descriptors include clique analysis, cluster analysis, content analysis, discourse analysis, domain analysis, market analysis, panel analysis, textual analysis, thematic analysis, and visual analysis. The term that most accurately describes my research methodology is thematic analysis.

Boyatzis (1998) noted that thematic analysis is a widely used research tool with very little written to guide researchers in the process. In fact until Boyatzis’s 1998 book,
no one had outlined any principles with regard to thematic analysis.¹ Although there is a lack of textbooks explaining thematic analysis research techniques, there is a rich tradition of thematic analysis research projects from which methodology can be drawn. Finished research products include Kathy Jackson Merlock's 1986 analysis of children's images in films; Wendy Simons's 1988 study of maternal grief in True Story from 1920 - 1985; Andrea Walsh's 1984 analysis of women in film from 1940 through 1950; and Elaine Hall and Kathy Shepherd Stolley's 1997 analysis of the presentation of abortion and adoption in textbooks.² These works are interesting examples of thematic analysis and helped to establish the principles in my research methodology. In addition to these completed pieces of research, I have also relied on several qualitative research design and data analysis books to construct this research project (e.g. Dey 1993; Maxwell 1996; Miles and Huberman 1994; Wolcott 1994). Boyatzis (1998) offered a number of excellent suggestions, and these suggestions, coupled with information obtained from completed thematic analysis research projects helped to produce the following research principles used in designing this research project:

A. In thematic analysis both latent and manifest content are coded to develop themes.

B. Thematic analysis is a qualitative and interpretive research process.

¹ Shulamit Reinharz (1992) did outline a number of principles for feminist interpretive content analysis.
C. Thematic analysis is used as an exploratory research tool and is used to explore research questions rather than hypotheses.

D. Thematic analysis is used to examine cultural artifacts to understand culturally held meanings and beliefs.

E. It is important to code both the representations that are present in the cultural objects and also think about what might be missing from the representations.

These five points are elaborated upon in the following sections.

Latent and Manifest Content to Develop Themes

Boyatzis (1998) stated that thematic analysis is similar to content analysis, but he noted that a subtle difference between the two is that researchers who conduct content analysis most often focus on either manifest content or latent content, and thematic analysis allows the researcher to use both manifest content and latent content to develop themes.\(^3\) Manifest content is the “visible surface content” (Babbie 1995:312) of a communication or cultural artifact. To illustrate the use of manifest coding, we might look at the popular issue of sexual content in television programs. To determine the sexual content of television shows, the manifest content analyst may count the number of times the characters engage in sexual activity such as hugging, kissing, or caressing. Once the researcher has tallied the number of times these actions took place in each of the television shows, the researcher then determines which of the shows has more sexual

\(^3\) Content analysis has historically focused most exclusively on manifest content analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Holsti 1969; Neuman 1997; Woodrum 1984). In addition to differences in the type of coding, content analysis and thematic analysis differ in terms of the type of measurement instrumentation. Content analysis typically begins the research process with predetermined coding categories, whereas thematic analysis researchers build categories and codes as the research progresses. Good examples of content analysis research include Lovdal (1989) and Barlow, Barlow, and Chiricos (1995) while Beier and Pollio (1994) and Simons (1988) are fine examples of thematic analysis.
content by ranking them according to the frequency of the hugs, kisses and caresses. The tremendous advantage of manifest coding is that researchers can obtain high levels of reliability (Babbie 1995; Neuman 1997). Since manifest content is, by definition, that which is visible content, it does not take long to achieve an inter-coder reliability with a Pearson’s correlation coefficient as high as .95 (Woodrum 1984). The major disadvantage of manifest coding is that researchers often take actions or words out of the context of the object of study. Without contextualizing the situation in which the kissing or caressing took place, researchers lose important meaning associated with these actions and therefore reduce the validity of their researcher (Neuman 1997; Woodrum 1984). This is a particular disadvantage for research projects such as mine that are designed to uncover a group’s norms, values, fears, beliefs, and fantasies (Woodrum 1984). The beliefs, fears, values, and norms of a society are mediated through their cultural products, and when a researcher studies the cultural products, it is important to be certain that the interpretations are valid. Since manifest content can only provide a researcher with a surface understanding of the cultural artifacts, it is important to use latent content to develop a better understanding of meaning.

A key element of thematic analysis is that it is a methodology used to code not only the manifest content of an artifact, but more importantly for understanding cultural meaning, thematic analysis examines the latent meaning of the text. Latent coding “looks for the underlying, implicit meaning in the content of the text” (Neuman 1997:276). In other words, the researcher attempts to understand the meaning of an action such as a kiss, hug, or caress. Going back to the example of sexual content in television programs,
a content analysis may show that a given television show had four different sexual encounters. This is the manifest content of the film. The researcher places the television show on an overall scale with the other shows of the sample. Since some of the programs may have only shown one sexual encounter and other programs had ten sexual encounters, a program with four sexual encounters would most likely be categorized as having mild to moderate sexual content. Once the manifest content has been established, the thematic analysis researcher can then study the latent meaning of each of the four sexual acts within the context of the film. One sexual encounter may be portrayed as a tender moment between a husband and wife, while another sexual encounter may involve a powerful boss harassing a weak employee. Additionally, a third sexual encounter may be a rape scene. Each of these scenarios includes kissing, caressing, hugging, and actual penial penetration; however, the underlying meaning of each sexual encounter differs drastically and include marital love, power, and violence. The meaning of the sexual action is not the same, and therefore, the three episodes are not categorized in the same grouping as was done with the manifest content analysis. Through the latent coding, the thematic analysis identified three separate themes of sex. Within this research project for example, I counted the number of times childless women were divorced or involved in divorce proceedings to get a sense of the manifest content. I then looked at the latent content of the divorces to develop a better understanding of the meaning of the childless marital disruption.

The actual process of latent coding in thematic analysis is more interpretive in nature than manifest coding. Latent coding involves reading through an entire passage, paragraph, or scene and then determines the underlying meaning of the text. Was the
sexual activity an act of violence, sensitivity, eroticism, or power? To some extent, coding the latent meaning of activity in films can be easier than coding written text. In addition to the spoken dialogue and action, films also provide cues about the meaning of the activity through the use of lighting, music, camera angle, and even the film genre itself. Therefore, when recording information about the sexual content of an individual scene in a particular film, I took into consideration a number of factors:

1. Who was involved in the sexual activity, and what was the nature of their relationship? Were they husband and wife? Co-workers? Boss and subordinate? Married man and single woman? Total strangers?

2. What was specifically said by the actors to indicate their feelings about the sexual activity? Was there discussion of regret or satisfaction? Was there foul language to describe the activity? Did they have contact after the sexual activity?

3. How was the news of the sexual activity received by other members of the film cast?

4. What mood was the director trying to create through the use of music, lighting, props, location, clothing style, and camera angles?

5. What is the genre of the film, and how do the expectations of certain genre affect our perception of the sexual activity?

While I have only provided one example of the types of questions involved in assessing the latent meaning of a particular variable (in this case sexual activity), a similar process was used to assess the latent meaning of other variables such as friendships, childless status, marital relationships, and career status. Although some manifest coding was incorporated into this thematic analysis in terms of recording demographic information, the bulk of the research was conducted utilizing thematic latent coding.
Thematic Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method

Researchers conducting thematic analysis are encouraged to stay close to their data and maintain theoretical sensitivity (Boyatzis 1998; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Since thematic analysis is both qualitative and interpretive in nature, let me make a distinction between interpretive and interpretation. The thematic analysis data collection procedure of thematic analysis involves constant evaluation by the researcher. Questions such as "Is this an instance of love or companionship?" are evaluated and answered by the researcher. Thematic analysis is a subjective research tool and differs from quantitative methodologies which places an emphasis on researcher objectivity. The data are interpreted through the researcher and the researcher's theoretical lens. The interpretive nature of thematic analysis data collection and analysis differs from the interpretation of the research findings. Regardless of a researcher's orientation as qualitative or quantitative, all researchers engage in interpretation of their findings.

Thematic Analysis is Exploratory Analysis

Thematic analysis focuses on exploration and description rather than confirmation or causation. Since my research questions are primarily noncausal-evaluation questions such as, "How are childless women represented?," closed-ended research devices and the use of heavy initial instrumentation are not appropriate to answer the research questions at hand (Miles and Huberman 1994). Therefore, instead of having a set of close-ended questions with predetermined categories, I used a set of open-ended questions that loosely guide my data collection. The set of questions are discussed at length later in this chapter. Since this research is exploratory, qualitative, and interpretive, more emphasis is placed on
assessing the research's validity than the reliability. Miles and Huberman (1994:35) suggested the use of four specific types of validity including, "construct (Are the concepts well grounded?), descriptive/contextual (Is the account complete and thorough?), interpretive (Does the account connect with "lived experience" of people in the case?), and natural (Is the setting mostly undisturbed by my presence?)."

Cultural Material Available

Shulamit Reinharz (1992) suggested that a variety of materials or cultural artifacts may be used for analysis for feminist interpretive content analysis. As stated in the introduction to this section, feminist interpretive content analysis and its procedures are very close methodologically to thematic analysis. For this reason, I have taken Reinharz's suggestion of looking beyond written materials for analysis. Reinharz suggested that researchers move beyond written materials such as newspaper articles, magazines, written transcripts of speeches, or novels and broaden the realm of analysis to include items such as children's books, fairy tales, billboards, fashion, Girl Scout handbooks, textbooks, music, movies, and greeting cards. Thematic analysis need not be limited to written text, but can be applied to spoken and visual text as well.

What's Missing?

A research tool often applied by feminist researchers in conducting qualitative content analysis is to also ask questions about what is missing from the texts. Likewise, I employ this technique in my research. Where appropriate, I present data analysis sections that point to omissions in the representations of childless women. Questions about missing personality traits or lacking social roles of childless women are instructive in
helping to get at underlying cultural beliefs about childless women. Additionally, we can ask, What are the implications of absent social roles for childless women in the cultural texts?

**Why Film?**

Commercial culture or popular culture artifacts are specific sites in which researchers can examine cultural practices, representations, meanings, beliefs, values, myths, fantasies, and traditions (Gray 1995; Marsden et al. 1982; and Merlock Jackson 1986). In terms of representations and issues concerning women, researchers have most often turned to film, television, and popular magazines to examine cultural beliefs about women's lives. Any one of these three genres would be instructive for studying the cultural meaning of childless women; however, there are certain advantages to turning to film as a conveyor of cultural messages and meaning that make it a unique project from studying other forms of popular culture.

The first reason for turning to film was that films, as a viewing process and a production process, are more protected than television or magazines from the influence of commercial advertisements. When a viewer attends a movie at a local theater, most often the only two types of direct advertisements are the concession stand promotions to sell popcorn, snacks, and sodas and the previews of future films that will be released in that particular theater. Neither of these two types of advertisements directly influence the content of the film at hand in terms of how the writer developed the characters and plot.

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line or how the film is received by the audience. This is not to say that film producers do not consciously decide, for example, between having a character drink a cup of coffee from Dunkin’ Donuts or Starbucks. However, in contrast to the direct line of advertising that is associated with television and magazines, the influence of any advertisements in films are much more subtle and do little to help construct the overall meaning of childlessness. Since the magazine industry receives its profits from attracting more advertisers (Tuchman 1978; White 1970), product advertisers have a great deal of power in determining what types of stories are written and published in popular magazines (see for example Faludi 1991, p. 108 and Scanlon 1995). In this way, magazine content is much more susceptible to influences from advertisers than the film industry. Likewise, television program content can also suffer from advertisement influence. E. Ann Kaplan (1992) noted that sitting down in a darkened theater to view an uninterrupted film is a very different experience from watching a television program. Television programs are interrupted by commercials that specifically target groups to purchase certain products. Soap operas were originally designed to sell soap type products during commercial breaks. The representation of women and the roles women perform during these commercials can possibly contradict or reinforce images of women and their gender roles that are portrayed on television programs. In order to avoid the mixture of messages between television programming and their commercial breaks, I decided not to work within the realm of television.5

5 A second inherent problem with television is the shear number of programs available for analysis. Every researcher utilizing television must make certain decisions about studying programs aired during prime time slots, morning talk shows, or afternoon soap operas. To look at television over a sixteen year period, as I do with films, would involve

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In addition to television and magazines being more susceptible to the influence of advertisers, they also tend to target specific viewers or readers. While for some research projects one might want to look at cultural products designed for a specific age, gender, or racial group, this was not my research intent. I wanted to be able to look closely at the commonsense understanding of childlessness and childless women as developed and reflected in a wide-reaching form of popular culture. Since childless women take their behavioral cues from people of all walks of life including their parents, friends, co-workers, and strangers, the messages about childlessness should reach as many of these people as possible. Film, as a form of popular culture, was chosen for this study because it is far reaching in audience attraction. Additionally, unlike magazines that specifically prescribe gender roles through articles on personal development and social behavior (Pomeroy 1998), films are not overt prescriptions of appropriate social behavior and appearance.

A final reason for selecting film rather than any other form of popular culture was that the research literature about women in films has hinted about representations of childless women but has not opened a full analysis. Susan Faludi (1991) incorporated childless women into her argument about the 1980s backlash against single working females. Faludi specifically focused on films such as Fatal Attraction, in which the single childless working woman is portrayed as a crazed femme fatale. Additionally Suzanna Danuta Walters's (1995) analysis of the post-feminist representation of women in films during the mid-1980s and early 1990s also discussed childless women in the role of villain.

hundreds of viewing hours beyond the approximate 200 hours of viewing for the films in this sample.
Research literature involving interviews with childless women also mention films such as *Fatal Attraction* and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* in which the childless woman plays the *fem m e f a t a l e* role (Bartlett 1994 and Morell 1994). So to some extent, film was chosen as the form of popular culture because several researchers have already speculated about the representation of childless women. A major difference between the discussions of Faludi, Walters, Bartlett, and Morell and the research at hand is that whereas these women point to specific pieces of offensive film material to bolster their arguments, I have developed a sample of childless women that spans sixteen years and crosses at least eleven different film genres. This research should give a more accurate description and analysis of the *representations* of childless women in popular films rather than an analysis of a singular *representation*.

**Sampling Frame**

A first question to be answered in setting up my sampling criteria was, how much time does the word “contemporary” encompass? I returned to the research literature on childlessness to help inform the rationale and reduce the arbitrariness of a definition of the number of years that constitute contemporary. Elaine Tyler May’s (1995) analysis of childlessness in America proclaimed that the 1970s marked the beginning of contemporary childfree living. Research literature on childlessness, particularly voluntary childlessness, began with pioneers like Veevers in the early 1970s, but the amount of research and self-help books on childlessness really took off during the 1980s and has continued into the

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6 There was occasional research on childlessness prior to the 1970s, but the vast majority of research, especially experiential literature came after 1970.
1990s. Additionally, in looking at the Reader's Guide to Periodic Literature, articles were not categorized under childlessness until the 1972-73 volume. With the exception of one article in the 1919-1924 volume, the category "childlessness" directs the reader to the categories of "birth control" and "sterility" between the years of 1900 and 1971. In contrast to the lack of childlessness articles from 1900 to 1971, there was a total of 56 articles catalogued under the heading childlessness between the years of 1972 and 1995.

The awareness of childlessness, particularly voluntary childlessness, as an alternative lifestyle became more widely recognized starting with the early to mid-1970s. In addition to the growing awareness of childlessness, more American marriages were experiencing childlessness. The 1970 census showed that 16.1 percent of the female married population between the ages of 25 and 29 were childless. By 1994, 28.9 percent of that same married age group were childless. Much of the change in the percent of married women in their late 20s without children has been attributed to delays in first births which can, in turn, lead to unintended childlessness (Bloom and Trussell 1984; McFalls 1991; and Popenoe 1993). In any case, contemporary discourse and views about voluntary childlessness and delayed childbearing began in the early 1970s and have continued through today. Thus, it would make sense to select movies for the sample starting with those films released in 1970. While it would have been instructive to look at films starting with those released in the 1970s, researchers have noted the shortage of leading women's roles during the 1970s (Douglas 1995; Haskell 1987; Powers, Rothman,

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and Rothman 1996). The lack of women’s roles is apparent in my sample through 1986, as very few films highlight women as leading characters; however, in order to get some historical perspective, this study begins with movies released by Hollywood starting in 1980.

**Sample**

Because probability sampling techniques were incompatible with the goals of this research project, I chose the purposive sampling technique. Neuman (1997) describes purposive sampling as:

> selecting cases...with a specific purpose in mind. It is used in exploratory research or in field research...and is appropriate to select unique cases that are especially informative...The purpose is less to generalize to a larger population than it is to gain a deeper understanding of types. (P. 206)

Purposive sampling is often used in film analysis studies. Unfortunately, there has not been much guidance from these other studies in setting criteria for inclusion in a sample. Norman Denzin, in both his 1995 book *The Cinematic Society* and his 1991 book *Images of Postmodern Society*, justified his samples by calling them “the best of the best.” Robert Ray’s book on the creation of ideology through Hollywood films gave no sampling justification for his choices of *Casablanca, It’s a Wonderful Life, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, The Godfather,* and *Taxi Driver*. Additionally, there is no explanation for the sampling methods of Faludi (1991), Douglas (1995), Kaplan (1992), or Walters (1995). Perhaps the most complete explanation of a purposive sampling technique that was offered was given by Wolfenstein and Leites ([1950] 1970). These researchers were
interested in cultural differences between American, British, and French films during the late 1940s. They described their sampling technique as follows:

The generalizations in this book are based on the American movies appearing since the latter part of 1945...and on a group of contemporary British and French films...We analyzed all the American A-films with a contemporary urban setting which were released in New York City for the year following September 1, 1945...Since melodramas had proved to contain particularly significant material, we further analyzed all the American A melodramas released in New York City from September 1, 1946 to January 1, 1948. (P. 303)

The following criteria were established for the selection of movies in this study.

1. Movies appearing in *Magill's Cinema Annual*, volumes 1981 through 1997. *Magill's Cinema Annual* is a recognized encyclopedia of popular movies produced each year. Each volume compiles movies from the previous year, so for example, the 1997 volume is a compilation of the 1996 movie releases. *Magill's* provides a summary of each movie's plot and some character development. In many cases, it was obvious from the description of the film or the cast of characters that the leading woman was childless. In films where her family life was left uncertain, the film was viewed to see if she was childless.

2. The lead character, or one of the lead characters, is played by a childless woman who is at least 30 years of age. If the character was not given a specific age in the movie, the age of the actress at the time of the movie's release was used as a proxy.\(^8\) I chose the age of 30 as a cut off point because it is so often associated with the biological clock, and by the age of 30, a woman should have had time to consider fertility options. The criterion for consideration as a lead character was that the actress had to receive or share top billing.\(^9\)

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\(^{8}\) I was not able to obtain the exact age for Laura Linney, the leading woman character in the film *Congo*. However, based on her character's level of education and professional experience, it would have been difficult to fit all of that into a short time of 30 years. 

\(^{9}\) There were some movies, such as *Superman 2* or *Lethal Weapon 3*, that might have been included in the sample for the strong childless characters, however, in such cases, Margot Kidder and Rene Russo did not receive shared top billing with the leading men. In a couple of the movies included in this sample, although the women shared top billing with their male co-stars, their characters were clearly of a subordinate role and did not receive much time on camera (i.e. *Arthur*, *Dave*, and *Eraser*).
3. It was also possible for a movie to be selected based on a supporting character if the presence of that supporting childless woman was the key to the plot development (e.g. *Presumed Innocent*).

4. Movies with a lead childless women character under the age of 30 were selected if their infertility or miscarriage problems was a key element of the plot development (e.g. *Malice*).

5. Since this is a study of contemporary representations of childless women, movies produced about an historical time period such as *Sense and Sensibility* or *Fried Green Tomatoes* were not considered. In keeping with this logic, movies set beyond the year 2000 were also not considered (e.g. *Alien*).

6. The scope of this study is limited to American culture and therefore, only films that have been produced and release in America were selected.

7. If cultural objects are to have any impact on a society, they must be seen and known. Christopher Case (1996) defines moderately successful movies as having grossed at least $30 million in box office sales. To ensure that movies were moderately successful, I used $35 million as the cut off point. This figure does not include video sales since video rental shops did not come into full swing until the mid-1980s (Powers, et al. 1996). Movies grossing less than $35 million were not included in the sample, with the exception of the four films footnoted below. All of the box office earning figures were adjusted for inflation.

Between the years of 1980 and 1996, 67 movies fit these criteria. Table 2.1 found on pages 18 and 19 provides a listing of the movie sample.

**Sample Limitation**

In presenting earlier editions of this research to professional groups, some people have taken note of a limitation of this sampling technique. Specifically, critics have

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10 Four films that grossed less than $35 million were selected for the sample. *Frankie and Johnny, Crimes of the Heart, Gorillas in the Mist*, and *Forget Paris* were all included in the sample even though they grossed less than $35 million. *Frankie and Johnny, Crimes of the Heart*, and *Forget Paris* all specifically deal with the lives of women who are infertile. *Gorillas in the Mist* is one of the few films to cover a significant part of a woman's life span, including her decisions about marriage and family. These four movies were all considered theoretically important to include in the sample despite their slightly lower box office earnings.
suggested that the films in the sample provide a poor representation of both minority women and lesbians. I agree with this assessment; my sample is overwhelmingly white heterosexual and under-represents minority women and lesbians. However, I do not believe this is a function of sampling bias. Instead, I would argue that the sample shows further evidence that the mass media reflects dominant American ideologies regarding race, class, and sexuality. This study is an examination of Hollywood films that have grossed at least 35 million dollars in box office sales. This sampling criterion was established so that I could draw conclusions about representations that have made some type of an impact within American popular culture. The impact is denoted by the success the films enjoyed at the box office. The limitation of this sampling criterion is that the data generated in this study and the conclusions that are drawn are bound by the fact that the films were created by large Hollywood studios and reflect corporate America's dominant views about race, class, and sexuality. The majority of the films in this sample were released by the Hollywood corporations Columbia Pictures, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal Studios, MGM, Paramount Pictures, TriStar Pictures, Warner Brothers, and Touchstone Pictures. Since large Hollywood studios are interested in making films with wide audience appeal in order to receive the greatest profits, they tend to produce films by and about majority populations. The films are overwhelmingly about white, middle to upper class, heterosexual women. The absence or under-representation of both minority women and lesbians may be a sign of their symbolic annihilation. Tuchman (1978)

11 Whoopi Goldberg is one of the few successful black Hollywood actresses that has played in a number of films as the leading childless character. Besides Whoopi's two films included in this sample, The Associate (1996), Eddie (1996), Boys on the Side (1995), and
explained that when the mass media condemn, trivialize, or fail to include representations of certain groups, this serves to symbolically annihilate those social groups. The fact that very few black women and absolutely no other minority women were caste as leading women in the top grossing Hollywood films between 1980 and 1996 could be evidence of the symbolic annihilation of these groups by film producers. Alternatively it could also be a sign of explicit racism in the film industry. Additionally, it could be further evidence to support the notion of the black woman’s double jeopardy. Feminist theorists have noted that black women are devalued on the basis of their gender and also on the basis of their race. Although the absence of minority women and lesbian women in mainstream Hollywood productions is an interesting question to explore, it is beyond the scope of this study, and I can only offer this brief speculation about this issue.

Data Collection

Reference books about qualitative data research strategies note that it is impossible, and even undesirable, for the qualitative researchers to record everything that they observe (Miles and Huberman 1994; Wolcott 1994). The data collection process is by its very nature a selective process. Wolcott (1994) states, “In the very act of observing, a qualitative researcher makes myriad choices in looking at some things rather

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Jumpin’ Jack Flash (1986) all fit the sampling criteria with the exception of the box office earnings and were therefore not included in the final sample.

Through my sampling criteria, I too have symbolically annihilated minority groups. Although a change in the sampling technique could not be undertaken for this project now, a future research goal is to over-sample films by and about minority women. By lowering the box office sales requirement for minority films, a wider sample of films featuring minority women can be included in this study (e.g. Jumpin’ Jack Flash, The Associate, Boys on the Side, Eddie, and a number of Spike Lee films).

Numerous studies specifically target minority representation in the mass media and I would suggest Herman Gray’s Watching Race as a starting point for anyone interested in black film representation.
than others, in taking note of some things rather than others, and in subsequently reporting some things rather than others” (P. 29). In order to guard against information overload and make appropriate choices about what to include or disregard in the data collection process, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that the researcher stay close to the conceptual framework. When faced with the daunting task of viewing the 67 films of this sample, I too found it imperative to stay close to my conceptual framework. At times, this proved a challenge as I could see how these films could be interpreted using a number of theoretical or methodological frameworks. Occasionally I found myself wanting to open my data collection questions to include issues about women on a broader level than the roles of childless women; however, that simply would have resulted in data overload, a loss of research focus, and my floundering with this research project for years to come. 14 Instead, I stuck close to my original questions about childless women. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I did not have a highly structured data collection tool with closed-ended questions and predetermined categories with boxes to check off instances of certain behavioral characteristics or actions. At the same time, this was not a completely open research project utilizing a grounded theory approach (see Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). The underlying conceptual framework used role theory to sift

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14 This is not to say that the research process was completely inflexible. From the time that I wrote the research proposal to the time I was involved in data collection, it became clear to me that some of my original questions were inappropriate for this research design. I was interested in knowing what social problems are associated with childless woman, but found that the films were not really a rich enough source for this line of inquiry and had to drop these questions from my research project.
Table 2.1: Sample of Films, 1980-1996

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Movie Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Nine to Five</td>
<td>1989</td>
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<td>Steel Magnolias</td>
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<td>1981</td>
<td>Absence of Malice</td>
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<td>Bird on a Wire</td>
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<td>Arthur</td>
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<td>Presumed Innocent</td>
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<td>1983</td>
<td>Sudden Impact</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Frankie &amp; Johnny</td>
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<td>Thelma and Louise</td>
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<td>1984</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Basic Instinct</td>
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<td>Romancing the Stone</td>
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<td>Batman Returns</td>
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<td>1985</td>
<td>Agnes of God</td>
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<td>Death Becomes Her</td>
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<td>Prizzi's Honor</td>
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<td>The Hand that Rocks the Cradle</td>
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<td>1986</td>
<td>Black Widow</td>
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<td>Housesitter</td>
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<td>Crimes of the Heart</td>
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<td>Medicine Man</td>
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<td>Ruthless People</td>
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<td>Sister Act</td>
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<td>1987</td>
<td>Baby Boom</td>
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<td>Unlawful Entry</td>
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<td>Blind Date</td>
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<td>Fatal Attraction</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>Beaches</td>
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<td>Big Business</td>
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<td>Bull Durham</td>
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<td>A Fish Called Wanda</td>
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<td>Gorillas in the Mist</td>
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<td>1989</td>
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<td>Steel Magnolias</td>
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Table 2.1: Sample of Films, 1980 - 1996, continued

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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through the enormous amount of materials presented in the films. Through the use of role theory, I developed a list of open-ended questions (see Table 2.2) that were helpful in collecting data. Through this list of open-ended questions found in Table 2.2, I collected data that reflected the childless woman’s social circles and her relationships with the people in these social circles. I also obtained data about how she performed her various roles. Once I had this list of theoretically driven questions to help structure my data collection, I was ready to begin viewing the films and recording data. Each of the 67 films were viewed at least twice. During the first viewing of the films, I did not actually take any formal research notes. The purpose of the first viewing was to be certain that the film fit the criteria for the sample\textsuperscript{15} and to have a full understanding of the plot development. I did not want to get tripped up by a plot twist during the data recording process and

\textsuperscript{15} The process of viewing the films a first time proved helpful since a number of films were screened out of the sample because I was unaware that the lead character was pregnant or had children.
watched each film once to gain an understanding of the plot. Having viewed the films a first time allowed concentration during the second viewing on the research questions and data collection.

It would be unfair to the reader to pretend that the data collection worked precisely as I had envisioned from the start of the project. For the first five films that were viewed, I tried to use my open-ended question list as a pseudo-interview form. I would watch the films and answer questions where appropriate. I found this practice completely unsatisfactory because the story lines and data were becoming fragmented. In other words, I was losing the meaning of the statements since they were being taken out of context and recorded on this pseudo-interview questionnaire. In essence, the data were being fragmented at least twice with this technique, once during the initial viewing and a second time when segments of the data were coded in *The Ethnograph* qualitative data analysis computer program. At this point, I made a switch in the data collection technique. Instead of trying to answer every question on my pseudo-questionnaire, I kept the list of questions by my side as a constant reminder of the focus of the research project, and let the movies do more of the talking. By this I mean that I was able to record information in sequence of the film events and story line rather than initially splitting the data up into answers to theoretical research questions. I entered the data directly into a lap-top computer and later transferred the data into *The Ethnograph* data analysis program. In addition to recording plot lines, dialogue, and information that related to my research questions, I also wrote a one page impression summary of each film. This one
Table 2.2: Guiding Research Questions for Data Collection

**The Childless Character:**
1. Why is she childless?
2. What is her reaction to her childlessness? Other people’s reaction?
3. What evidence is there of her mental stability or instability?
4. Does she have any childless women as role models in her life?

**Childless Woman’s Love Relationship:**
1. Describe any romantic interests that this woman has and the characteristics of the relationship (i.e. long-term, one night stand, mistress).
2. If her partner has a family other than the childless woman, what is his relationship with his family (i.e. his wife and children)?
3. If she does not have any love relationship, why not?

**Childless Woman’s Job Performance:**
1. What type of job does she have, and how well does she perform her job?
2. How do her co-workers or boss assess her job performance? What is her own assessment of her job performance?
3. Does she have any career goals?
4. What is her personal relationship like with the people she works for/with?

**Childless Woman’s Family and Friends:**
1. Does she have any living family members? What is her relationship with these family members?
2. Does she have any friends? What is her relationship with these friends?

**Childless Women, Children, and Mothers:**
1. How does the childless woman interact with other childless women?
2. How does the childless women interact with or describe women who are mothers?
3. How does the childless woman interact with children?
4. Does the childless woman have any feelings about families and domesticity?

**Characteristics of Any Mothers in the Film:**
1. What is the mother’s social circle, including friends and family? What is her relationship with her family and friends?
2. Does the mother have a job?
3. How does she handle having a job and a family?
page summary was helpful in the data analysis stage since I recorded on this summary sheet thoughts such as how the films possibly related to other films in the samples or how certain themes in some films differed from other portrayals of similar themes. I also recorded notes on the summary sheets to remind myself of issues or themes that might come up in future films. In addition to the summary sheets, I also constructed a diagram of each of the childless woman’s role set. As a final form of data collection, I filled out a second summary sheet for each film which included demographic information about the childless character and the film genre. This demographic information was tabulated and is presented in Chapter 4.

Qualitative Computer Software

The use of computer software packages is a frequently discussed topic in qualitative data analysis reference books. Typically in these discussions researchers present the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating a software package into data analysis. These discussions of software programs also note that each qualitative software program is designed with specific functions for data analysis. I chose the software package *The Ethnograph* v. 4.0 which is primarily designed to code and retrieve text based data (see Miles and Weitzman 1994). My concern was to have a research tool that would allow me to easily store, code, and retrieve my data, and *The Ethnograph* was certainly designed to complete these functions. As most every textbook discussion of computers in qualitative analysis reminds readers, these software programs do not complete the analysis for the researcher and, in some cases, can even hinder the research.

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16 See for example, Dey 1993; Maxwell 1996; Miles and Huberman 1994; and Neuman 1997.
experience. *The Ethnograph* was employed in this research program to simply help with data management and with the process of sorting and sifting coded materials. *The Ethnograph* does not print out or suggest possible themes from the coded data. All development of themes is completed by the researcher. The computer is simply used as a large database of coded text.

**Data Coding and Analysis**

Once I had collected the data and transcribed them into *The Ethnograph*, the next research step was to affix codes to the film “field notes” (Miles and Huberman 1994). Dey (1993) noted that during the coding process, the researcher must decide what level of categorization to undertake. Data can be analyzed through three different approaches:

1. **Line-By-Line**: This approach is often used in grounded theory research where the researcher is developing new theory. Through line-by-line coding, the researcher categorizes key words or phases and attaches codes to almost every line of the transcription.

2. **Holistic Approach**: With the holistic approach to coding, the researcher attempts to “grasp basic themes or issues in the data by absorbing them as a whole rather than by analyzing them line-by-line” (Dey 1993:104). The researcher may not attach codes to the individual data, but may wait until reading through the entire transcript and then attach a code or several codes to the entire case.

3. **Middle-Order**: The middle-order approach to coding “offers a flexible compromise which allows the analysis to develop in a more detailed or holistic way as time and inclination permits. A middle-order approach is also attractive if the data, although qualitative, is not entirely lacking in structure” (Dey 1993:104). With middle-order coding, the researcher usually codes segments of data such as paragraphs.

I used the middle-order coding system during the initial coding, and I tended to code entire paragraphs or large portions of paragraphs under one category code rather than
code individual lines or words. Some researchers suggest that the data analysis (coding) begins after all of the field notes have been collected (see Neuman 1997, Chapter 16), but I took Maxwell’s (1996) suggestion about beginning the data analysis process early on in the research process. I waited until I had about five to ten movies viewed and then began to code the written film field notes. I continued this process of stopping to code data after I had collected between five and ten sets of film field notes. Although Miles and Huberman (1994:58) suggested that researchers may want to begin coding with a list of concepts from which to pull codes for the data, I began the coding process with a blank sheet of paper and developed each code as a new code was needed to refer to different phenomena. Allowing codes to come from the data is common to open coding and helps to bring forth the themes that are present in the data rather than looking for a pre-established list of themes (see for example, Strauss 1987 and Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Different researchers use codes for different purposes in their qualitative research. In a review of the uses of coding for qualitative data, Seidel (1995) discussed the differences between using codes as a “condensed representation of the facts described in the data” (P. E17) and using the codes as a flag system to alert the researcher to segments of the data for further analysis and consideration.17 I used the code words in the latter sense of the meaning described by Seidel. The code words helped to identify themes in the data, and I used The Ethnograph computer program to run searches for all instances of data segments with a particular code. Once I had the computer generated grouping of

17 Seidel (1995) uses the distinction between objectivist coding and heuristic coding to distinguish these two types of coding system, which are similar to the manifest and latent coding discussed at the beginning of this chapter.
all the instances of a code word, I used the data segments to further develop my understanding of the themes pertaining to the data. Perhaps at this point, an example of a coded section would be helpful. The following four segments of data are instances of the code “infertile.” The code infertile was used to flag any chunk of data that specifically discussed issues concerning the inability to have children. The first two segments are drawn from the 1995 film *Forget Paris* and refer to the lead characters Mickey and Ellen and their struggle to conceive a child, and the second two segments are excerpts from *Crimes of the Heart,* a film that often discussed Lenny’s shrunken ovary.

When Mickey and Ellen realize that they are having trouble conceiving a child, they make an appointment with a fertility specialist. Although we don’t see them at this appointment, in a later conversation with her friend Ellen explains the atmosphere, “You should see the waiting room. All the childless couples. I mean you could cut the hopelessness with a chainsaw.”

The film presents the situation of Mickey providing the sperm for Ellen’s eggs in a humorous manner. Since Mickey could not produce the needed sperm sample in the room provided by the infertility specialist, he begs them to allow him to ejaculate in the privacy of his own home where, he jokes, he is accustomed to this behavior. The nurses allow Mickey to drive home and produce a semen sample in a more natural setting. He is instructed to bring his semen sample back to the office within one hour of ejaculation or the sperm will be die. Mickey is able to produce the semen sample in his own bathroom and triumphantly emerges from the bathroom to show Ellen. He seat belts the cup containing the sample into the passenger seat of his Jeep and tells the “little fellows” to “hang on.” As he is driving his sample to the doctor’s office, Mickey gets stuck in a traffic jam. While frantically trying to get around the traffic, Mickey is pulled over by a police officer. Mickey tells the police officer that 50,000 lives are at stake. The next scene shows the police officer giving Mickey and his sperm sample an escort to the infertility specialist.

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18 These excerpts from my film “field notes” also provide a glimpse at my style of observation and recording of data which was a combination of interpreting the events of the film and recording direct dialogue to allow the “respondents” to speak for themselves.
Meg - Poor Lenny. She needs some love in her life. All she does is work out at that back yard and take care of old granddaddy.
Babe - Yeah but she's so shy with men.
Meg - Probably that shrunken ovary she's got.
Babe - Yeah that deformed ovary.
Meg - Yeah. It was granddaddy was the one who made her feel self-conscious about that. It's his fault the old fool.
[Camera cuts to Lenny working out in the garden looking frumpy and wearing her grandmother's hat]

Lenny - I don't care what you believe. It's just always been just so easy for you. You've always had so many men fall in love with you. But I have this [pause] shrunken ovary, I just can't have any children, look at my hair. It's just falling out in this comb. So you just tell me, What kind of man is going to love me? What man is going to love me?
Meg - Oh Lenny. Lot's of men.
Lenny - What men?
Meg - A whole lot of men. It's just old granddaddy who seems to feel otherwise.
Lenny - Yeah, because he doesn't want to see me rejected and humiliated.
Meg - Oh Lenny. Stop being so pathetic. Now just tell me. Did you ever actually ask that man from Memphis all about this? Did you?
Lenny - No I didn't. 'Cause I just didn't want him not to want me.

Although the tone of each of these segments is different, they were all coded with the term "infertile." In later analysis of all segments coded "infertile," I was able to notice several themes about infertility. One theme that became apparent is that films focus on the despair and pain of infertile women at the same time that the focus of men's direct experiences with infertility is the embarrassment and humor in the situation.

I did not try to severely limit the number of codes developed during the open coding process so I ended up with about 85 different code words. One nice feature of using a computer software program to manage qualitative data is that I could run frequency distributions of all of the codes. As suspected, several of the codes were used
infrequently, and a number of other codes were used consistently throughout the sample. I could go back and look at the codes that were used infrequently to see if they should be combined with other codes in order to reduce the overall number of codes. Infrequently used codes were also examined to see if there was something unique happening in one or two of the films that was not present in the other films. Additionally, segments with codes that were used frequently throughout the sample could be printed off to isolate and further develop themes.

**Organization and Presentation of the Data**

In his book *Transforming Qualitative Data*, Harry Wolcott raised the question of how to present qualitative data to your readers. Wolcott made several suggestions for researchers who are struggling with questions about the amount of description, analysis, and interpretation to include in a research project. Wolcott offered ten different strategies for presenting description and analysis of qualitative data, but I have found his suggestion about following your analytical framework most helpful.¹⁹ I have tried to stay close to my data and have tried to be cautious about leaping too far off the interpretation high dive.²⁰ I believe that the strength of this research project lies in the description and thematic analysis of the representations of childless women. For this reason, I have organized my “findings” within a framework of the analytical tool thematic analysis. Chapters 4 through 8 present the themes that I have developed from viewing and analyzing the 67 films. Each chapter deals with a specific type of social role and presents the themes pertaining to that

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¹⁹ None of the strategies are more right or wrong, but are presented to show that different research projects lend themselves to different strategies of description and analysis.
²⁰ Keep in mind that the data are interpretive and flow through the researcher and that interpretation is the process of drawing conclusions or causal statements about the research findings.
social role. Chapter 4 covers the demographic information, a detailed explanation of the childless categorization, and gives some general information about the social roles of the childless women. Chapters 5 through 8 deal with the performance of social roles including the transition of some women to motherhood, childless wives, single childless women, and career women. However, before I get to these analysis chapters, it is important to place this study in historical context and talk about the meaning of childlessness prior to the 1980s. The historical meaning of childlessness in America and the changing rates of childlessness are explored in Chapter 3.

Conclusion

In sum, the methodological design of this study is a qualitative thematic analysis of 67 films released by Hollywood between the years of 1980 and 1996. The primary sampling criteria was that the films contained a leading character who was a childless woman over the age of thirty. I specifically chose to work with film because it is a cultural medium that points to social tensions and social meaning without specifically prescribing social behavior. Through the thematic analysis I have explored the two main research questions: (1) What social roles are available to women without children?; and (2) What is the contemporary meaning of childlessness in America? This research project is exploratory in nature and is therefore only a first step in building a better understanding of the meaning of contemporary childlessness.
CHAPTER 3

CHANGES IN THE MEANING AND RATES OF CHILDLESSNESS FROM THE COLONIAL DAYS TO THE PRESENT

Centering Research in Historical Context: Where Is The Point of Reference?

In 1993 David Popenoe professed that, “family decline since 1960 has been extraordinarily steep, and its social consequences serious, especially for children” (p.527). Families, according to Popenoe, “have grown smaller in size, less stable, and shorter in life span,” (p.528) and individuals have become less committed to the family institution and more committed to themselves. A result of the weakened individual commitment to families is the weakening of certain functions of the family such as the procreation and socialization of children. Popenoe argued that when people choose not to procreate, they undermine the family institution and the functions that it provides for society (see also McFalls 1991 and Thornton 1989). Marriages without children, Popenoe asserted, are inherently less stable and committed relationships. Despite Popenoe’s claim about the instability of childless marriages, research results neither confirm nor refute the idea that childless marriages are more prone to divorce (Faux 1984; Glenn 1989; Monahan 1955; Wineberg 1990). In fact, childless couples may actually experience higher levels of marital satisfaction than married couples with children (Houseknecht 1979; White, Booth and Edwards 1986).

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1 See Houseknecht (1987) for a summary of research findings regarding marital stability and childlessness.
Popenoe’s conclusion that American families are experiencing a sharp decline over the past thirty years was based, in part, on the declining fertility rate, the increase in marriages without children, a weakening in the stigma associated with childlessness, and Popenoe’s limited definition of the family. However, trend analysis covering a thirty year period may not be enough of a time span to draw conclusions about the changing family structure. Mattessich (1979) cautioned researchers about drawing conclusions without taking into consideration the limitations of the time period under study. In the concluding remarks in a research paper of changing childless rates over the past century, Mattessich stated, “The choice of an initial point of reference determines the implications which one can draw concerning changes in the extent of childlessness among young, married women” (1979:305). When a researcher looks at changes in rates of fertility or childlessness over a short period of time, what could be interpreted as a steep decline or a sharp increase may only be “minor fluctuations in the long run” (Mattessich 1979:306). Perhaps the conclusions drawn by researchers such as Popenoe (1993), Thornton (1989), and McFalls (1991) might have changed considerably if they had started their analysis with the birth cohorts of the mid-nineteenth century rather than limiting their analyses to the past twenty or thirty years. In contrast to the concerns of McFalls, Popenoe, and Thornton regarding the recent increase in childlessness, researchers who analyzed changes in childless rates

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2 Sweet & Bumpass’s 1987 work showed that from 1962 to 1980, the percentage of American mothers who felt that all marriages should have children dropped from 84 percent to 43 percent.

3 For Popenoe, the family is defined as a group of at least two people, including at least one adult and one dependent person. Popenoe’s definition of the family did not leave room for several types of ‘new’ family lifestyles including married heterosexual independent individuals who do not have children, committed homosexual relationships, and people who remain single throughout their lives.
over the past two centuries comment on the similarities in childlessness for women born between about 1860 to 1910 and the women born since about 1945 (Davis 1982; Morgan 1991; Sweet and Bumpass 1987; Tolnay and Guest 1982).

In an attempt to avoid drawing research conclusions without thinking about contemporary childlessness in its broader historical time frame, this chapter is designed to map out the changes in the meaning of childlessness and the changing rates of childless women since the Colonial Era. Childless rates have fluctuated throughout the past century and a half.\(^4\) Not only has the number of childless women and couples fluctuated, but the meaning and experience of childlessness has also changed since the birth of this nation. This chapter is a review of those changes and is based on the childlessness research literature.

**Colonial America**

The very survival of colonial America depended upon large families (Tyler May 1995). High birth rates were necessary to overcome the high infant mortality rate, so there was little need for birth control.\(^5\) Even though contraception such as abstinence, withdrawal, and condoms had been known since antiquity (Gordon 1990), there is little evidence to suggest that colonial Americans voluntarily avoided childbirth. The family household was the primary economic unit of production and without children, the family had trouble sustaining its economic needs. Late twentieth-century American parenting ideology suggests that women bear and rear children as a form of personal self-fulfillment.

\(^4\) Unfortunately national data on the rates of childless women are not available prior to 1830 birth cohorts.

\(^5\) Tyler May (1995) noted that although abortion, contraception, and infanticide seemed to be fairly prevalent in England and France, “deliberate family limitation was not widespread in the [American] colonies until the late eighteenth century” (p. 31).
(Kaplan 1992); however, the Puritan doctrine which mandated marriages to “be fruitful and multiply,” was not meant to lead to personal fulfillment of the parents. While parents may have been the benefactors of certain joys associated with children, the mandate to raise large families was meant to sustain the greater community (Tyler May 1995). The high infant mortality rate and the short life-expectancy resulted in an unromanticized and practical view of children and parenting (Ariés 1962; Ulrich 1980). Children were reared for the benefit of the community. Without children to help with farming and household production of material goods, the community could not sustain itself. The strong emphasis on community survival, which was partially dependent upon procreation, meant that childlessness was considered a serious issue. The deliberate attempt to remain childless by a wife was grounds for a divorce. Although deliberate childlessness was grounds for divorce, barrenness was not (Demos 1974), and Mintz and Kellogg (1988) estimated that approximately one in twelve colonial wives were barren. The childless were considered barren, a term that carried a host of negative meanings, including “unproductive, sterile, bare, empty, stark, deficient, lacking, wanting, destitute, [and] devoid” (Tyler May 1995:11). With the exception of prayer, there was little that could be done to help infertile couples conceive.  

Despite the negative meaning associated with the barren situation, religious leaders encouraged childless couples to accept their fate and continue in God’s work through

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6 At the time, the only known form of infertility among men was impotence. Most childlessness in a marital relationship was considered the fault of the woman. Male sterility was not discovered until the early part of the twentieth century. Although barrenness was not grounds for a divorce, a woman could divorce an impotent man for failure to provide sexual companionship (Tyler May 1995).
alternatives to parenting one's own biological children. The childless couple could maintain respectability within the community by taking in other children. Unlike the modern emphasis on the privatization of the nuclear family (McMahon 1995), the early settlers of colonial times placed a greater emphasis on community living. Opportunities existed for childless couples to 'adopt' children of the community who had lost one or both parents. Since many children lost at least one parent before reaching adulthood, children were often taken in as apprentices and servants. The orphaned children would be nurtured, educated in religion, and disciplined in the home of their 'adopted' parents. These informal adoptions often took place among relatives who were already familiar with the child (Greil 1991b).

Changes in the Nineteenth Century

The Culture of Single Blessedness

The colonial era of America with the family based economy was characterized by both high marriage rates and high birth rates. However, the beginnings of the industrial revolution in the early nineteenth century saw many young single women, particularly in the northeast, leaving their families to take up work in the factories. Typically, the young women left the factory work upon marriage, but a growing number of women were choosing a life of singleness or spinsterhood (Chambers-Schiller 1984). Some women felt that spinsterhood was a better choice than entering into a marriage with an undesirable

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7 The first formal adoption laws were not enacted until 1851 in Massachusetts.
8 The Oxford English Dictionary notes that the word spinster has three separate definitions including: (1) a woman who is beyond the normal age of marriage and is still unmarried; (2) a legal definition for a single, never married woman; and (3) a woman whose occupation is spinning yarn or thread. Spinster is used here to refer to women who have passed the prime marital age and have never been married.
Other women were unable to find suitable partners because of the male shortage in the northeast. Chambers-Schiller explained that the reasons for singlehood were numerous. Many women feared the:

...domination of men, the danger of childbirth, the unknown territory of sexual intercourse. There were those who rejected the drudgery of housekeeping for a family in favor of work suited to their inclination or talent. Some sought a sphere of public usefulness; still others aspired to fame or accomplishment in the public sphere. Some would not forsake their premarital independence for the marriage bond or commit themselves to self-sacrifice rather than self-cultivation. (Chamber-Schiller 1984:207)

During the colonial days and early period of the American nation, a stigma was associated with women who were spinsters. However, in the early 1800s, a new understanding of spinsterhood was beginning to take shape that would last through the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century. The growing number of single women countered the spinster stigma with their positive image of a “Cult of Single Blessedness” (Chambers-Schiller 1984). The Cult of Single Blessedness maintained that singlehood was both socially and personally valuable and to some extent, a higher calling in life than marriage. Ante-bellum single women were looked upon favorably if they worked within the traditional sphere of women’s work. Within this Cult of Single Blessedness, single women were dutiful daughters and selfless women who cared for their aging parents, provided support for sisters in labor, nurtured parentless nieces or nephews, and finally cared for the poor, sick or orphaned of their communities. As long as the spinsters adhered to certain standards,

9 The Shaker community, with its emphasis on celibacy, may have provided a legitimate outlet for single women who feared marriage or sex (Chambers-Schiller 1984; Tyler May 1995).
their status as “old maid” was transformed into notion of the “Maiden Aunt” or “Sister of Charity”:

As womanly women, they lived useful social and domestic lives. As a result, they were respected by their communities, in which they were well integrated members. At no time in these stories were they identified as odd, isolate, or deviant. Yet the social approbation implied by this literature was clearly conditional. Only so long as these women enacted certain roles, those traditionally associated with the female gender, did ante-bellum women’s literature affirm singlehood as beneficial to women, to their families, and to their communities. (Chambers-Schiller 1984:27)

Throughout the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, the Cult of Single Blessedness was met with social approval. It was not until the single women tried to assert too much independence and move outside of traditional female roles that singleness was met with a powerful backlash. Single women such as Louisa May Alcott and Susan B. Anthony had become quite vocal in their position as single and childless women. Louisa May Alcott wrote that “liberty is a better husband than love to many of us” (Chambers-Schiller 1984:1), and Susan B. Anthony wrote several letters to her fellow feminist activists expressing her disappointment that they had become pregnant and had children (Dally 1982). Susan B. Anthony knew that marriage and family responsibilities limited the ability of her fellow feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Antoinette Brown, and Lucy Stone to perform their roles as activists.

The rising divorce rate coupled with the declining fertility rates gave cause for further concern about these independent women who threatened the gender structure of America. The spinsters became known as a highly deviant third sex termed “hermaphrodites” (Chambers-Schiller 1984). Medical, psychological, and scientific
literature claimed that hermaphrodites were a gender that was female in terms of their genitalia, but held masculine traits such as independence, intelligence, ambition, and love of women. By the end of the nineteenth century, spinsterhood had been linked with lesbianism and feminism, and the nation turned against the Cult of Single Blessedness. A renewed negative ideal about spinsterhood and old maids helped to usher in the start of the twentieth century.

**Changes in Adoption Laws**

Changes in child-rearing practices brought about during the nineteenth century also led to the notion of the “best interest of the child” (Presser 1971). Starting in Massachusetts in 1851, the informal adoption or child-sharing practices of the colonial and early days of the nation were being replaced by adoption laws. The emphasis of these laws was on the protection of the welfare of the child. Of course orphaned children were placed under the social service care for adoption, but in addition to these obviously needy children, intact poor families were coming under the scrutiny of the social service agencies. Parental worthiness of biological parents was being examined, and it had become possible for lower class biological parents to lose custody of their children to a middle class childless couple deemed more worthy. It was considered to be in the best interest of the child to be raised by more capable middle or upper class parents.

**Medical Advancements in Birth Control**

Although the fertility rate of white women in America had been declining since the beginning of the nineteenth century, voluntary childlessness of married women in the

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10 The fertility rate of white women fell from 7.04 children per woman in 1800 to 3.56 children per woman in 1900 (Degler 1980).
middle of the nineteenth century was still a relatively rare occurrence. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, married women were trying to reduce their family size, but were not necessarily trying or able to avoid childbirth altogether (Garey 1987). After the Civil War, Victorian ideology had become a dominant force in America, and that ideology proclaimed that women were guided by their wombs. The equivalent to the male sex drive for women had become the maternal instinct (Gordon 1990; Thurer 1994). The proponents of the maternal instinct belief claimed that women were both biologically predisposed to having children and were also biologically suited to nurture and care for children. Gordon (1990) noted that nineteenth century middle class usage of the words “motherhood” and “womanhood” had similar meanings except that greater dignity was assigned to the word motherhood.

For those who wanted children and could not have them, there was still little that medical doctors could do. An early medical textbook concluded that infertility was part of nature’s design and could not be remedied through an operation (Tyler May 1995). Instead of coming up with effective treatments for infertile women, medical research of the mid-nineteenth century ended up yielding more information about contraception and better control over fertility. Despite the efforts by conservative groups to limit the circulation of

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11 A limitation of the information gathered on childlessness throughout this chapter is the emphasis on white middle and upper class women’s lives. There is little information available on childlessness of 19th Century minority women. We do know that black fertility between 1875 and 1940 dropped from 7.5 children per woman to 2.8 children per woman (Tolnay 1985). Additionally, there is some evidence to suggest that ‘voluntary’ childlessness was used as a form of resistance among some black slaves. However, the slave life of a childless woman was much harsher than that of a woman with children and is not considered to have been a widespread form of resistance (Gutman 1976). For rate changes in black infertility, see Boyd (1989b); Goldscheider and Uhlenberg (1969); Grindstaff (1976); Kunz and Brinkerhoff (1969); Tolnay (1987); and Veevers (1982).
birth control and abortion information, this information had become widespread between
the 1830s and 1870s (Mohr 1978). The 1932 book by Dr. Charles Knowlton described
several methods of birth control and advocated birth control on medical, economic, and
social grounds. After publishing the first edition of the book, Knowlton was prosecuted,
fined, and sentenced to a short jail term. Despite these setbacks, Knowlton went on to
publish nine American editions that were selling 250,000 copies per year by the end of the
nineteenth century (Tyler May 1995). Contraception and fertility control methods
known at the time included withdrawal, the baudrache (a condom-like device), sponges,
douches, pessaries, syringes, suppositories or jellies, abstinence, safe period or rhythm,
and abortion (David and Sanderson 1986; Gordon 1990; Tyler May 1995). A study of
married upper class couples found that 90 percent had used some form of contraception at
some point between the years 1892 and 1897 (David and Sanderson 1986).

Rise in Marital Childlessness

The spread of information on contraception and abortion brought with it a trend
that completely contradicted the Victorian mandate to submit to the maternal instinct.
Although deemed unfeminine and unnatural by dominant ideology, a minority of wives
born in the birth cohorts after 1860 were beginning to have higher rates of what has been
termed voluntary childlessness. Morgan (1991) looked at the percent of white women
over the age of 45 in the birth cohorts from 1835 through 1930 who were either never
married or who had experienced permanent marital childlessness. His analysis, presented
below in Figure 3.1, shows that the percent of never-married women rose slightly for birth

12 By the end of the nineteenth century, nine more books on contraception and abortion
were available to the public (Tyler May 1995).
cohorts 1830 through 1870, but experienced a steady decline after 1880. Meanwhile, the percent of childless marriages rose steadily for the birth cohorts between 1830 and 1900. The childless marriages then declined sharply for the birth cohorts between 1905 through 1930 (the 1950s mothers of the baby boomers).

**Figure 3.1: Never Married and Married Childlessness, by Birth Cohort (1835-1930) for White Women Over 45** (Source: Morgan 1991; data taken from graph)

Davis's 1982 study (findings presented in Table 3.1) supports Morgan's findings. For both white and black women, the rates of childlessness increased for birth cohorts from 1891 to 1910 and then began to decline for birth cohorts 1911 to 1925.\(^\text{13}\) During the peak

\(^{13}\) See also Hastings and Robins (1974) and Poston and Gotard (1977).
childbearing years, the highest rates of childlessness were experienced in conjunction with the Great Depression and declined slightly during World War II, and then dropped off sharply for white women during the 1950s. The childless rates for black women are higher than the rates for white women for every birth cohort between 1891 and 1925. The black childless rate did not drop below 22.7 percent, which is 1.8 percent higher than even the highest rate of white childlessness (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Percentage Childless by Birth Cohort and Race Among Ever-Married Women Aged 35-69 in 1960: U.S. Women Born 1891-1895 to 1921-1925

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth Cohort</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Year at Age 30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1891 - 1895</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>1921 - 1925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896 - 1900</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>1926 - 1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901 - 1905</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>1931 - 1935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906 - 1910</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>1936 - 1940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911 - 1915</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>1941 - 1945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916 - 1920</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>1946 - 1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921 - 1925</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>1951 - 1955</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Davis (1982)

A move toward voluntary childlessness was underway in America, especially in the North Atlantic region (Morgan 1991; Tyler May 1995). Throughout the nineteenth century singleness, the most assured means of childlessness, became a more popular option for women. For women born in the 1830s, 7.3 percent were never-married in comparison to 11 percent of the women who were born in the decade following the Civil War (Smith 1979). In addition to the choice of singleness, many women and men were delaying marriage and delaying childbearing, which eventually led, in many cases, to their permanent childlessness status. These trends were particularly apparent in New England.
where 32.1 percent of the New Hampshire 1861-65 birth cohort were still childless by the ages of 45 through 49. The southern region had lower rates of childlessness, but the lowest rates could be found in western states, where, for instance, Oklahoma had a childless rate of 5.7 percent (Morgan 1991). The large fluctuation in the childless rates across the nation could not be explained solely by infertility or health problems that led to sterility. Much of the childlessness was among white middle and upper class women who presumably had better access to health care and lived in healthier conditions (Morgan 1991). Several researchers have concluded that voluntary control of fertility had to have played a large part in the high rates of childlessness among both single women and married women, especially in the New England states (Davis 1982; Morgan 1991).

Motherhood Movements and Childless Responses

Several contemporary social researchers have tried to make sense of the rising rates of marital childlessness which began with the 1860 birth cohort. In looking at the dominant ideology of the last third of the nineteenth century which proscribed motherhood for all women through their maternal instinct, these rates seem puzzling. Several "mother's movements" had taken place by about the 1870s. Linda Kerber (1980) described the new concept of "republican motherhood" which argued that although women would still not own property and would be denied the ability to vote, they did need greater levels of education to be responsible mothers to the future citizens of the nation.

14 When Morgan controlled for the proportion of women who were ever married, only a small amount of the state variability in childlessness was explained. Additionally, Morgan did not find any significant differences between states in terms of marital disruption (separation, divorce, and widowhood). Some of the variability was explained by the less and later marriages in the Northeastern region, but this did not explain all of the variability, and Morgan concluded that much of the childlessness was voluntary.
The role of “educator of the next generation” elevated the position of mothers in society. The elevated role of the moral and educational guide was created to help entice women to become mothers. The irony of this republican motherhood ideology was that it actually gave way for women to choose childlessness (Chambers-Schiller 1984). Some women reasoned that if they were to be the moral guidance of the society, they could do this with or without children. Some of the most influential advise to mothers in the late nineteenth century actually came from women who did not have children such as Lydia Marie Child with her book, *The Mother’s Book* (Tyler May 1995).

A second movement under way by the 1870s was the voluntary motherhood movement which advocated that women should be mothers because they chose to become mothers. At the same time, however, the voluntary motherhood movement did not lend its support to the use of contraception and abortion (Gordon 1990). Members of the voluntary motherhood movement hoped to advance the position of women in society because of the fact that they were mothers and chose to be mothers of children. It was their important role as educators of the children that would be one of the rallying points for the right to vote. The voluntary motherhood movement was not actually developed to open the possibility of not having children. It simply emphasized the importance of the fact that women chose to bear and rear children because they wanted to do so. The voluntary motherhood movement maintained that a woman’s place was in the home with the primary role of mother, and the ideology of the movement discouraged women from seeking work outside of the home.
Although movements such as the republican motherhood and voluntary motherhood movements had many female supporters and would gain momentum into the early part of the twentieth century, they were unable to stop the growing rates of marital childlessness. In an attempt to understand the high rates of voluntary childlessness among women born after 1860, Morgan (1991) expressed his dismay at women choosing permanent childlessness:

Why not just accept at face value that women were controlling fertility at all stages of family formation? The answer is that many would contest this explanation because they see little motivation for women at the turn of the century to try to remain childless. These observers equate fertility control with the desire for no more children. I, too, see little rationale for women to choose (permanent) childlessness when they are young and, in consistency with contemporary models of childlessness, I reason that women delayed marriage and childbearing, which led eventually to nonmarriage and childlessness. (P. 799-800)

Certainly, the choice to remain childless in the face of economic, pronatalist, and structural barriers for women may seem puzzling; however, other researchers have provided evidence to suggest that many women were deliberately trying to either remain childless for life or were well aware of the cost of children and marriage to their aspirations for work outside of the home (Gordon 1990; Tolnay and Guest 1982). In a rare public discussion of childlessness, one woman wrote a letter to the weekly journal, The Independent entitled, “Why I Have No Children.” In addition to discussing the financial hardship that a child would bring to her and her husband, this anonymous author wrote in 1905:

We are not selfish and pleasure loving; on the contrary, the principal aim of our lives, as well as our standard of human value, is social usefulness. Nor are we lonely and full of heart-longings, as childless people are supposed to be....We believe that to have children would be detrimental to our usefulness.
as members of society, detract from the happiness of our marriage, and make us lower, not nobler, people....I have often reflected upon the position of the dependent wife with a family. I have discovered that...there were numberless women in state of hateful and hated marital servitude. Whenever I learned of the reason of the women’s submission, it was always based upon the fact that she had children and no money, the existence of the one precluding the obtaining of the other. (Quoted in Faux 1984:112.)

Jensen’s (1973) study of women listed in the *Who’s Who in America 1913-1914* showed that about half of those career women were not married. Additionally, of those that were married, only half had children. Although the sheer number of single and childless married women is enough to show that women had to choose between a family or a career, the words of a Vassar alumna of the class of 1913, written twenty years after her graduation, speak directly to the aspirations of educated women:

Twenty years ago we all believed in the economic independence of women. Domesticity was regarded with impatience. When we planned what we should do with our lives, we thought of some money-making occupation, preferably in a field in which women were unwelcome. We all expected to have careers, and we all hoped to be distinguished as the leading women in this or the first woman in that. It was part of the doctrine that we should marry and have children, but that these incidents should not stand in the way of our work. Marriage does not interfere with a man’s work. A woman, too, should have both a rich personal life and useful public career. (Quoted in Jensen 1973:269)

Certainly the desire for a social role outside of wife and mother might be motivation enough for some women to choose to remain permanently childless. Childlessness may also have been the result of the husband’s attitude toward family life (Tolnay and Guest 1982).

**The Quest of Researchers to Understand Early 20th Century Childlessness**

Since the 1930s, social researchers have investigated the social correlates of childlessness at the turn of the century and have found that childlessness was associated
with age at marriage, social class, employment status, geographic region, and education
(Kiser 1939; Lorimer and Osborn 1934; Mattessich 1979; Morgan 1991; Notestein 1933;
Tolnay and Guest 1982; and Whelpton 1936). Consistently researchers have found that:

• women who married at later ages were more likely to remain permanently childless;
• women in the higher social classes had higher proportions of childlessness than women of lower classes;
• women with high levels of education were more likely to be childless;
• women who worked outside of the home were more likely to remain childless than women who did not work outside of the home;
• women who lived in the Northern Atlantic region were most likely to remain childless; and
• childlessness rates were higher among black women than among white women.

Paul Popenoe (1936 and 1943) was one of the first researchers to ask specific questions about the voluntary or involuntary nature of childlessness. Popenoe asked “mature adult” white students in his college courses to talk about their married childless friends and why they felt their friends were childless. Popenoe’s findings, although admittedly second-hand information, are reported below in Table 3.2. Over half of the respondents felt that their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Reason for Childlessness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>self-centered, social climbers, pursue their own interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>wife’s career - she wanted to work, but didn’t financially need to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>economic pressure - couldn’t afford children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>infertility problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>health of the wife, not including infertility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>dislike children or fear of childbearing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Popenoe 1936.
friends were childless because they were either self-centered social climbers or were concentrating on the wife’s career. Popenoe had also found that the greatest proportions of childless couples were concentrated in the three highest social classes: (1) professional class; (2) semi-professional and managerial class; and (3) clerical, skilled trades, and retail business class.

A more recent research question raised about turn of the century childlessness was why women who delayed marriage had higher rates of childlessness? Tolnay and Guest (1982) speculated that there might be three reasons for the higher rates of childlessness among delayed marriage: (1) these women might have consciously tried to delay childbearing and eventually been unable to have children since sterility naturally increases with age; (2) late-marrying women may have developed certain roles that were incompatible or in competition with motherhood, thus they became increasingly disinterested in having children at the expense of these other roles; and (3) women who were developing a career may have intentionally married late and consequently delayed the possibility of childbearing. Morgan (1991) suggested similar reasons for permanent childlessness, but also stated that he felt the majority of the childlessness was due to a process of delayed childbearing. Morgan believed that women did not intend to remain childless forever, but postponed childbearing until it was too late to conceive a child.

Using a series of secondary sources rather than asking women directly about their childlessness, Lorimer and Osborn (1934) concluded that “few women deliberately choose to remain childless for the sake of professional advancement” (p. 331). They speculated that most women who worked did so because they were either widowed, single, or
divorced and naturally had fewer responsibilities in the home than married women with children. In analyzing the relationship between work and fertility, Lorimer and Osborn felt that the stronger causal direction was from infertility to work rather than work to infertility. In other words, they felt that women who worked were filling the void of not having an active family life rather than choosing to work at the expense of a family life. Lorimer and Osborn (1934) stated:

Some women are apparently able to combine successful professional careers with home responsibilities and large families, but such women are at present about as rare as those who deliberately renounce parenthood altogether. (P.331-332)

Davis (1982) explored several reasons for the high rates of childlessness among the birth cohorts between 1891 and 1925. Although some researchers felt that much of the childlessness, especially among minority women was involuntary childlessness as a result of poor health conditions, Davis maintained that the poor health hypothesis could not be supported. Health conditions, including the infant mortality rate and childbearing survival rate, were improving at the same time that childlessness was on the rise. Additionally, the greatest proportion of childless women were concentrated among the highest social classes with presumably the best possible health conditions at the time. Instead of supporting the health hypothesis, Davis believed that an interplay between pronatalist "mandatory motherhood" arguments and both long-term and cyclical economic shifts allowed for higher rates of childlessness at different times throughout the twentieth century. Davis acknowledged that pronatalist attitudes are always present in society; however, they tend to compete with the ideology of capitalism and shifts in the economy.
At the same time that people are to bear children, they are also supposed to achieve social mobility in an upward direction. During certain economic times, the price of social mobility may be the delay of childbearing and the eventual decision to forgo children altogether. Therefore, long-term shifts in the economic system including the decreased economic value of children's labor, children's movement from industry to classrooms, and the increased financial costs of children to parents left open the possibility to choose childlessness as an economic option. Additionally cyclical shifts in the economy, such as the Great Depression, led to more people remaining childless or delaying childbearing as a coping mechanism during times of economic hardship. Several researchers have noted that the highest rates of permanent childlessness during this century were among women who were in their childbearing years during the 1930s and early 1940s. Tolnay and Guest (1982) reported that 19.5 percent of the ever-married white women who were of prime childbearing age during the Depression and early 1940s did not have children. Although the economic argument seems to explain some childlessness, it does not explain all childlessness during even the most severe economic downturns. The greatest proportion of childlessness among white married women during the Great Depression was found within the upper classes.

Backlash Against Voluntary Childlessness: Race Suicide

The realization that many of the childless women were upper class, well educated, white, native-born citizens, led to several questions and concerns for social leaders and researchers. Not only were they concerned with why people were choosing to remain childless, but more importantly they were even more concerned by who was remaining
childless. From the beginning of the childlessness trend in the later nineteenth century to its peak during the Great Depression, it was perfectly clear that many of the white, upper class native born childless women were remaining voluntarily childless. Although black women had higher rates of childlessness than any class of whites, the fact that black women as a group had higher fertility rates than white women overshadowed their childlessness. In addition to the black fertility rate, an even bigger concern for native-born white upper class Americans was the fact that the fertility rate of the immigrants was also higher than the native-born white fertility rate. By the turn of the century, a social problem had been identified that was directly attributed to the choice of native born upper class white women to remain childless. The social problem was the perceived race suicide. The fear of the race suicide was that white native born Americans were not procreating in rates high enough to reproduce themselves, and as a result, they would eventually become extinct. It was believed that since the white native-born population was shrinking, the country would be taken over by immigrants and blacks.

Perhaps the most famous and visible voice of the race suicide movement was President Theodore Roosevelt. Although he was not the first person to warn others about the race suicide, he was an important voice in changing immigration policy and supporting the eugenics movement and its reproductive engineering. In his Sixth Annual Message to Congress in 1903, Roosevelt made the following plea:

When home ties are loosened; when men and women cease to regard a worthy family life...as the life best worth living; then evil days for the commonwealth are at hand. There are regions in our own land, and classes of our population, where the birth rate has sunk below the death rate. Surely it should need no demonstration to show that willful sterility is, from the standpoint of the nation, from the standpoint of the human race, the one sin for which the penalty is national death, race death; a sin for which
there is no atonement; a sin which is the more dreadful exactly in proportion as the men and women guilty thereof are in other respects, in character, and bodily and mental powers, those who for the sake of the state it would be well to see the fathers and mothers of many healthy children, well brought up in homes made happy by their presence. No man, no woman, can shirk the primary duties of life, whether for love of ease and pleasure, or for any other cause, and retain his or her self-respect.

(Quoted in Tyler May 1995:61)

In conjunction with the National Congress of Mothers, Roosevelt took this message on the road in a campaign designed to encourage women to procreate. He gave several speeches across the country reminding women that their duty to America and to their race was to bear and rear children (Gordon 1990; Tyler May 1995). Having compared the importance of female childbirth duty to the importance of male military duty, Roosevelt concluded that women who did not have children were viscous, cold, and shallow-hearted. The descriptors viscous, cold, and shallow-hearted were only a few ways of describing women who were seen at the time as using sinful birth control to avoid their primary duty in life, the duty of motherhood (Gordon 1990). Childless women were also seen as selfish individuals who put too much emphasis on work outside of the home rather than performing the duty of motherhood, which was required of all women.

Childless Speak Out

By 1914, the United States government had established Mother’s Day “as a public expression of our love and reverence for the mothers of our country” (quoted in Scott and Wishy 1982:466). In spite of Roosevelt’s speeches, the new national awareness of the race suicide and government gimmicks such as Mother’s Day, the birth rate continued to decline, and the childless rate continued to increase until the early 1940s. Tyler May
(1995) noted that by the early 1920s, there seemed to be some popular culture support for
the modern married couple without children. Movies of this time period often had as
subjects married couples without children and focused on fun-filled leisure and romance in
a relationship. To some extent, there seemed to be a war of reproduction ideology in the
1920s and 1930s between popular culture and the crusaders of the eugenics who published
their ideas in professional journals and prescriptive literature (Tyler May 1995). At the
same time that Hollywood couples were enjoying marriages without children and
portraying this same lifestyle on the screen, eugenics researchers were continuing the cries
of race suicide that were first heard at the turn of the century.

Some women and men began to speak out against the pronatalist social pressure.
In her 1916 article in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Leta Hollingworth explained
that there was no maternal instinct that compelled women to bear and rear children.
Hollingworth cited newspaper articles that professed "that only abnormal women wanted
no babies" and countered with the idea that society was exerting social pressure for
women to want babies. Hollingworth publicly proclaimed that there was no biological
reason for women to want to have children. In addition to the scholarly article by
Hollingworth, a small number of childless women wrote letters to popular journals such as
*Good Housekeeping*. Their goal was to help people understand why they had chosen a
life without children and to make people see that this was a viable option. Some childless
couples saw not having children as their only economic option. Other writers talked about
their ability to help both their community and their church. Since they had more time and
little responsibilities in the home, they could also provide service for others (Tyler May 1995).

A more radical argument for remaining childless came from socialists (Gordon 1990). The socialists urged working class and poor women to stop producing the “slaves” that fueled the machinery of capitalist America. The socialist position was a minority view, and birth control advocates were careful in their propaganda to urge poor women to use birth control as a means to reduce family size rather than push for the poor to completely eliminate childbirth. Birth control advocates like Margaret Sanger felt that the poor and working classes could improve their economic situation not by eliminating the possibility of children altogether, but by reducing the total number of children per family. Even though advocating smaller families was safer than advocating no children, birth control proponents still came under attack. The birth control advocates were, in essence, challenging the family and motherhood ideology of the time. The dominant ideology maintained that the unique role of women was to mother, a role that naturally separated women from men and made the distinction between the sexes very clear. Limiting a woman’s fecundity through birth control blurred the distinction between the sexes and changed the meaning of marriage and sexual relationships. Birth control separated sexuality from reproduction and was a license to enjoy sex more freely (Gordon 1990).

**Positive and Negative Eugenics**

**Positive Eugenics**

For the eugenists of the time, the few articles or letters printed in support of childless women and men fell on deaf ears. The view of eugenists throughout the first
three decades of the twentieth century, was that women existed for the sole purpose of perpetuating the race (Gordon 1990). Solutions to end voluntary childlessness (and even involuntary childlessness) that concentrated on the means to increase the “breeding” opportunities of especially “fit” individuals were classified as positive eugenics (Shapiro 1985:33) Over twenty-five years after Roosevelt’s speeches, eugenicists researchers were still making the same statements. In their book *Fertility and Family Planning in the United States*, Lorimer and Osborn (1934) stated, “In general, it is evident that those who enjoy the greatest cultural resources are not having enough children to replace themselves in the next generation, and that the most undeveloped groups in our national life are the chief sources of population increase” (p. 345). Having demonstrated in their book that the gradual increase in women’s employment outside of the home between 1870 and 1930 was connected to the higher rates of childlessness, Lorimer and Osborn suggested several solutions to the dilemma of women having to choose between work and family. Since many women who were pursuing careers outside of the home had also been educated and were part of the upper classes, Lorimer and Osborn (1934) concluded that educational programs for women could be one source of change:

It may be that for most women consecutive, full-time, paid occupations are incompatible with the most complete realization of the values of family life....In the meantime, it would seem advisable that in educational courses for women greater stress should be placed on interests which are obviously compatible with maternity rather than on pre-vocational studies leading toward professional activities which may be more or less incompatible with family values. (P. 332-333)

Thus, one simple solution is to change women’s curriculum to introduce more home economics courses and channel women’s intellectual energies back into the family
household. Between 1901 and 1919 some physicians who were also exasperated with the situation of educated women and their refusal to bear children, maintained that education could ruin a young woman's reproductive organs, and they urged leaders to prevent women from over-studying (Tyler May 1995). If women could not be kept from obtaining an education, perhaps employment policy could encourage them to stay home and have children. It was routine policy in many states to fire teachers once they became pregnant (Tyler May 1995). This policy was developed to ensure that women devoted the necessary time to raising their children. However, the policy backfired and many women chose to remain childless in order to keep their jobs.

Even the sterile men and infertile women came under attack and were blamed for their sterility or infertility. Men were blamed for their own sterility because of unprevented venereal diseases, and involuntary childlessness among women was attributed to their education, careers, contraception. All of these causes of infertility were believed to be preventable (Sandelowski 1990). Men did not need to be sexually promiscuous, and women did not need education or careers. Additionally it was believed that women certainly should not have been using contraception or having abortions. Infertility was not curable and for many involuntary childless couples, their situation could not be helped through adoption. As early as 1910 adoption agencies experienced a shortage of available infants, and there were at least twice as many applicants as there were available infants.

**Negative Eugenics**

An alternative solution to the positive eugenics practices of the race suicide problem was negative eugenics. Negative eugenics concentrated on stopping the
reproductive possibility of less ‘fit’ individuals (Gordon 1990). Compulsory sterilization was seen as an efficient and cost-effective way to solve the problem of the race suicide and eliminated the possibility of children from those who were deemed unfit for parenting (Shapiro 1985). While the unfit parents were blamed in part for the problem of race suicide, the children of unfit parents were blamed for several other social problems including poverty and crime. To combat crime and poverty, many states across the nation initiated compulsory sterilization laws which were aimed at forcibly sterilizing criminals and mental patients. In 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court, through the Buck v. Bell decision declared that the compulsory sterilization laws were constitutional, thus creating government sanctioned reduced fertility rates among certain men and women. If the best stock of men and women could not be enticed to breed more children, then the alternative was to limit the unfit from having many children.

In the initial phase of compulsory sterilizations, men were targeted, but soon more women were sterilized than men. By 1960, an estimated 60,000 eugenic sterilizations had taken place in state institutions across the country (Tyler May 1995). State institutions were not the only targets of negative eugenics. The poor economic conditions of the 1930s led many eugenists to focus not only on those they considered mentally or criminally defective, but also people they felt were unable to properly provide for children. By the middle of the twentieth century, the major spotlight of the eugenicists movement was on poor women, particularly women of color living in the south who were on public assistance. Most of the women sterilized under the eugenics policies were not informed of the true nature of the operations that they were to undergo and were sterilized without
their consent. At the same time, women who wanted to be sterilized, particularly women in the middle or upper classes, could not find doctors willing to perform the operations. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists had developed the “120 formula” and followed this formula as late as 1970. The simple formula was to multiply the woman’s age by the number of children she had. If it did not equal at least 120, then she was not a candidate for sterilization (Tyler May 1995).

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The Baby Boom and the End of the Race Suicide Fears

The unveiling of the atrocities of Hitler’s Germany during the second world war combined with the baby boom of the 1950s reduced public support of eugenics and brought an end to the majority of the forced sterilizations (Tyler May 1995). The baby boom of the 1950s finally brought an end to the fears of the possibility of a race suicide. Between 1950 and 1960 the childless rate fell sharply and continued to decline until 1965 (see Table 3.3). The overall rate of childlessness among ever-married women then started

Table 3.3: Percent of Ever-Married Women Who Are Childless, 15-44 Years of Age, At Selected Dates, 1940 through 1994; United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Percent Childless</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Percent Childless</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Poston and Kramer, 1983 (1940 - 1981); 1994 U.S. Census Table 1

15 Not all sterilizations had ended during the 1950s. In one case, the Eugenics Board of North Carolina admitted to sterilizing 1,620 black women and girls between 1960 and 1968. Most of these women were younger than 20.
Table 3.4: Percent of Ever-Married Women Who Are Childless, By Age for Selected Years Between 1940 and 1994: United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>20-24</th>
<th>25-29</th>
<th>30-34</th>
<th>35-39</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


a slight upturn and continued to increase through 1994 (last date information was collected by the United States Census Bureau).

It is interesting to note that the overall rate of childlessness among ever-married women aged 15-44 was highest between 1940 and 1950. It is believed that this was the result of the number of women who forwent childbearing during the Depression years for economic reasons (Davis 1982). To get a clearer picture of the rates of childlessness among ever-married women from 1940 through 1994, we should break the rates down by age as Mattessich's 1979 study shows (see Table 3.4 above). The childlessness rates for women in their younger child-bearing years of 20-29 show sharp declines between 1950 and 1960 and then increase again between 1960 and 1970, continuing to remain high through 1994.16 In addition to changes in fertility behavior, America's attitude toward the

16 The issue of delayed childbearing among women from 1970 through 1994 will be discussed in a later section of this chapter. For now the rates are given to show the uniqueness of the baby boom generation.
ideal family size had undergone some slight shifts. Surveys in 1936 showed that a minority of people felt that the ideal family size was zero children (Blake 1966). By 1953 there were no respondents who felt that the ideal family size was zero children. Most believed the ideal family size was somewhere between two and four children. In 1966 Whelpton, Campbell and Patterson had declared voluntary childlessness "nearly extinct" and assumed that all remaining childlessness was among those who wanted children but were physically unable to have them. For the childless, the baby boom years were especially difficult. As Tyler May (1995) stated,

> As the baby boom finally put fears of race suicide to rest, the childless faced an even more ferocious stigma, one that called into question not just their behavior, but their character, as well...the stigma surrounding [childlessness] took on a psychological dimension. Now childlessness became a mark of social maladjustment. The focus shifted from the 'unfit' poor woman to the 'neurotic' middle-class woman who did not conform to prevailing gender roles....The dual functions of patriotism and personal happiness marked a change in the concept of parenthood and marginalized the childless in unprecedented ways. Childless women and men in the postwar era struggled to find their place in a society that wrapped happiness and meaning around having children. (P. 125-129)

Several ideas about women and motherhood helped to create the childless stigma, including the political climate, neo-Freudian psychiatry, and a new concern in popular culture with infertility (Burgwyn 1981). In light of the postwar political climate, a life outside of the traditional nuclear family had been deemed unpatriotic. Since women of communist countries worked outside the home and had the need for day care centers, working wives of Americans were seen as communist sympathizers (Thurer 1994). In

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17 Contrary to this type of claim, Boyd (1989a) found evidence to suggest that some couples were purposely avoiding having children as a means of social mobility during the baby boom years.
contrast to the communist woman's life, J. Edgar Hoover told American women that motherhood was a 'career' and talked about the fact that motherhood and its homemaking duties were the only career needs for women. Through their career as mothers, women could fight the dual enemies of communism and crime (Tyler May 1995). Once again, educated women came under attack and were told that they could not achieve happiness through books and lectures.\(^\text{18}\)

In addition to ideas about communism and motherhood, the 1950s and 1960s saw a growth in both prestige and popularity of neo-Freudian psychology. Women who had no physiological reason for not having children were told by psychologists that they were either too frigid or subconsciously had a desire to avoid parenthood (Gordon 1990). Although not the most commonly prescribed remedy, some doctors suggested that women who worked should quit their jobs because it was too stressful and could impair their ability to become parents. Other women were told to spend more time around children in an effort to overcome their subconscious reservations. Abraham Stone, the director of the Margaret Sanger Research Foundation believed:

> For conception to take place a woman must be a woman. Not only must she have the physical structure and hormones of a woman but she must feel she is a woman and accept it....Being a woman means acceptance of her primary role, that of conceiving and bearing a child. Every woman has a basic urge and need to produce a child. Being a woman means a complete readiness to look forward to the delivery of that child when it is sufficiently nourished by her to take its place as an infant in the outside world. Being a woman means her feeling of her own readiness and capability to rear that child and aid in its physical, emotional and mental development. (Quoted in Tyler May 1995:154)

\(^{18}\) It did not seem to matter that the fertility rate of educated women had increased the greatest during the baby boom years. Education and motherhood were viewed as incompatible.
Women who were ambivalent about having children were labeled abnormal, selfish or deviant, and it was increasingly hard for them to find a place in a society that only valued housewives and mothers (Tyler May 1995). Women who did not have children were told that they had not achieved full adult status or full status as a woman (Gordon 1990). Within the popular culture, childlessness was portrayed as something of a personal tragedy. Unlike the 1920s when the lives of happy married childless movie stars were discussed in the popular magazines, the 1950s magazines told of Marylin Monroe's fertility disappointments and the ups and downs of Janet Leigh and Tony Curtis's struggle to have a child (Tyler May 1995).

With the intense social pressures to have a family life during the baby boom years, many infertile couples turned to adoption. Single pregnant women were considered unsuitable parents and were encouraged to give their babies up for adoption.¹⁹ Their babies were quickly adopted by what was considered more suitable parents, which included both a mother and a father (Solinger 1994). The adoptable baby supply would not last forever, and when the demand for babies outweighed the supply of "suitable" white babies, Greil noted that couples turned to their physicians for help. Although medical doctors still had little to offer infertile couples (Greil 1991b), the media was constantly talking about miracle babies or the latest treatments for infertility. Rather than accept their infertility status and contribute to society in an alternate fashion as earlier generations of childless couples had, the infertile couples of the baby boom generation were seeking out medical explanations and treatment (Greil 1991b, Tyler May 1995).

¹⁹ See Solinger 1994 for a discussion of the differential treatment of single pregnant white woman and single pregnant black women.
With limited reproduction technology, most Ob/Gyn's told their patients that they needed to "let nature take it's course." Additionally, since they could not find any medical explanation for many of the infertility cases, a number of physicians believed that most infertility complaints, like many other complaints by their women patients, were emotional and not physical complaints (Greil 1991b). Advances in infertility treatment would not come about until the mid-1960s, and an even greater push for 'cures' of infertility by childless couples would not come about until the mid-1980s.

**Heading into the 1970s and the New Increase in Voluntary Childlessness**

The baby boom years mark the lowest rates of childlessness ever. Since then, the percentage of ever-married childless women increased and the number of single, childless Americans has also been increasing (see Table 3.5 below). In 1973, Larry Bumpass posed the question, "Is low fertility here to stay?" With the advent of the birth control pill in the late 1960s, it was becoming apparent that complete fertility control might be possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Age of Woman</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18-24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>69.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>71.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>77.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>77.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* For the years 1990 and 1994, the figures represent ages 15-24. Source: U.S. Census 1994, Table 1
The question women now had to answer, and with some certainty, was not just when to have children, but whether they should have children. As stated earlier in this chapter, there had been voluntarily childless women prior to the invention of the pill, particularly during the early part of this century. The difference that Bumpass now saw was that accidental pregnancy could almost be eliminated. Couples could now weigh the costs and benefits of having children and decide if they would live a life with or without children. This freedom in choice would come at some cost to the society. Bumpass (1973) speculated that in future generations when motherhood was not the only role that women were socialized into, “staffing of parental roles may become problematic” (p. 68).

Several political philosophies of the late 1960s and 1970s seemed to have been connected with the rise in voluntary childlessness. Tyler May (1995) noted that the voluntary childless increase was consistent with several political and social movements, including feminism, environmentalism, zero population growth, gay and lesbian rights, the movement for reproductive choice, and the New Left’s rejection of the domestic ideology of the cold war years. Family life, including the assumption that children were the center of personal fulfillment, was beginning to be examined from many fronts. In 1963, Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique* and Gail Green’s article, “A Vote Against Motherhood” were both published. Friedan explored what she called “the problem that had no name.” Her book opened a national discussion about the lack of fulfillment that women were feeling by identifying themselves solely with the roles of wife and mother. Women were crying out that they wanted something more than husbands, children, and homes. One way in which some women were achieving personal fulfillment was through
their childfree status. The childless who rallied around issues of the environment, population growth, and personal lifestyle choice formed the National Organization for Non-Parents (NON) in 1972. Most of the members of this organization were white, married women 35 years old and younger who were living in urban areas. They were typically well educated and had high incomes (Tyler May 1995).

In addition to the national chapters of NON, childlessness, both voluntary and involuntary, was a topic that was receiving greater amounts of discussion in popular culture. My examination of the Reader's Guide to Periodic Literature shows that with the exception of one article in the 1919-1924 volume, between the years of 1900 and 1971 the category childlessness directs the reader to the categories of 'birth control' and 'sterility.' Starting with the 1972-73 volume and continuing through 1995 there was an average of two articles in popular magazines each year categorized under childlessness (see Table 3.6). A total of 56 articles were categorized under childlessness heading in the 23 years between 1972 and 1995 versus the one article in the 71 years between 1900 and 1971. Numerous self-help books were also being published for people who could not or chose not to have children including: Dowrick and Grundberg's 1980 Why Children?, Eck Menning's 1977 Infertility: A Guide for the Childless Couple; English's 1985 Childlessness Transformed: Stories of Alternative Parenting, Faux's 1984 Childless By Choice: Choosing Childlessness in the Eighties; Glazer and Cooper's 1988 Without

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20 Although there was some links between these movements and childlessness, most people had chosen their childless status for personal reasons and then found that certain social movements reinforced their decisions (Tyler May 1995).

21 The National Organization for Non-Parents was later renamed the National Alliance for Optional Parenthood, but was disbanded ten years after its conception due to lack of interest (Lang 1991).

By the mid-1980s the mandate for all married women to have children had eased a bit as surveys showed that the percent of American women who felt that all couples should have children had dropped from 84.8% in 1962 to 42.6% in 1985 (Thornton 1989). However, at the same time that Americans felt that not every marriage needed to reproduce, most Americans still felt that they wanted to have children. Thornton (1989) showed that the number of Americans who felt very strongly that they would have children had increased from 59.3% in 1962 to 64.5% in 1985 and the number of people who thought it very unlikely they would have children dropped from 5.3% to 3.7%.

Despite these survey results that Americans were becoming more accepting of childlessness, research studies examining the lives of childless women and married couples reported that childless people, both infertile and voluntarily childless, believed they were
being stigmatized and perceived as deviant (Burgwyn 1981; Greil 1991a; Miall 1985 and 1986; Morell 1994; Veevers 1972 and 1980; Whiteford and Gonzalez 1995).

Table 3.6: Articles Listed in the Reader’s Guide to Periodic Literature, 1900-1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Childlessness Entry</th>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Childlessness Entry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900-04</td>
<td>Category Not Present</td>
<td>1968-69</td>
<td>See Sterility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905-09</td>
<td>Category Not Present</td>
<td>1969-70</td>
<td>Category Not Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910-14</td>
<td>Category Not Present</td>
<td>1970-71</td>
<td>See B.C./Sterility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915-18</td>
<td>Category Not Present</td>
<td>1971-72</td>
<td>Category Not Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1 Article</td>
<td>1972-73</td>
<td>2 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922-24</td>
<td>Category Not Present</td>
<td>1973-74</td>
<td>1 Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925-28</td>
<td>Category Not Present</td>
<td>1974-75</td>
<td>3 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929-32</td>
<td>See B.C.</td>
<td>1975-76</td>
<td>3 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932-35</td>
<td>See B.C.</td>
<td>1976-77</td>
<td>3 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935-37</td>
<td>Category Not Present</td>
<td>1977-78</td>
<td>2 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937-39</td>
<td>Category Not Present</td>
<td>1978-79</td>
<td>2 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939-41</td>
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<td>4 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941-43</td>
<td>See B.C./Sterility</td>
<td>1980-81</td>
<td>2 Articles</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945-47</td>
<td>See Sterility</td>
<td>1982-83</td>
<td>2 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947-49</td>
<td>See Sterility</td>
<td>1983-84</td>
<td>2 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949-51</td>
<td>See Sterility</td>
<td>1984-85</td>
<td>2 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>See Sterility</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>2 Articles</td>
</tr>
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<td>See Sterility</td>
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<td>1 Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955-57</td>
<td>See Sterility</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>2 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957-59</td>
<td>See Sterility</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>4 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>See Sterility</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>0 Articles</td>
</tr>
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<td>See Sterility</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>0 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965-66</td>
<td>See Sterility</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>4 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966-67</td>
<td>Category Not Present</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>4 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967-68</td>
<td>See Sterility</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>3 Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>1 Article</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Expansion of Academic Interest in Childlessness

Of course, popular culture was not the only place where questions were being raised about childlessness. Although there had been some research on childlessness throughout the early and middle part of this century, there was a new academic interest in childlessness which started in the early 1970s. The first study to actually use in-depth interviews with childless wives was conducted by Jean Veevers. Her preliminary findings were published in 1974, and more complete findings were published in her 1980 book *Childless by Choice*. Veevers’ book was followed by a number of studies of childless women including: Bartlett’s 1994 *Will You Be Mother?*, Burgwyn’s 1981 *Marriage Without Children*, Campbells’ 1985 *The Childless Marriage*, Greil’s 1991 *Not Yet Pregnant: Infertile Couples in Contemporary America*, Ireland’s 1993 *Reconceiving Women: Separating Motherhood from Female Identity*, Lang’s 1991 *Women Without Children: The Reasons, The Rewards, The Regrets*, and Morell’s 1994 *Unwomanly Conduct*. In addition to these seven books, there have been a host of research articles on childlessness published in professional journals. The new academic interest in childlessness raised many of the same questions about contemporary childlessness that had been raised by the eugenic researchers in the 1920s and 1930s. Who were the childless? Why were they childless? How many were voluntarily versus involuntarily childless? What were the characteristics of the childless? Was childlessness a temporary condition that resulted from postponements of first births, or was childless permanent and articulated early in a couple’s lives? These questions were not only being asked by
American researchers, they were being asked by researchers in many of the Western countries that were also experiencing high levels of childlessness.

Religion: Researchers found many of the same things about childless couples as had been known about the childless at the turn of the century. The voluntarily childless were more likely not to attend church and to claim no religious affiliation (Gustavus and Henley 1971; Jacobson and Heaton 1991; Pol 1983).

Education: A second correlation is the positive and somewhat curvilinear relationship between voluntary childlessness and higher education (Baum and Cope 1980; Bloom and Pebley 1982; DeJong and Sell 1977; Gustavus and Henley 1971; Jacobson and Heaton 1991; Jacobson, Heaton and Taylor 1988; Mattessich 1979; Pol 1983). In general, voluntary childlessness increases with college education and then decreases slightly with post-college education levels.

Income: Couples with higher incomes are also more likely to be voluntarily childless (Baum and Cope 1980; Bloom and Pebley 1982; Gustavus and Henley 1971; Mattessich 1979; Pol 1983).

Age at Marriage: Additionally, the older a woman is at marriage, the more likely she is to remain voluntarily childless (Bloom and Pebley 1982; DeJong and Sell 1977; Jacobson et al. 1988; Mattessich 1979).

Professional Status: Several factors relating to professional status, labor force participation, and the amount of time spent at work have also been correlated with voluntary childlessness. Studies by both Baum and Cope (1980) and Jacobson and Heaton (1991) found that couples in which the husband was employed as either a professional or
manager had higher rates of voluntary childlessness. Labor force participation also has a strong positive relationship with voluntary childlessness (Baum and Cope 1980; Bloom and Pebley 1982; DeJong and Sell 1977; Jacobson et al. 1988; Mattessich 1979; Pol 1983). Jacobson and Heaton (1991) found that women who wanted to work over 40 hours per week had higher rates of voluntary childlessness.

**Marital Stability**: The question of whether or not marital instability is related to childlessness has had some contradictory findings. Both Bloom and Pebley (1982) and DeJong and Sell (1977) found a positive relationship between marital instability and childlessness. However, Wineberg (1990) found that there was no statistically significant relationship between marital instability and childlessness. Additionally, Monahan (1955) believed that the relationship between the two variables was a spurious relationship. Other researchers (Houseknecht 1979; White, Booth, and Edwards 1986) found that marital satisfaction is higher for childless couples than for marital partners with children.

Researchers also wanted to know why the childless people chose not to have children. Gustavus and Henley (1971) interviewed American childless couples who wanted to remain childless and sought sterilization. They found that most often respondents answered that they “just don’t want kids.” Additionally, the respondents cited health reasons (noninfertility reasons), population concerns, age, commitment to careers, dislike of children, and economic concerns. Similar findings have been reported in Britain (Baum 1983 and Baum and Cope 1980), Scotland (Campbell 1983), and the Federal Republic of Germany (Nave-Herz 1989). Baum and Cope’s (1980) study cited preservation of freedom as the primary reason for remaining childless, followed by career...
concerns, dislike of childrearing activities, cost of living, dislike of children, environmental and social standards, and health reasons. Campbell's (1983) study of becoming childless in Scotland reported the following reasons: loss of control over self and future; dislike of children; childrearing too heavy a responsibility; children detract from marital relationship; children interfere with overall goals; and a dislike of parenthood activities.

Interestingly, several studies have noted that the voluntary childless have very strong ideas of what it is to be a 'good mother' (see Bartlett 1994; Lang 1991; and Morell 1994). Seventy-three percent of Nave-Herz's (1989) sample felt that a good mother can only be a mother who has no professional activities. Additionally, Tyler May (1995) noted that even during the height of the 1970s childfree movement, women who chose to remain childless had strong beliefs about mothering. Childless women felt that the quantity of time a woman spent with her children could not be made-up for by the quality of the time a woman spent with her children. In order to be a good mother, many childless women felt that you had to be 100% committed to your children, which did not of course include a full-time career.

**Concern Over Delayed Childbirth**

Since 1955, the median age of first marriage for women has been increasing (U.S. Census 1996). In 1955, the median age at first marriage was just over 20 for women whereas by 1990 the median age at first marriage had increased to over 23.5. The median age at first marriage for men followed a similar trend (see Appendix Figure 2.2). The trend of delayed marriages and accompanying delayed childbirth has prompted concern

22 See page 157 of Baum 1983 for a categorization of hedonistic, idealistic, emotional, and practical reasons for childlessness.
among some social researchers. Although some researchers have noted the similarities between the marriage and fertility trends between 1910 and 1940 and the trends after 1960 (Sweet and Bumpass 1987), other researcher have failed to make the connection between the two historical time periods. As Morgan (1991) stated, “A common assumption is that this trend [rising rates of childlessness since 1960] is unprecedented and represents a largely secular phenomenon: a decline in the importance of parenthood” (p.779-780). The assumption that this is the first time in history that women have been postponing marriage and childbirth has sparked a number of studies of delayed childbearing (McFalls 1991; Popenoe 1993; Thornton 1989; Westoff 1986; Wilkie 1981)\(^2\) and led to several conclusions and cautions to young, particularly white women. Researchers have warned that the function of marriage is being upset by the delay in childbearing by young couples (Popenoe 1993; Westoff 1986). McFalls (1991) warned that:

> Women and couples who postpone childbearing should be aware of all these intermediate variable risks [onset of infertility with age]. Indeed, their awareness should be even broader, encompassing age-related risks concerning birth defects, infant mortality, and maternal mortality. (P.98-99)

Often the possible childlessness that may result from delaying childbearing is seen as a sign of weakening family values or the weakening of the function of the family. Taking a stronger stance in the debate over the risks of delayed childbearing, Gordon (1990) stated:

> There is particularly a widespread belief that increased infertility results from delayed childbearing, a result in turn of greater birth control use because of women’s greater labor-force participation and career aspirations. This belief is fed by antifeminist polemics, blaming women for rejecting their womanly roles....But no evidence supports this: fecundity declines only gradually until

\(^2\) See Chen and Morgan (1991) for a discussion of the trends in the timing of first births for white women from 1890 through 1987. Although Chen and Morgan concentrate on the more recent trend of delayed child birth, they do situate this recent trend in historical context.
menopause; and women who find themselves infertile at later ages have often been using contraception previously and therefore do not know when their infertility began. In fact fertility among women over thirty has been growing and among women over forty at the fastest rate - 60 per cent higher in 1986 than in 1976. (P. 461)

Gordon speculated that what has escalated over the past century is the sense of loss among infertile women and couples. The increase in the sense of loss accompanies the greater societal emphasis in more recent times on the centrality of children and the family to life happiness. Additionally, when the goal of infertility specialists is to cure the couple of their infertility and produce a biological child, alternative goals such as adoption and childfree living are seen as options to consider only after there has been failure of a normal pregnancy (Greil 1991b).

In 1991, Greil reported that despite the concern over the increase in overall infertility in America, there has not been an increase in the number of infertile couples. The changes in infertility that have taken place since the early 1960s include three things: (1) the number of couples who sought treatment for infertility increased from 600,000 office visits in 1968 to 1.6 million visits in 1984; (2) infertility actually declined from 3.0 million couples in 1965 to 2.4 million couples in 1982; and (3) the number of childless infertile couples doubled from 0.5 million in 1965 to 1.0 million in 1982 (Greil 1991b). In other words, the number of reported cases of primary infertility (infertile couples with no children) has increased while the number of infertile couples who already have at least one biological child has decreased.

Researchers such as Bloom and Pebley (1982), McFalls (1991), Popenoe (1993), Westoff (1986), and Wilkie (1981) who made warning statements about delayed births
and increased infertility, drew their conclusions about declining family values, family
functioning, and risks of childlessness with the assumption that this was the first time
women had been delaying childbearing during this century. For the most part, they were
comparing the trends that have taken place during the 1970s and 1980s with those of the
1950s and 1960s. When contemporary childbearing trends are compared with those of the
women born in the mid-1800s, conclusions and cautions may differ. Morgan (1991)
stressed the "commonalties" of the women born in 1860 and 1960, stating that, "the most
general lesson from this study is that contemporary family change can often be viewed
profitably, not as a 'new response,' but as an 'old response' to new exigencies" (p. 803).

Conclusion

Historical documents, cultural artifacts, survey research, and in-depth interview
research have helped social scientists to build a better understanding of the changes in
cultural meanings of childlessness since colonial times and the changing rates of
childlessness since the mid-1800s. In the colonial days, voluntary childlessness was a
relatively rare occurrence, and the meaning of childlessness centered most frequently on
the stigmatized term barren. Barren couples were able to combat the stigma of their
barrenness by informally adopting orphaned children of the communities. While
barrenness continued throughout the next centuries of American history, the term barren
was eventually medicalized and became more commonly known as infertility. Along with
the medicalization of infertility came the realization that men could contribute to a
couple's fertility problems. Additionally as medical researchers learned more about the

24 The researchers use the term 'family values' to refer to ideals about nuclear families that
model the family structure and national emphasis on families of the baby boom era.
procreation process, advances were made in contraception. By the late 1800s, many middle and upper class white American married couples were using early forms of contraception to reduce the number of children or even eliminate childbirth altogether.

The late 1800s and early 1900s brought about what was really the first mass movement of voluntary childlessness. This movement was met with both popular culture approval and political and academic disapproval. White American childless couples were being blamed for the apparent "race suicide" and came under attack in both the political and academic arenas. From the turn of the century to the start of World War II, rates of childlessness in America rose steadily. With the end of the war and the onset of the baby boom, voluntary childlessness had been declared extinct and childless couples came under physiological and psychological suspicion. It was not until the early 1970s that the idea of child-free living resurfaced. This time the choice to remain childless was supported by a number of political and environmental movements. By the end of the 1970s, some researchers were claiming that the stigma of voluntary childlessness for married couples was beginning to crumble. Since the colonization of this country the meaning of marital childlessness has shifted from an exclusive idea of barrenness to a number of options including infertility and voluntary childlessness.

The meaning of female singlehood, and consequently single childlessness, has also undergone several shifts. Prior to the early 1800s, female singleness was primarily associated with the negative term spinster. During the first two-thirds of the 1800s, The Cult of Single Blessedness movement allowed women to embrace their singlehood and celebrate a higher calling than marriage. However by the end of the nineteenth century
this Cult of Single Blessedness came under suspicion as many single and childless women entered the first women’s movement. Seen as a threat to the family, social, and economic structure of the nation, singleness was once again stigmatized and the social category of spinsterhood returned.

The purpose of my research is to try to add to the growing literature regarding the construction of the meaning of childlessness. My research findings are pulled from the analysis of 67 films released by Hollywood between 1980 and 1996. I have conducted a thematic analysis to examine the social roles and the social meaning of childlessness in contemporary American culture. Throughout the presentation of the childlessness themes, I compare the cultural themes and messages to the experiential literature generated since about 1980. The comparison of the experiential research literature to the cultural representations of childless women often reveal gaps or contradictions between the reality of childlessness and the constructed representations. I also compare the current cultural meaning of childlessness to the historical meanings of childlessness to better understand the changes in the meaning and expectations of the role of childless woman.
CHAPTER 4

DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE STUDY SAMPLE

As a precursor to the thematic analysis presented in Chapters 5 through 8, this chapter provides a description of the study sample including the univariate frequency distributions that describe the childless women film characters. The women are described in terms personal characteristics such as age, race, education, social class status, marital status, geographic location, sexual orientation, and employment status. This chapter also outlines important distinctions between the reasons for women’s childlessness, including women who have been classified as traditional, transitional, transformative, and traditional life-course. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of the personal backgrounds of the childless women including their families, friendship networks, and their involvement, or lack of involvement, in the lives of children.

Film Sample Demographics

Before I discuss the childless women of the film sample, perhaps it would be informative to have a little background information about the films themselves. The overwhelming majority (97.0%) of the films were directed by men (see Table 4.1). Only two films (The Mirror has Two Faces and Sleepless in Seattle) were directed by women. In addition to having been directed primarily by men, the majority of the screenplays (67.2%) were also written by men. Table 4.1 shows that there was more female representation in the writing of the screenplays than in directing. About thirteen percent
of the films had been written by women and nineteen percent of the films were written by a male/female writing team. Table 4.1 also gives the film genre breakdown and shows that the largest proportion of the films (32.8%) were comedies. Suspense/horror films constituted 18 percent of the film sample followed by about equal proportions of drama, action/adventure, comedy-dramas, and romance/romantic comedies.

In Chapter 2, I explained my use of film as a cultural medium because I wanted to research cultural artifacts that did not prescribe behavior. Additionally I felt that films were important because, as we will see, the themes identified in the thematic analysis chapters cut across film genre lines. Although the themes do cut across genre lines, it is
also important to note that certain genres were more likely to have specific characteristics in terms of the childless women. The suspense/horror films were more likely than drama or action/adventure films to have a childless woman portrayed as a villain. Action/adventure films most often had the childless woman portraying the heroine as was the case for comedies. Romantic comedies were most often likely to have childless women who wanted to be mothers but were still looking for the right man to marry. In contrast, dramas were more likely to have childless women who were infertile. The film genre also could dictate the actress who was cast in the role of the childless woman. For example, Meg Ryan is much more likely to be cast in a romantic comedy than in a suspense film as a *femme fatale*. In discussing the casting of Meg Ryan in the romantic comedy *French Kiss*, Maclean's film critic Lawrence Kasdan (1995:73) noted that Meg Ryan is “irrepressibly cute” and “Hollywood’s reigning queen of the [romantic comedy] genre.” Just as Meg Ryan works well in the romantic comedy as a woman who would like to get married and have children, Kathleen Turner or Sharon Stone were cast in roles that require overt sexuality. When collecting data from each film, genre helped to frame how the actions of the women were interpreted. A kiss from Meg Ryan in a romantic comedy is often meant to be innocent, sweet, and loving, while a kiss from Sharon Stone in the suspense thriller *Basic Instinct* is dangerous, sexual, and tantalizing. In other words, film genre helped to create meaning and context for the actions of the childless women.

**The Childless Film Characters**

A total of 75 leading childless characters were identified in the 67 films and these characters are listed for each film in the Appendix Table A.1. Personal characteristics,
including age, social class, education, sexual orientation, marital status, race, and geographic location were quantified for the childless characters, and the data are presented in Table 4.2. Each of these variables are discussed in the section to follow. Within the discussion of each of the variables, the film sample characteristics are compared with available survey research findings on real life childless women. Since only one woman in the sample was shown participating in a weekly religious service and only seven women's religious affiliation could be identified, religious participation or affiliation is not noted on Table 4.2. Although survey research shows that voluntary childless women are slightly less likely to participate in organized religion than women who are mothers (Abma and Peterson 1995),¹ the lack of religious participation among the women of the film sample is grossly underrepresented.

**Age of the Childless Characters.** As a reminder, this sample only included childless characters who were at least thirty years of age.² If the age of the character was not specifically stated in the film, then the age of the actress at the time of the film’s release was used as a proxy. The majority of the childless characters (78.7%) were between the ages of 30 and 44, and a fifth of the women were over the age of 45. The maximum age of the childless characters was 61 years.

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¹ Other survey research that does not differentiate between voluntarily and non-voluntary childless women shows no statistical relationship between religious affiliation and childlessness (Jacobson and Heaton 1991; Jacobson, Heaton, and Taylor 1988; Pol 1983).
² The one exception to this rule was the character Tracy Safian from the 1993 film *Malice*. This character was only 26 years old, but was included in this sample because the film was specifically about the purposeful manipulation and removal of her ovaries.

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### Table 4.2: Demographic Variables of the 75 Childless Lead Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Some High School</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>High School Degree</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>54.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>Master's Degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>Law Degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Medical Degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>span years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Class</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>94.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Geographic Location</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>Urban/Suburban</td>
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<td>73.3</td>
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<td>Married</td>
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<td>14.7</td>
<td>Rural/Small Town</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td><strong>Sexual Orientation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>97.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bi-Sexual</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A-Sexual / Nun</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All sample variables size = 75.*

**Education Level.** A consistent research finding of national probability samples of women is that there is an inverse relationship between education attainment and fertility (Abma and Peterson 1995; Bloom and Trussell 1984; Pol 1983). In other words, women with higher levels of education are more likely to be childless than women with lower levels of education. There is some evidence (Jacobson, Heaton, and Taylor 1988) to
suggest that the relationship is somewhat curvilinear, and women with college degrees have slightly higher rates of childlessness than women with post-graduate degrees. The relationship between education level and childlessness seems to be represented in this sample of childless film characters. Only four percent of the sample had less than a high school diploma, while 54.7 percent had a college degree. An additional 18.6 percent of the women had graduate degrees such as a medical degree, Ph.D., or a law degree.

Social Class Status. The information on social class status presented in Table 4.2 should be taken only as a rough estimate. A distinct advantage to survey data of actual childless respondents is that the researcher can ascertain information to more accurately categorize women into social class standings. Films, on the other hand, do not often explicitly state a character’s social class standing. Nevertheless, it was fairly easy to identify characters who were supposed to be either working class or elite class. Working class women were most often portrayed as waitresses or secretaries and, for the most part, rented small run-down apartments rather than owning their own homes. Elite class women were easy to identify based on their plush lifestyles, elaborate homes, and specific discussion of their millions of dollars. Unfortunately, distinctions between the middle and upper class women were more difficult to identify than the women of the working or elite classes. Women I designated as middle class owned either modest homes or rented upscale apartments and drove newer model vehicles. Middle class women also tended to have professional positions such as college professors, writers, and researchers. Women categorized as upper class clearly made six figure salaries, had large well-furnished homes, and often came from upper class family backgrounds. Often times the films would make a
specific note about the amount of money or comfortable style of living that the women
designated as upper class enjoyed. Table 4.2 shows the frequency and percentage
breakdown of the social class variable. The majority of the women (81.3%) were
determined to be middle class or above. The representation of childless women in films as
middle class or above is consistent with survey data about childless women. Survey data
reports that there is an inverse relationship between childlessness and social class (Abma
and Peterson 1995; Pol 1983). Women of higher social classes have a greater likelihood
of remaining childless than women of the lower social classes.

Race. The overwhelming majority of the women in this sample (94.7%) were
white. A very small percent of the women were African American (5.3%), and no other
racial group is represented in this sample. As was stated in Chapter 2 on the sampling
procedures, this is not a result of sampling bias, but is a clear reflection of the tendency in
Hollywood to cast films by and about white Americans. All racial minority groups of
America are under-represented in the film industry, especially as leading characters in top
box office grossing films. The over-representation of childless women as white women is
not consistent with survey research data. Several studies have shown that white women
are only slightly more likely to remain childless than African American women (Abma
and Peterson 1995; Bloom and Trussell 1984; Jacobson and Heaton 1991). One study found
that Asian American women have slightly higher rates of childlessness than white women
(Jacobson et al. 1988).

Marital Status. Table 4.2 shows that a little over one half of the women in this
sample were single, never married women (56%). Of these 42 women who were still
single, five of them had experienced a broken engagement. More women had experienced divorce (18.7%) than had remained in intact marriages (14.7%). Finally, a small number of women (5) were widowed women who had not remarried. The large number of single women versus the small number of married childless women represented in these films may be evidence to support the belief that marriages are intended to procreate and socialize children.

**Geographic Location.** The majority of the childless characters (73.3%) lived in urban or suburban locations. One third of those living in a city resided in New York City. One quarter of the sample lived in rural locations or small towns, with over one half of these women residing in small southern towns. One woman was never shown in any location except an underwater research laboratory, so it was impossible to determine her residential location. The representation of the childless characters as urban residents is an overstatement of the actual situation of childless women in reality. Although childless women are slightly more likely to live in an urban setting, this relationship is not statistically significant (Jacobson et al 1988).

**Sexual Orientation.** The final variable listed on Table 4.2 is the sexual orientation of the women of this sample. The overwhelming majority (97.3%) of the women were heterosexual, with just one bi-sexual woman and one a-sexual nun.

**Occupational Status.** Table 4.3 shows the full breakdown of the occupations of the childless lead characters in the 67 films of this sample. Consistent with the fact that most of the women were at least middle to upper class, the majority of the women in this sample had careers rather than jobs and most women wanted to work rather than feeling
forced to work as a result of their economic situation. The 16 percent of the sample that
did not have a job were not unemployed due to lack of job availability or marketable skills,

Table 4.3: Occupation Status of the 75 Childless Lead Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Managerial</strong></td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executives</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Activist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Specialties</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientist/Researchers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologists</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Artists/Writers/Entertainers</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Editors</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporters/Producers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actresses</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painter</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horticulturist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Federal Agents</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret Service</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Lady</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analyst</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Administrative Support and</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Occupations</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Waitresses</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretaries</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurateur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanny</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nun</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thief/Prostitute/Hitwoman</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thief</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitute</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitwoman</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No Job</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
but chose not to work. The women with no jobs were typically elite class women who had no need for work. The fact that the childless women of this sample were more likely to work than not work is also consistent with the survey research literature which shows that women who are employed are more likely to remain childless (Abma and Peterson 1995; Houseknecht 1987; Jacobson and Heaton 1991; Jacobson et al 1988). Over 65 percent of the women in this sample were pursuing careers that they had trained for through formal education. A full analysis of the childless women and their careers is explored in Chapter 8.

Despite the differences of childless women in terms of their personal characteristics, the typical representation of a childless woman in these Hollywood films showed her to be a well-educated white middle to upper class heterosexual single women between the ages of 30 and 44 who lived in a city and was employed in some type of professional line of work. In addition to these demographic characteristics, childless women must also be differentiated based on their reasons for becoming childless or choosing childlessness as a lifestyle.

**Childless Women and Their Reasons for Remaining Childless**

A consistent finding within the experiential research literature is that childless women are not a homogeneous group. Like all women, they differ in terms of personal characteristics such as age, education, occupation, race, marital status, sexual orientation, and religious participation. In terms of their personal characteristics, the women of this sample were indeed a heterogeneous group. As important as the differences in these personal characteristics are, an even more important distinction between childless women
is their reasons for remaining childless. Jean Veevers (1974) was one of the first researchers to note the differences among childless women. In studying voluntarily married childless women, Veevers made the distinction between women she called early articulators (women who have expressed the desire to remain childless even before marriage) and those she dubbed postponers (women who arrive at the childless decision through a series of postponements throughout the marriage). More recently, while studying both married and single women, Mardy Ireland (1993) developed a categorization system which expanded upon Veevers’s classification and included infertile women. Ireland’s three category classification of childless women included: (1) traditional women, those women who have tried to fulfill the motherhood role but were unable due to infertility or health reasons; (2) transitional women, those women who had always thought that they would have children, but delay childbirth to the point when they finally decide to remain childless; and (3) transformative women, those who have decided early in life that they intend to remain childless. Throughout the analysis in this study, I utilized Ireland’s categorization of childless women but have also expanded this classification system to included an additional category that I term traditional life-course women. The term traditional life-course differentiates those women who intend to marry and have children, but who have not yet found the right man. Table 4.4 gives the numeric breakdown of the reasons for the childlessness classification for the women in the film sample. To a certain extent, the films in this sample made distinctions about why the leading characters did not have children. Again, like the social class standing, the figures in Table 4.4 should be viewed as somewhat tentative. Although some of the films
specifically state why the women do not have or want children, the majority of the childlessness categorization had to be inferred using cues from the films about the women's possible feelings towards children and family intentions.

**Traditional Women.** The easiest group to distinguish was the traditional women. Eight percent of the women in these films wanted to have children, but were unable to do so because of infertility problems and were therefore classified as traditional women. There are two basic subsets of traditional women including: (1) women who never experienced pregnancy, but were instead medically diagnosed with infertility problems (*Crimes of the Heart, Forget Paris, and Unlawful Entry*); and (2) women who had miscarriages that led to complications and the inability to ever conceive a child (*Fatal*...
The traditional women had the most emotional pain associated with their childless status. For these women, childlessness was a specific social role that was performed like any other social role such as daughter, wife, or teacher. These women were truly the childless women, and the lack of children in their lives played a major role in their perception of self.

Transitional Women. Transitional women are difficult to identify in a study such as this. Transitional women want to have children, but due to a series of decisions and postponements, they either make the final decision not to have children or find themselves unable to have children due to menopause or infertility problems. Four films had women who were categorized as transitional (*Best Friends*, *Dave*, *Gorillas in the Mist*, and *Thelma and Louise*). In *Best Friends*, Paula McCollen (Goldie Hawn) postponed the decision to have children because of her fears associated with marriage and the potential loss of independence. In the film *Dave*, First Lady Helen Mitchell (Sigourney Weaver) had wanted to have children, but due to the responsibilities of her husband’s political career, they postponed having children until she was no longer able to have them. *Gorillas in the Mist* ended with a friend standing over the grave of Dian Fossey and remembering how Dian (Sigourney Weaver) always thought she would leave her research, return to the United States, get married, and have children. Instead, Dian continually postponed her decision to leave her gorilla research; she never returned to the United States to settle down. Finally, Thelma Dickenson (Geena Davis) of *Thelma and Louise*...
wanted to have children, but her husband insisted on postponing children until after he was through being a child himself. The transitional women were not greatly affected by their childless status and seemed to accept their postponement decisions.

**Traditional Life-Course Women**  Traditional life-course women were more prevalent in this sample than traditional women or transitional women. Just over thirteen percent of the sample were categorized as traditional life-course women. These were the women who would like to have had children, but were unable to do so because of their current life situation. The traditional life-course women were women who did not yet have children but would most likely become future mothers. There were three basic subsets of traditional life-course women including: (1) women who wanted to have children but their opportunity was cut short due to the death of their husband or divorce; (2) women who became step-mothers to Mr. Right's children from a previous marriage; and (3) women who found Mr. Right during the film story, but the story did not play out far enough into their relationship to show life after the wedding.

**Transformative Women**  Transformative women are those women who do not have children because they voluntarily chose not to have them. One third of the women in this sample were classified as transformative. Transformative women were not childless, but were childfree. Transformative women were often easier to classify than transitional women because transformative women sometimes made specific statements about their dislike of children (i.e. *Basic Instinct, 101 Dalmatians, Disclosure, Malice*, and *Misery*). Some transformative women specifically manipulated their reproductive organs so that they would not be able to conceive children. In other cases women were classified as
transformative because of their intense commitment to their careers and the lack of any mention of the possibility of children (i.e. Absence of Malice, The Abyss, Baby Boom, Beaches, Black Widow, The First Wives Club, and Outbreak). Still other women led lifestyles that were incompatible with the ideals of motherhood, and the women realized that children were not a possibility (i.e. Best Little Whore House in Texas and Dead Man Walking).

**Categories Beyond the Four-Part Classification.** There were a number of films for which the issue of children was side-stepped altogether, and it was simply impossible to classify the women in terms of their fertility intentions. Twenty percent of the sample was unclassifiable due to a total lack of information about children. An additional sixteen percent of the women focused their energies on finding a husband and made no references about their feelings towards children. These were neither childfree or childless women but were women shown outside of the realm of children.

**The Fluidity of the Childless Categories.** The categorization of each film character into a specific type of childlessness is somewhat artificial. Childlessness researchers have discussed the difficulty of categorizing childless women because childlessness is a process rather than a concrete decision made once in an individual's life. Decisions about fertility are made numerous times throughout a woman’s life, and therefore, any attempt to place a woman into a static set of categories is by its very nature incomplete. Additionally, a woman may believe herself to be postponing the decision to have children (transitional) only to find out that she is actually infertile, in which case she is now classified as traditional. To some extent categorizing film characters is somewhat easier than
categorizing actual childless women. The majority of the films cover only a small part of the women’s lives and can be explicit about her fertility status; however, there are couple of instances in which a childless character moved between categories within the duration of the film. CC Bloom of the film *Beaches* first believed herself to be postponing children (transitional), but later came to the realization that she was more likely childless by choice (transformative). Additionally in the film *Forget Paris*, a married childless couple began their relationship by postponing childbirth only to find out that the wife was infertile. In order to categorize each childless woman, I worked with the status with which the woman or other film characters most often identified her. In the case of CC Bloom, she was categorized as transformative, and in Ellen’s case of *Forget Paris*, she was categorized as traditional.

**Social Circles and Social Roles**

Chapters 5 through 8 deal specifically with the childless women and their performance of specific social roles. As an introduction to these analysis chapters, this final section is written as an overview of the social roles and social circles of the childless women in this sample. With the exception of two women (*Disclosure* and *Misery*), every woman in this sample occupied at least two social roles in addition to the social role of woman. Sixty percent of the women were shown performing three or four social roles and an additional nineteen percent were shown performing five or six social roles. Since many films side-stepped the issue of children and the possibility of motherhood responsibilities, there was little need to worry about the role conflict between professional
life and family life. Many women did experience conflict between their marital relationship responsibilities and professional obligations. These conflicts are explored at length in Chapter 7. With the exception of the wife versus professional career woman conflicts, the multiple roles women performed were often seen by other film characters as inherently beneficial for the women. Rose Coser (1975) stated that people with multiple roles in life have better opportunities for "intellectual development, role articulation, increased autonomy, heightened self-image, greater creativity, enhanced prestige, access to new resources...and protection from the demands of greedy institutions [family life]" (p. 259). The acquisition of a new social role such as rescuer, girlfriend, or employee often led to a positive metamorphosis among the childless women. Judy Bernily of the film 9 to 5 had to take her first job outside of the home when her husband of twelve years divorced her for a younger woman. Through her new job as a secretary and the development of new friendships with co-workers, Judy became a stronger and more independent individual. Likewise, all of the women of The First Wives Club experienced personal growth when they rekindled old college friendships. For Joan Wilder of Romancing the Stone, a new life circumstance forced her to take on the role of rescuer. Once Joan had resolved to find her kidnapped sister, she too grew stronger and more independent and even found the love she so desperately needed in her life. In fact, one quarter of the women in this sample underwent a positive transformation through the performance of a new social role. Conversely only three women experience a negative transformation

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* The exception to the conflict between professional life and family life is the conflict between professional life and marriage responsibilities to husbands. This issue is covered at length in Chapter 7.
through the addition of a new social role (*Batman Returns*, *Best Friends*, and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*). Table 4.5 displays information about the childless women in the family roles of daughter and sibling and also shows information about women in the role of friend. Finally, this table also provides information about the involvement of children in the lives of the childless women.

Table 4.5: Social Circles of Childless Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables (N = 75)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Daughter Role</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Mention of Either Parent</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Parents are Deceased</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Alive, Father Deceased</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Alive, Mother Deceased</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Parents Alive</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orphaned</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sister Role</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Mention of Any Siblings</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>56.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Child, No Siblings</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has Sister(s) and Interacts with Her</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has Brother and Interacts with Him</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has Brother and Sister and Interacts with Them</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings are Mentioned, But No Interaction</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Sibling is Deceased</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friendships</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Mention of Any Friends</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships Outside of Co-Workers</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends are all Co-Workers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Involvement of Children in Her Life</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Involvement of Children</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>65.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved with Children through Her Job</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children Play Very Limited Role in Her Life</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becomes Step-Mother to Child or Nanny</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Daughter Role. For almost half of the childless women (45.3%) there was absolutely no mention of either one of their parents. Every film spanned at least several days of the childless women's lives, and there was ample opportunity to have some parental involvement in their lives if the writers and directors had seen fit to include them. By failing to mention the existence of any parents, the films cut off the possibility of the performance of the role of daughter for these women. A number of the women (18.7%) did not have any parental involvement in their lives because both of their parents were deceased, and an additional four percent of the women had been orphaned. Sixteen percent of the women had lost their fathers but still had living mothers, and 6.7 percent of the women had lost their mothers but still had living fathers. Typically the women who only had their fathers left had close relationships with them. In contrast, the majority of women with only a mother left had strained or non-existent relationships with their mothers. Only 9.3 percent of the women had two living parents. Of the seven women who had both of their parents still living, five of them had good relationships with their parents. Close to 15 percent of the women in this sample had some type of trauma associated with their parents. The MaGrath sisters in Crimes of the Heart, for example, had been abandoned by their father and lived through the suicide of their mother. Their mother's suicide had made national press because she had hung their pet cat along with herself. In a couple of cases (Basic Instinct, Beaches, and Misery), the childless women were either blamed directly or strongly implicated for the death of one or both of their parents.
Sibling Roles. Table 4.5 shows that for over half of the women of this sample (56%) there was no mention of any siblings. These women were denied the possibility of the role sister through the absence of any statements regarding siblings. Close to a fifth of the sample (18.7%) were identified as an only children. This left only one quarter of the sample with any type of sibling involvement. To some extent, the representation of childless women as only children is somewhat consistent with survey research which has shown that girls who are only children or first born siblings have a greater likelihood of being childless women (Houseknecht 1987). Researchers have only been able to offer speculation about the association between first birth or only child status and later life childlessness.

Friendships. Table 4.5 also shows data on the friendships of the childless women. Close to half of the sample of women had no mention of any friendships throughout the entire film. A little less than one fifth of the women (17.3%) had friendships they had developed through their work environment, but these women were not shown with any friends outside of those co-workers friendships. Seventy percent of these friendships with co-workers extended beyond the boundaries of their work environment, and they would associate with the co-workers during cocktail hours or other social events. Slightly over one third of the sample (37.3%) had friendships with people who were not co-workers. These non-co-worker friendships were almost exclusively with other women. Only one woman was shown to have a friend who was a male, and that man was homosexual (Frankie and Johnny). While many of the films showed the women in sexual relationships with men, only Frankie of Frankie and Johnny had a close non-sexual relationship with a
man. Since Frankie had been burned by bad relationships with men in the past, her relationship with her gay male friend Tim was developed as a safe and caring relationship.

**Involvement of Children in Her Life.** With the exception of the six women who became step-mothers to children who lost their biological mothers, the majority of the childless women in these films were not involved in the lives of children. They were not given the role of aunt, friend, or caregiver to a child or teenager. This is a significant omission in their character development and helps to enhance the image that childless women do not have children because they do not like them or like being around children.

A repeated research finding among qualitative interviews with childless women and men is that they often times have at least one child in their lives that constitutes a special friendship and a strong nurturing bond (Burgwyn 1981; English 1985; Ireland 1993; Morell 1994; Veevers 1980). Many times this is a niece, nephew, or child of a close friend. Unlike the real life childless women interviewed by researchers such as Burgwyn, English, Ireland, Morell, and Veevers, the childless characters in the films played a very limited role in the lives of their nieces and nephews or children of their friends.

In addition to missing close relationships with at least one child, the majority of the women worked in professions that were isolated from children. Only 11 of the 75 women worked in professions that involved teaching or helping children. Very few of the transformative women worked in professions that provided any direct contact with children. The one time that a woman did develop a close nurturing relationship with a young girl is the one film that serves as a cautionary tale not to let childless women get too close to children. Peyton Flanders in *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* was the only
woman shown who had developed a special bond with a young child. Peyton used this special friendship to form a secret club with the little girl and helped to turn the young child against her own mother. Experiential literature on childless women and men’s lives tells us that rather than being perceived as a threat to the parents, childless people can often be one more adult confidant to help adolescents and teenagers through hard times. Sadly, the opportunity to reinforce the positive roles that childless men and women can play as adult mentors is missed, and the films in this sample instead caution people to be leery of the intentions of childless women.

Conclusion

Social roles such as friend, sister, daughter, aunt, caregiver, and mentor are all typically positive social roles that enhance a woman’s life. These are also many of the social roles that were absent in the lives of the majority of the childless women. Chapter 1 outlined Gladys Rothbell’s (1995) theory of role-images. Rothbell suggested that role-images of social groups can be negatively or positively created through their representations in cultural artifacts such as films. I would propose that the lack of portrayal of childless women in positive social roles such as sister, daughter, friend, aunt, or caregiver helps to create a negative role-image for childless women. As we will see in the coming chapters, childless women were instead primarily given the roles of career woman, lover, girlfriend, fiancée, villain, or ex-wife. In the four chapters to follow, I explore more fully certain social roles of the women. Chapter 5 examines the different

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5 David Ansen (1992a) noted that Peyton was part of what he called, “the New Ogre, a cleaver devil, sets out to destroy its enemy by homing in on its enemy’s children. This ogre doesn’t harm kids; it seduces them into preferring the villain to their own parents” (p. 60).
meanings of the role of childless woman in the context of the reasons for the childless status. Chapter 6 specifically looks at single childless women and their relationships with men and women, while Chapter 7 explores the role of childless women as wives. The last of the social role chapters focuses on the career woman role.
CHAPTER 5

DIFFERING MEANINGS AND EXPERIENCES OF CHILDLESSNESS

In Chapter 4, I outlined the fact that there are several reasons why women come to live a childless life. Some women want to be mothers and are unable to because of infertility problems (traditional women), other women want to become mothers but continually postpone the decision to have children (transitional women). Still other women make the decision early on in life not to become mothers and choose child-free living (transformative women). Finally some women want to have children but have yet to find the right man to settle down with and start a family (traditional life-course women). The alternative reasons for becoming childless result in different experiences of the meaning of childlessness and different reactions by other people when confronted with childless individuals. The first section of this chapter explores themes regarding the meaning of childlessness for traditional women. I have organized the discussion of traditional women in terms of their marital status. The treatment of infertility was slightly different for women who were married as opposed to those women who were still single.

This chapter also describes six different situations in which childless women became surrogate or step-mothers to children who had lost their parents. This section is organized into a discussion about traditional life-course women who become step-mothers and transformative women who are forced into the role of step-mother. For traditional life-course women who see eventual motherhood as part of their self-identification, the progression to motherhood is a natural process, and the role of mother is readily assumed.
In contrast, transformative childless women are less eager to become step-mothers and often reject the role before they eventually conform to maternal ideological standards. The shift to the mother role for transformative childless women of these films always meant that the women had to undergo a significant personality or lifestyle change in order to properly perform the role of mother.

In the final section of this chapter, I address a number of negative personality traits and behavioral patterns that appear primarily in the representations of transitional and transformative childless women. The themes regarding behavioral and personality traits that are associated with transitional and transformative women are often contrary to ideals of femininity and modern mothering ideology. The themes presented in this section include the tendency of transitional and transformative women to be selfish or narcissistic, cold-hearted or mean, consumed by revenge, mentally unstable, and deceitful. Additionally many of these women are defined by their overt sexuality, and a number of them had homicidal tendencies. A possible interpretation of these films might suggest that there is an underlying cultural suspicion of women who chose to postpone or forgo child bearing and child rearing responsibilities.

Infertility

For each of the women who had experienced infertility, the condition was a source of sorrow in their lives. Infertility was associated with loneliness (Crimes of the Heart and Frankie and Johnny), unhappiness (Forget Paris and Unlawful Entry), and even mental instability (Fatal Attraction and The Hand that Rocks the Cradle). Only eight percent of

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Fatal Attraction and The Hand That Rocks the Cradle feature childless women who have suffered from miscarriages and have later gone on to terrorize a nuclear family. These

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The women in this sample had experienced infertility or a miscarriage, and one additional woman had intentionally had her ovaries removed (*Malice*). Although there are only a few films that specifically mention infertility, they are explored at length in this chapter because of their theoretical importance. The experience of infertility was treated differently for married women than for the single women. Infertility problems of single women were a major part of their self-identification and were therefore, a major part of the film's story line. Single women experienced infertility as a source of unhappiness, frustration, and loneliness. Single traditional women felt that their infertility made them less of a woman, which in turn precluded them from assuming social roles in relationship to men such as lover, girlfriend, or wife. The single traditional women had to learn that their childlessness did not make them any less of a complete woman and that men would except them regardless of their fertility problems. Since the single traditional women had always seen themselves performing the nurturing role of mother, they tended to take on other nurturing roles that filled the maternal gap.

In contrast to the single traditional women, the married women's infertility was a less significant part of the film story lines and less important in their overall conception of self. The married women's self-identification was through their roles as wife and career woman. The married women entered into their marital relationships having identified

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Films are discussed in Chapter 6 on the section about single childless women and their relationships with men.

2 Additionally two women whose marriages were being dissolved through divorce had ended pregnancies by abortions (*Agnes of God* and *Dangerous Minds*) and one woman (*All of Me*) had health problems that prevented her from getting married and having children. In *All of Me*, Edwina Cutwater had mourned her missed opportunities in life, but the subject of children was not something she mentioned as having missed out on.
themselves as women who were simply postponing their child bearing years (traditional life-course women). It was not until after the married traditional life-course women tried to conceive a child with their spouses that they realized they were actually infertile. Although the shift to an infertile self-identity was difficult for married women, it presented less of a problem for them than the single women because of the support they received from their husbands. The films showed that the experience of infertility in the marriages may have helped to strengthen the couples’ relationships. Married women did not have the problem the single women had of identifying themselves as less than complete women who were unworthy of male companionship.

Infertile Married Couples

In this section I discuss the two married couples from the films *Unlawful Entry* and *Forget Paris* who were experiencing infertility problems. Again, the infertility of these couples was viewed as only one aspect of their relationships. Unlike single childless traditional women whose infertility was a cornerstone of their self-identification, infertility was only a small part of the lives of married traditional women.

*Unlawful Entry.* In this film we meet Karen and Michael Carr (Madeleine Stowe and Kurt Russell), a happily married couple who have recently purchased a large home. When their house is burglarized, Karen tries to convince Michael that she is no longer comfortable in the house and wants to sell it. As part of her argument, Karen reminds Michael that they no longer need all of the space they had originally planned for since they cannot have any children. Michael comforts Karen and convinces her that their newly installed security system will keep out future unwanted intruders. This scene is only the
first of two scenes that briefly mentions Michael and Karen’s infertility problems. In a later scene with their new found friend Pete (Ray Liotta), Karen inquires about Pete’s marital status. Since Pete seems like such a nice guy, Karen can’t believe that he is not involved in a serious relationship with anyone. Pete tells Karen that his shyness coupled with being a cop does not make for successful relationships. In the conversation that follows, we get the only real glimpse of Karen and Michael’s disappointment about their infertility:

Karen: Take it from a teacher. We love those quiet little boys in the back of the class.

Michael: Don’t you believe her Pete. She loves all kids.

Pete: So that’s what’s missing. I’m surprised you two don’t have a few running around.

[Michael and Karen both look uncomfortably at the ground, and the film cuts to a new scene.]

Although Michael and Karen both look uncomfortable with the mention of children, it is Michael whom Pete later apologizes to for having brought up the issue of children. Michael brushes the situation off and tells Pete not to worry about it. Since Michael seems less emotionally disturbed by their infertility, he is the person who can address Pete’s concerns. Although Pete’s infatuation with Karen later causes Karen and Michael to experience some marital disruption, at no point in the film is the infertility a cause of their relationship problems.

*Forget Paris.* This film is a comedy about Mickey and Ellen Gordon (Billy Crystal and Debra Winger), a couple who have a perfect courtship which leads to a less than perfect marriage. Committed to their own personal careers, Mickey and Ellen have a
terrible time reconciling their professional responsibilities and their personal relationship. After about two years of marriage, Ellen tells Mickey that she is ready to have a baby. They try to conceive a child, but after many months of failed attempts, they visit an infertility specialist and find out that Ellen’s fallopian tubes are damaged. The tone of their disappointment is set by Ellen when she tells her friend about their experience at the infertility specialist, “You should see the waiting room, all the childless couples. I mean you could cut the hopelessness with a chain saw.” Ellen and Mickey decide to try in-vitro fertilization. At this point, we see that Mickey and Ellen experience infertility in very different ways. Ellen’s infertility is marked by constant disappointment, painful treatments, and lonely tearful experiences. Since Mickey travels a great deal with his job Ellen is even forced to administer her own fertility drug injections. Mickey’s experience, on the other hand, is often presented in a humorous manner. After all, once Ellen’s eggs have been harvested, Mickey need only supply the sperm. When the time comes for Mickey to provide a semen sample, the nurse leads him into one of their rooms designed for comfort and ease. Mickey is shown the selection of pornographic magazines and video tapes. Unable to get comfortable in this foreign situation, Mickey pleads with the nurse to allow him to do this in the privacy of his own home where, he jokes, he is accustomed to this behavior. The nurses allow Mickey to drive home and produce a sperm sample in a more natural setting. He is instructed to bring his sperm sample back to the office within one hour of ejaculation, or the sample will be spoiled. Back at home, Mickey produces the sperm sample in his own bathroom and triumphantly emerges from the bathroom to show Ellen his success. He seat belts the cup containing the sample into
the passenger seat of his Jeep and tells the “little fellows” to “hang on.” Mickey speeds off to deliver his sperm to the doctor’s office, but his adventure is halted by a massive traffic jam on the freeway. In a frantic move, Mickey drives down the breakdown lane and is pulled over by a police officer. Mickey tells the police officer that he has a perfectly good excuse for his erratic driving since “50,000 lives are at stake.” The next scene shows the police officer giving Mickey and his semen sample a police escort to the fertility specialist. Having successfully delivered his sperm, Mickey’s job is done, and the audience has enjoyed a few laughs along the way.

During the infertility treatments, Mickey and Ellen must watch their friends go through the miracle of childbirth and the excitement of parenthood. While looking in on the hospital nursery at the new baby, Ellen tells Mickey that she is tired of the fertility treatments and wants to stop. Mickey does not seem disappointed for himself, but is concerned for the happiness of his wife. He offers to look into adoption, but Ellen wants a little time to think things through. When they do decide to check with an adoption agency, the agency is not very supportive of a dual-career couple and places Mickey and Ellen on a “ten mile waiting list.” Once placed on this hopeless waiting list, Mickey and Ellen refocus their energy back on their careers, and the subject of children is never brought up again.

In each of the films portraying married infertile couples, the husbands play a supportive role to their disappointed wives. The experience of infertility is portrayed differently for husbands than for wives. The husband’s humiliating experience of having to ejaculate into a specimen cup is couched with humor, while the sorrowful wife endures
fertility injections and places calls to the fertility specialist to receive the results of another negative pregnancy test.³

**Traditional Single Women**

The tragedy of single women's experiences with infertility is explored at length in the films *Crimes of the Heart* and *Frankie and Johnny*. In each case, infertility is seen as a source of loneliness and a reason to insulate one's self from potential suitors who could only later reject a woman who cannot reproduce. Feeling as if they are less than complete women, Lenny MaGrath (Diane Keaton) of *Crimes of the Heart* and Frankie (Michelle Pfeiffer) of *Frankie and Johnny* both believe that no man can love them since they cannot produce children. Each woman wanted to be a mother and found ways to fulfill the void of their nonmotherhood. Lenny is the full-time caregiver for her ailing grandfather, and Frankie is the "den mother to a family of eccentrics who frequent [her] diner" (Johnson 1991:98). Lenny and Frankie's low self-esteem and loneliness are coupled with images of them as frumpy, pathetic, scared, and unattractive.

*Crimes of the Heart*. One of the first scenes in this film shows a frumpy Lenny MaGrath alone on her birthday. Lenny is a pathetic woman who is trying to create a make-shift birthday cake out of commercial chocolate chip cookies. Lenny tries repeatedly to get a candle to stick in the cookie while singing "Happy Birthday" to herself.

³ Although *Forget Paris* is the only film in this sample that specifically deals with the experience of infertility in a marriage, the same gendered division of the experience of infertility appear in the portrayal of the infertile marriage of television characters Hayden Fox and Christine Armstrong in the sitcom *Coach*. Several episodes were dedicated to the humorous and humiliating experience of diagnosing and treating Hayden's low sperm count at the same time that his wife Christine displayed disappointment and emotional distress.
On the eve of her forty-first birthday, Lenny looks years beyond her chronological age with her unkempt hair and big, baggy clothing. Lenny lives in her grandfather’s house, and has been the primary caregiver for her ailing grandfather for several years. Lenny is a timid woman who lets other people push her around and is also the oldest of three sisters. Lenny is the virgin figure in her family while her younger sister Meg (Jessica Lange) is the tramp sister who is constantly referred to by her cousin as “cheap Christmas trash,” and the youngest sister Babe (Sissy Spacek) is mentally unstable. In contrast to infertile Lenny’s frumpy style of conservative baggy dresses and an old cardigan sweater, the transformative sister Meg dresses in a tight short skirt and red high heels.

The story begins when Meg comes back to their small Southern town after getting news from Lenny that Babe has shot her husband and is being held in the county jail for attempted murder. Meg helps to get Babe released from jail and sets her up with an attorney. The three sisters are reunited under the roof of their grandfather’s house where they all grew up together after their mother’s suicide. Meg and Babe have a special bond between them that does not seem to include Lenny, and the two of them assess Lenny’s life. Since all Lenny does is care for their grandfather and work in the garden in the backyard, her sisters express concern that she even seems to have turned into their grandmother. Lenny has taken to wearing her grandmother’s gardening gloves and hat and seems to have mentally aged years beyond her chronological age. As Meg and Babe watch Lenny working in the garden, they discuss her fertility situation and lack of love:

Meg: Poor Lenny. She needs some love in her life. All she does is work out at that back yard and take care of old Granddaddy.

Babe: Yeah, but she’s so shy with men.
Meg: Probably that shrunken ovary she’s got.

Babe: Yeah, that deformed ovary.

Meg: Yeah. It was Granddaddy was the one who made her feel self-conscious about that. It’s his fault the old fool. I’ll bet Lenny has never even slept with a man. I’ll bet she’s never even had it once.

Babe: Oh I don’t know. Maybe she did it once.

Meg: She had?

Babe: Maybe. [Mouths in silence, “I think so.”]

Meg: When?

Babe tells Meg of the time that Lenny had placed an ad in a lonely hearts club personal column. A man from Memphis called up Lenny, and they went out on a date. Babe thinks that Lenny had even slept with this man, but after introducing him to their Granddaddy, they never dated again. Lenny told Babe they broke up because of her shrunken ovary.

Lenny’s lack of love and unhappiness due to her infertility is further explored during an argument between Lenny and Meg. Lenny is upset because Meg has just broken the sisters’ plans in order to go out with a married man.

Meg: Hey. Listen. I know I’ve had too many men. Believe me, I have had way too many men. But it’s not my fault you haven’t had any. Or maybe just that one from Memphis.

Lenny: What one from Memphis?

Meg: Well that one Babe told me about.

Lenny: Babe!

Babe: Meg!...

Lenny: Well I’ll never. I’ll never be able to trust you ever again. [She runs out of the room, and Meg and Babe follow her.]
Meg: Lenny! Come on now Lenny. We were just worried. We were worried about you, and we wanted to find a way to make you happy.

Lenny: Happy? Happy? Oh no, I'll never be happy.

Meg: Well not if you live your life as old Granddaddy’s nursemaid.

Babe: Oh Meg shut up.

Meg: Oh I can't help it. Now I just know the reason you broke off with that man from Memphis was 'cause of old Granddaddy.

Lenny: So what. You mean Babe didn’t tell you the rest of the story?

Meg: Well, she said something about your shrunken ovary.

Lenny: Babe!

Babe: I just mentioned it.

Meg: I don’t believe a word of that story.

Lenny: I don’t care what you believe. It’s just always been just so easy for you. You’ve always had so many men fall in love with you. But I have this [pause] shrunken ovary, I just can’t have any children, look at my hair. It’s just falling out in this comb. So you just tell me. What kind of man is going to love me? What man is going to love me?

Meg: Oh Lenny. Lot’s of men.

Lenny: What men?

Meg: A whole lot of men. It’s just old Granddaddy who seems to feel otherwise.

Lenny: Yeah, because he doesn’t want to see me rejected and humiliated.

Meg: Oh Lenny. Stop being so pathetic. Now just tell me. Did you ever actually ask that man from Memphis all about this? Did you?

Lenny: No I didn’t. ‘Cause I just didn’t want him not to want me.

Meg: Oh Lenny.
The next day Meg and Babe encourage Lenny to call the man from Memphis and explain why she never went out with him again. Lenny tries to make the call but does not have enough nerve to go through with it. Later, after a burst of self-confidence, Lenny returns to the telephone and calls Charlie (the man from Memphis). She tells him about her fertility problem and is relieved to hear that he thinks that children are all “little snot-nosed brats.” Charlie accepts Lenny’s apology and, after having lived over 40 years of her life afraid to let a man get close to her, Lenny accepts Charlie’s invitation to dinner. The film ends shortly thereafter with the three sister united in friendship and happiness.

*Frankie and Johnny.* Frankie is a woman whose former boyfriend abused her while she was pregnant and caused her to lose her baby. The miscarriage led to complications, and she was left infertile. Apparently, Frankie never told her mother about this pregnancy or her infertility. We first meet up with Frankie in her hometown of Altoona, PA at the baptism of her cousin’s baby. Frankie was asked to be the godmother and comes in from New York City to take part in the ceremony. After the ceremony, Frankie’s mother tells the other family member how much she loves babies and how sorry she is that she does not have any grandchildren of her own. Under this direct pressure, Frankie warns her mother not to nag her about her life and lack of husband or children. Before leaving on a bus back to New York, Frankie’s mother pleads with Frankie to quit her waitressing job and move out of the city. Real people, she reasons, live in places like Altoona and get married and have babies. Frankie admits that she might not be the “happiest person who ever lived,” but she cannot seem to tell her mother that she will never be able to produce the much desired grandchildren. Although Frankie generally
keeps her emotions bottled up, on the bus ride back to New York, she allows herself to feel her emotional pain and cries about her loneliness. Frankie’s loneliness is highlighted in the film through her friendships with three other single childless co-workers (Helen, Cora, and Neddy). Each woman has no family members and no close friends outside of their co-workers. None of them have a love relationship in their lives either. Early on in the film, Helen, the eldest of the childless waitresses, takes ill and is sent to the hospital. Cora and Frankie go to visit their comatose friend in the hospital and are Helen’s only visitors. Cora asks Frankie if she thinks they’re going to end up alone in life like Helen. Frankie disagrees that Helen is alone, but Cora looks down at Helen again and tells Frankie “she’s alone.” Through a series of camera shots into people’s New York City apartment windows, the loneliness of these three women’s lives is highlighted. We are shown Cora trying to find company in the arms of any man who will have her, Neddy talking to her pet turtles, Frankie choking on peanut butter and having to self-administer the Heimlich maneuver, and a final shot of their boss happily surrounded by his wife and many children.

Frankie prefers to build walls between herself and other people as a defense mechanism, and she is determined not to let another “schmuck” mess up her life. Caught between her desire for a safe world with no more relationship pains and her fears of being alone in life, Frankie flatly refuses dates with men including the new cook at the diner, Johnny (Al Pacino). Despite Frankie’s initial rejections, Johnny is persistent and ultimately persuades Frankie to join him for a date. The film continues with a series of Frankie’s emotional swings, opening up to Johnny and then shutting down before he can get too
Eventually Johnny is able to get through to Frankie and start to build what will be a lasting relationship. Like Lenny in *Crimes of the Heart*, Frankie's many years of unhappiness are about to be put to rest through the love of the right man, a man who is willing to accept her for herself and her fertility imperfections.

**Making Sense of the Meaning of Infertility**

Traditional women always envisioned themselves as performing the role of mother but end up unable to assume the role because of infertility problems. When infertility strikes women who wanted to be mothers, they are typically portrayed lonely women and saddened by the experience of infertility. The traditional women who were still single were the closest that characters came to being portrayed as spinsters. While they were never called spinsters in the films, Lenny and Frankie were women well over thirty who wanted to be married with children but felt that their infertility precluded them from marriage. They had to learn in the films that they were not incomplete women. By the end of each film, Lenny and Frankie had found men who loved them for themselves and not their potential motherhood. Lenny and Frankie also sought replacement of the biological mothering role through caring for elderly people.

Conversely, the married traditional women were not self-defined incomplete women. Infertility played a fairly minor role in the lives of the traditional married women, and their self-identification came primarily from their careers and their marriages. They were comfortable in their role of wife and had no reason to believe themselves less than

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4 Lenny was identified as a spinster in two separate critical reviews. Richard Corliss (1986:70) called Lenny the “spinster with the shriveled ovary and motherly protectiveness toward her younger sister,” and David Ansen (1986:75) called Lenny the spinster sister who was “terrified of romance.”

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complete women. It was only after they tried to conceive a child with their spouses that the married women came to realize their infertility problems. Having already established themselves in the role of wife, they were able to continue in that role without questioning their identification as a full and complete woman. Additionally, the continued support they received from their husbands insulated them from the self-doubt that plagued Frankie and Lenny.

**Childless Women as Surrogate Mothers**

This next section looks at traditional life-course women and transformative women who ended up becoming surrogate mothers at some point in the films. In six different films of this sample, childless women became surrogate mothers or step-mothers to children who had lost their mother (or both parents) to either death or divorce (*The American President, Baby Boom, Beaches, Big Business, Overboard, and Sleepless in Seattle*). These films proved to be an interesting look at some differences between women in the role of mother and women in the role of nonmother. I would suggest that there is some evidence in these films to support Suzanna Danuta Walters's (1995) claim that Hollywood over-simplifies women's lives and dichotomizes them into domestic (what I would call traditional life-course women) and nondomestic women (transformative childless women). The films show distinct differences between traditional life-course women (*The American President, Big Business, and Sleepless in Seattle*) and transformative women (*Baby Boom, Beaches, and Overboard*). Motherhood was met with two types of reactions by the childless women, and the reactions depended upon whether the woman was a traditional life-course or transformative childless woman. The
traditional life-course women (Sydney Ellen Wade of *The American President*, Sadie Radliff of *Big Business*, and Annie Reed of *Sleepless in Seattle*) met the surrogate mother role with natural acceptance. In these three films, each woman was loving, kind, caring, and maternal in personality and therefore fell easily into the role of step-mother. The children in these three films readily accepted the traditional life-course women as step-mothers, and the fathers of the children felt that the women were equal (if not better in *Big Business*) replacements for the biological mothers. In contrast to the natural acceptance of motherhood by the traditional life-course women, the transformative women (J.C. Wiatt of *Baby Boom*, CC Bloom of *Beaches*, and Joanna Stayton of *Overboard*) met the role of surrogate mother with initial reluctance. In order for these transformative women to become mothers, they had to make significant personality and lifestyle changes. J.C. Wiatt, CC Bloom, and Joanna Stayton were all committed to their childless lifestyles, and J.C. and CC were also committed to their successful careers. None of the women had seriously considered having children, and their reaction to the role of step-mother was initial reluctance or out-and-out rejection of the role. However they could not easily turn away from the children and were forced to assume the role of mother. Taking on the nurturing role transformed the personality of each woman, making her less egocentric and more aware of the needs of others.

**Traditional Life-Course Women**

*Big Business*. The first of films involving traditional life-course women is the 1988 film *Big Business*. This film is the story of two sets of identical twin girls who are accidentally switched at birth and raised in separate locations as fraternal twins. The first
set of twins, Sadie Shelton and Rose Shelton (played by Bette Midler and Lily Tomlin) are raised by rich parents who live in New York City. The second set of twins, Sadie Radliff and Rose Radliff (also played by Bette Midler and Lily Tomlin) are raised by poor parents in the small rural town of Jupiter Hollow, West Virginia. When the Radliff sisters have to travel to New York City to do business with the Shelton’s corporation, the film becomes a story of mistaken identities. Although the two Sadies look identical, they differ substantially in personality. Sadie Shelton is a cold-hearted, ruthless corporate CEO who characterizes her marriage as a “brief childhood fiasco.” Sadie Shelton is also the only mother in the film; however, she is minimally involved in her son’s life and has given custody to the father. As the villain of the film, Sadie Shelton runs her deceased father’s company with an iron fist and works her employees like slaves. Sadie Shelton loves a good corporate take over and had no qualms about putting 300 Santas out of business just days before Christmas. Her emphasis on business rather than family life led to several behavioral problems in her son Jason. Jason is a spoiled brat who is wildly out of control.

In contrast to Sadie Shelton, Sadie Radliff wants to lead a life like Joan Collins on Dynasty but does not have a cold enough heart for cut-throat business. Having been raised by the wrong parents, Sadie Radliff has always felt that she does not belong in the small community of Jupiter Hollow and desperately wants to move to the big city. Sadie Radliff does not particularly want a career like her biological twin sister, but instead just wants to be financially well off so that she can enjoy the finer things of life. Because she is kind and loving to her many nieces and nephews, they adore her and are sorry to see her leave Jupiter Hollow for New York City. After arriving in New York, Sadie Radliff is
mistaken by Sadie Shelton's ex-husband Michael, and he compliments Sadie Radliff on her apparent change of heart in dealing with their son. Sadie Radliff is clearly better suited to be a mother than Sadie Shelton, and by the end of the film, Sadie Radliff has been paired off with Sadie Shelton's ex-husband and son. Sadie Shelton does not seem to mind that her son has just taken on a new step-mother since she has her hands full with a new love affair and the heavy duties of running a multi-million dollar corporation. Sadie Radliff is also more suited to the role of mother because of her lack of interest in a career. The film reinforces a theme to be discussed in Chapter 8 that employed women who are believed to be overly-invested in their careers are less capable of handling the role of mother than women who have the time to stay at home full-time with their children.

*Sleeperless in Seattle*. This film opens with Sam and Jonah Baldwin (Tom Hanks and Ross Malinger) standing over the grave of their wife and mother Maggie Baldwin. Sam has been devastated by the early loss of his wife to cancer. In order to escape some of the memories and move on with his life, Sam and his son Jonah move to Seattle to try and make a fresh start. Unfortunately, Sam has a hard time moving on, and Jonah becomes concerned. On Christmas Eve Jonah telephones radio psychiatrist Dr. Marcia and tells her that his wish for Christmas is to find a new wife for his father. Dr. Marcia coaxes Sam onto the telephone and asks him about his wife and his inability to handle her death. Sam tells Dr. Marcia that he is having trouble sleeping at night (hence the name Sleepless in Seattle) and is certain that he will never find a woman as perfect as his wife Maggie. When Dr. Marcia asks Sam what was so wonderful about his wife, Sam replies, "How long is your show?" Many of the women listeners are touched by Sam and Jonah's story.
including Annie Reed (Meg Ryan), a newspaper columnist from Baltimore. Annie is a warm and wonderful woman who has been listening to the broadcast. Annie is deeply moved by Sleepless's comments and feels an immediate connection with him. While she denies her friend Becky's allegations that she has fallen in love with Sam, she soon comes to realize that Sam and Jonah have struck her in a special way. Although she is engaged to a rather bland guy with a number of quirky personality traits, Annie writes a letter to Sleepless and son. Annie has no intention of sending the letter, but writes it to get Sleepless out of her system. Unbeknownst to her, Becky retrieves the letter from the trash can and mails the letter to Sleepless in Seattle. Annie’s letter is among over 2,000 other letters that are sent to Sam by women who want to meet him. Sam refuses to look at the letters, but Jonah reads through each of them in hopes of finding a perfect woman to become his new mother and Sam’s wife. When Annie’s letter arrives, it is addressed to both Sleepless and Son. This seems to be one of the only letters that includes Jonah and talks specifically about things, such as baseball, that are of interest to a young boy. Since her proposal is to meet them both at the top of the Empire State Building on Valentine’s Day (a reference to her passion for old love stories such as An Affair to Remember), the letter also reveals that Annie is a hopeless romantic. Jonah replies to Annie’s letter, telling her that they would be happy to meet her as she has suggested. Sam, however, refuses to entertain Jonah’s request to fly to New York on Valentine’s Day to meet Annie. Convinced that Annie is the perfect woman for him and his father, Jonah flies to New York without his father’s permission. Meanwhile, Annie is in New York on Valentine’s Day with her bland fiancé Walter. Annie begins to wonder if she and Walter are too
perfect for each other and if they might be the equivalent of two rights making a wrong. At the same time that Annie is breaking up with Walter, Sam is frantically flying to New York to catch up with Jonah. Jonah waits anxiously at the top of the Empire State Building for Annie, but it appears that she will not make it. Sam finally catches up with the disappointed Jonah, and they descend from the observation deck on the last elevator run of the evening. Meanwhile Annie is pleading with the elevator operator to make one final run to the observation deck to see if she can catch Sleepless and Son. Annie misses Sam and Jonah, but finds Jonah’s misplaced backpack. Sam and Jonah return to the observation deck to retrieve the backpack and find Annie holding the pack and Jonah’s favorite stuffed teddy bear. Since Annie was on a traditional life-course path with Walter that would have included having children, Annie looks perfectly natural holding the children’s backpack and Jonah’s teddy bear. She is gentle in handing the teddy bear over to Jonah and speaks softly to him about the bear. Annie, Sam, and Jonah look like a perfect family, and the love story is complete. Annie embodies many of the qualities that are essential to mothering ideals. She is kind, gentle, caring, and loving. Annie has a wonderful relationship with her parents, her brother, and many other members of her extended family. She is also a good friend to Becky and enjoys her work but is not a workaholic. With all of these positive qualities already well established in the film, we have no problem projecting Annie into the role of Jonah’s step-mother. Annie’s new relationship with Sam has only sped up her inevitable transition to motherhood.

*The American President*. The 1995 film, *The American President* is meant to be a comical parody of President Clinton’s administration. Paul Magnusson’s (1995) article in
Business Week noted that "President Shepherd is obviously meant to be Bill Clinton - except that he is a lonely widower. Democrat Shepherd has a daughter Chelsea's age, never served in the military, and is surrounded by young, workaholic aides who forget that it's Christmas unless they get a memo reminding them." President Andrew Shepherd (Michael Douglas) is fighting to pass a crime bill much the same way that President Clinton did during the push for the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act of 1993 and the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. Just as Clinton was facing a tough re-election campaign against the Republican Senate Leader Bob Dole, so Shepherd faces the tough challenge of right-wing Republican Senate Minority Leader Robert Rumson (Richard Dreyfuss). The twist in this film from reality is that the president is a lonely widower who has found a new love interest, environmental lobbyist Sydney Ellen Wade (Annette Bening). As a lonely widower, the president was shielded from having to engage in character debates with the republican opposition. However, now that the president's got a new girlfriend, Bob Rumson opens the character debate in full force and drags the president's relationship with Sydney through the "family values" mud. Rumson's tactics work, and Andrew Shepherd's approval ratings drop from 63 to 41 percent in a span of seven weeks. The irony of Bob Rumson pointing to Sydney Ellen Wade and her relationship with the president as the root of all of America's social problems is that Sydney Wade is a fine woman with decent qualities and a loving nature. Sydney is the one who tries unsuccessfully to convince Andrew that they should end the relationship in order to save his re-election chances, but Andrew is in love with Sydney and refused to entertain her suggestions. It is not difficult to see why the President has
fallen in love with this woman. Sydney is charming, cultured, intelligent, bi-lingual, sweet, 
loving, and immediately liked by Andrew’s daughter Lucy. Sydney and Lucy build a 
warm friendship, and when they are shown together with Andrew, they look like an ideal 
nuclear family having meat loaf for dinner. Sydney’s qualities are summed up best by 
Andrew Shepherd himself when he finally responds to Bob Rumson’s challenge to a 
character debate. In an impromptu speech to the press core the morning of the State of 
the Union Address, Andrew makes the following statement nationally to Bob Rusmon and 
his growing supporters (white middle class, middle-aged voters):

You wave an old photo of the president’s girlfriend and you tell them that she’s to blame for their lot in life, and you go on television and you call her a whore. Sydney Ellen Wade has done nothing to you Bob. She has done nothing but put herself through school, represent the interests of public school teachers, and lobby for the safety of our natural resources. You want a character debate Bob, you better stick with me. Because Sydney Ellen Wade is way out of your league.

As with Big Business and Sleepless in Seattle, the film ends without taking us through the 
inevitable marriage ceremony. As viewers we have no problem projecting Sadie Radliff, 
Annie Reed, or Sydney Ellen Wade into the role of step-mother. Each of these women 
share caring qualities that are indicative of mothering ideals. They have strong ties with 
their immediate family members and are shown in positive interaction with at least one of 
those family member. Additionally, unlike transformative women who embody sexuality, 
these traditional life-course women are never shown in any direct sexual activity.⁵ Sydney 
Ellen Wade does have sex with the widowed president, but the film does not show them in

⁵ Transformative women and their sexuality are discussed in this chapter under the section describing transformative and transitional women’s personality and behavioral characteristics.
the actual act. Sydney is never objectified as are the women of Bull Durham, Grumpy Old Men, A Fish Called Wanda, or Working Girl. This is consistent with the notion that motherhood and sexuality are not necessarily complementary roles (Kaplan 1991, 1992, and 1994). In Sleepless in Seattle and The American President, Sam Baldwin and Andrew Shepherd place Annie and Sydney at the same personal quality level as their first wives (also the biological mothers of their children). In Sleepless in Seattle, Sam makes the point to Dr. Marcia that he had something really special with his wife Maggie and didn’t think that could ever happen twice in a lifetime. By Sam’s acceptance of Annie upon their first meeting, and his having mouthed the word ‘perfect’ while passing Annie at the Seattle airport, he has acknowledged that Annie is as special a woman as his deceased wife Maggie. Sam implicitly admits that it is possible to find happiness and a perfect mother for his son twice in a lifetime. In The American President, Andrew Shepherd is even more specific about placing Sydney on the same level as his deceased wife when he states, “I’ve love two women in my life. I lost one to cancer, and I lost the other because I was so busy trying to keep my job that I forgot to do my job.” These positive images of traditional life-course childless women suggest that childless women can easily become good mothers as long as they have only been post-ponning their motherhood role and not rejecting that role. These women make a natural transition to step-mother because it has presumably been part of their concept of self. Sadie, Annie, and Sydney were not childless because they specifically did not want to be mothers but were childless because they had not found the right man to settle down with and start a family. As we will see, this is a fundamental difference between traditional life-course women and transformative women.
Transformative women do not immediately identify with the role of mother and generally reject the suggestion that they take on the role of mother.

**Traditional Life-Course Women Still Looking for Mr. Right.** Several of the childless women in this sample were identified as traditional life-course women, but unlike Sadie, Annie, and Sydney, they had either not found Mr. Right, or had postponed their decision to have children. The women who wanted to have children but were unable to because they had no man, generally had compatible personalities with mothering ideals. Marianne Graves (Goldie Hawn) of *Bird on a Wire* was told that she had “that motherly” sound to her voice. Loretta (Cher) of *Moonstruck* had strong family ties and every intention of having children, but her husband had died only two years after they were married. She always felt guilty that she was the one who had wanted to postpone having children for a couple of years. In *French Kiss*, the sweet and lovable Kate (Meg Ryan) had planned all of her life to get married, buy a house, and have children. In order to fulfill her plan, she just needed to find the right man.

These traditional life-course women all would have easily assumed the role of mother had their life circumstances been different. In each case, the films end with the women engaged or married to the man of their dreams. It is implied that they will fulfill their dreams of children now that they have found their Mr. Right. Traditional life-course women are typically portrayed as heroines of the films with positive personality traits. As we will see later in this chapter, this is a distinct difference from how transitional or transformative women are portrayed. Women who do not have children because they are
postponing their decision or have rejected the role of mother are often portrayed much more negatively than traditional life-course women or traditional infertile women.

**Transformative Childless Women**

The traditional life-course childless characters like Sydney Ellen Wade and Annie Reed are successful in their careers, but also find a clear balance between their work responsibilities and their ability to enjoy a life beyond the boundaries of their careers. Presumably, they would be able to strike a balance between work and their new found family obligations. In contrast to traditional life-course women who needed no personality transformation to become successful step-mothers, transformative childless women only assumed the role of mother when they were forced to do so. They were able to become effective mothers only after they had made significant life-style or personality changes. J.C. Wiatt of *Baby Boom*, CC Bloom of *Beaches*, and Joanna Stayton of *Overboard* are transformative childless women who reluctantly take on the responsibilities of motherhood.

*Overboard*. In the 1987 film *Overboard*, Goldie Hawn plays Joanna Stayton, an insufferable wealthy heiress who spends her days sailing the Pacific Ocean on an extravagant yacht. She is married to an overgrown child, Grant (Edward Herrmond), who spends his hours skeet shooting off the deck of the yacht. The film begins when Joanna has ordered the yacht to dock in a small Oregon town for what she considers emergency repairs. When local carpenter Dean Proffitt (Kurt Russell) shows up for the emergency, Joanna directs him to the closet in her stateroom. There simply isn’t enough space in the closet to hold all of her shoes and clothing, and he must redesign the closet immediately.
Dean is a bit confused since he was under the impression that there was an emergency at hand. Joanna informs Dean that her closet is an emergency, and he should get to work. While Joanna realizes that it is necessary to have Dean on board her yacht, she is annoyed by his working class presence and tells Grant that she doubts whether this "Elk Snout mountain man" has ever been house trained.

The plot thickens when Dean shows Joanna the finished custom designed closet, and she refuses to pay him for his service because he has made the closet out of oak wood rather than cedar. Dean claims that Joanna never specified the type of wood, and she counters that everyone in the civilized world knows that closets are made out of cedar. As Dean and Joanna argue about the closet and payment, Dean tells Joanna that no job could ever be done to her satisfaction. He continues:

You know what your problem is? Huh? You’re so goddamn bored you gotta invent things to bitch about. You haven’t got a single thing on this earth to do except your hair. The closet was fine. You just needed something to take up your useless, empty, nail polishing, rich bitch sun tanning day.

Joanna is appalled by his comments and pushes him overboard and follows by throwing his tool belt and toolbox overboard as well. She yells after him, “I’m not bored. I’m quite happy. Everyone wants to be me.” But in fact Joanna does not seem happy since she never smiles and is constantly complaining about trivial items.

Later that evening, Joanna consults with her mother on the telephone, and we get a glimpse at Joanna’s feelings toward children.

Joanna: Grant mentioned having a baby again. What should I do?

Her Mother: Darling, if you have a baby, you won’t be the baby anymore.
Joanna: True.

After this telephone conversation Joanna refuses to have sex with Grant and goes on deck to find her wedding rings that were accidentally left outside earlier in the afternoon while her nails were drying. When the yacht changes motion, Joanna is tossed overboard and no one on board realizes that they have lost her. The next morning, Joanna is recovered by a garbage barge and taken back to a hospital in Elk Snout. The ordeal of the previous evening leaves Joanna with a case of amnesia, but her arrogant, distasteful personality is still with her. When Grant shows up at the hospital to pick up Joanna, he realizes that she has amnesia and seizes this opportunity to rid himself of his insufferable wife. Grant leaves the hospital claiming he has never seen this woman before in his life. Having seen the news coverage of Joanna’s ordeal and the footage of Grant leaving the hospital, Dean gets an idea to recover the cost of his tools while having a little fun with this rich bitch. Dean’s wife had died three years earlier, leaving him with four boys to raise on his own. The boys are such a discipline problem that Dean has difficulty keeping baby-sitters for any length of time. Since Dean works two different jobs to provide for his children, he has limited time to care for his boys and even less time for housekeeping. Dean decides to claim Joanna as his wife and have her come to his house to cook, clean, and care for the boys. He figures that a month or so of her domestic service should equal the approximate cost of his lost tools. The doctors are more than happy to pawn Joanna off on someone else, and Dean is asked for only minimal proof of their marriage. Dean makes up a story about Joanna. He calls her Annie, claims that they have been married for thirteen years, and tells them that prior to the birth of their children, Annie had been in the Navy for
several years. Dean enjoys treating Annie like dirt and makes her ride to his house in the back of the pick-up truck while the dog sits in the front cab.

Although she has no memory of her previous life, Joanna/Annie is quite sure that she does not belong with Dean. She doesn’t recognize the four children and claims she would never do such vial things as cook, clean, and tend to Dean’s children. In fact, she is a terrible cook and has no idea where to begin in the cleaning process. The children walk all over Annie and constantly play tricks on her. Dean is never around much because of his two jobs. He is embarrassed to tell the kids and Annie that he works a second job shoveling fertilizer, so he covers this up by telling them he goes out with the guys drinking and bowling.

Within a few weeks Annie learns to overcome Dean’s humiliating treatment and becomes more proficient with the cleaning, cooking, and caring for the children. Although the house was a complete shambles when she arrived, Annie has been able to turn it into a home for “her” children. She makes even more progress with the discipline and raising of the children. As Annie becomes more and more involved in their lives, she teaches the youngest boy to read and is directly responsible for great strides in school achievements for the other three boys. Each night is spent working on homework in a quiet family setting rather than running wild as they had when Dean was their only parental figure. During the two months that Annie is with the Proffitt family, the boys begin to like her more as a parent than their father since she has changed in personality and now provides much needed care and guidance. With the boys becoming more attached to Annie, they develop a deep concern that she will leave if she gets her memory back. When questioned
by the boys if she is going to leave them, Annie tells them that mothers do not leave their children.

The children are not the only ones becoming attached to the new Annie. Dean has found himself falling in love with Annie, and she in turn has fallen in love with him. Feeling guilty about the trick he has played on her, Dean tries, unsuccessfully, to tell Annie the truth. It is not until Grant shows up (under threat by his mother-in-law) to reclaim Joanna that she recovers her memory. When she realizes that she has been deceived by Dean and the boys, she tells them that she does not belong there and returns to the yacht with Grant. But Joanna finds that going back to her previous lifestyle after having gone through some significant personality changes is not as simple as her mother and husband had hoped. Joanna no longer orders her servants around like a master of slaves. Instead she apologizes to her butler Andrew for having been so rude to him for so many years and for never once thanking him for any of his service. Andrew tells Joanna that few people have the privilege of escaping their bonds to see the world from another perspective. How she chooses to use this information is entirely up to her. Keep in mind that her earlier bonds were a loveless marriage, a reluctance to grow up, no desire for children, and the selfish hoarding her millions of dollars. Now she has the opportunity to live with the love she and Dean developed and the joys she received while mothering his children. She orders the yacht to turn around and head back to Dean. In the meantime, Dean and the boys enlist the help of a friend in the Coast Guard to find Joanna’s yacht. When it looks like opposition might keep them apart, Dean and Annie both jump overboard and swim to each other in the ocean. They are rescued by the Coast Guard ship, and it seems that
Annie has escaped her bonds and given up her fortune for Dean and the boys. In actuality Annie only needed to escape the loveless marriage and her childish, selfish ways. As it turns out, all of the money belongs to her. The film ends with Dean and Annie reunited and wondering about their life with money:

**Dean:** What could I possibly give you ever that you don’t already have?

**Annie:** [Looks down and smiles at their four boys.] A little girl.

Annie has come a long way from the Joanna she once was. In the beginning of the film we cannot imagine Joanna as a mother figure. Joanna is a self-absorbed spoiled brat in a loveless marriage and a meaningless life. As Annie, she has blossomed into a caring, kind, and loving woman who stands by her man and helps him build his dream business.

Lawrence O’Toole (1988) suggested that the overriding message of *Overboard* is that, “a woman becomes a better woman by learning to cut the crusts off sandwiches for children” (p. 62). When Annie shows that she is quite capable of handling the four boys, her “once empty life is now replaced with a fulfilled, challenging one” (Cunneff 1988:10). The only thing that could add to her now perfect life is conceiving a little girl with Dean. The change in Annie’s personality did not come easily. In the beginning of Dean’s plot for revenge, he forced Annie to cook, clean, and care for his children through total humiliation. By the end of the film, Annie had found her happiness through the joys of being a stay-at-home wife and mother. Joanna was a rich woman who constantly refused to procreate with her husband and, according to Dean, lived a meaningless existence. As Annie, Joanna found meaning in her life through the love and care that went into making an ideal nuclear family life and home for Dean and his boys.
Baby Boom. The second transformative childless woman who suddenly became a mother is J.C. Wiatt (Diane Keaton) in the 1987 film Baby Boom. Baby Boom is a comical look at a serious issue facing women and is much more explicit about its intention to make a statement about women who think they can achieve happiness in life through the commitment to their careers at the expense of husband and children. The film begins with a narrator setting the tone for the film:

Fifty-three percent of the American work force is female. Three generations of women have turned a thousand years of tradition on its ear. As little girls, they were told to grow up and marry doctors and lawyers. Instead, they grew up and became doctors and lawyers. They moved out of the pink collar ghetto and into the executive suite. Sociologists say the new working woman is a phenomenon of our time. Take J.C. Wiatt for example. Graduated first in her class at Yale, got her MBA at Harvard. Has a corner office at the corner of 58th and Park. She works 5 to 9. She makes six figures a year, and they call her the “Tiger Lady.” Married to her job, she lives with an investment banker married to his. They collect African art, co-own their coop, and have separate but equal IRA accounts. One would take it for granted that a woman like this has it all. [pause] One must never take anything for granted.

While the narrator is talking about women in the work force, we see J.C. heading to work in the morning on the crowded New York City streets, reading the newspaper, and becoming visibly annoyed by the slower moving elderly couple blocking her path. When she arrives at work, J.C. is handed a cup of coffee by a male subordinate. She announces her intention to work all weekend long and expects her subordinates to do the same. When one secretary protests that she had planned for six months to attend the ballet during the coming weekend, J.C. gives her a look of strong disapproval and continues to delegate the work load.
That afternoon J.C. has a meeting with her boss Fritz. The purpose of the lunch is for Fritz to tell J.C. that she is being considered for promotion to a partnership in the firm. Fritz wants to clear a couple of items up before the decision is finalized, and he cautions J.C. with the following:

Fritz: J.C., let me ask you something. How many hours a week do you work now?

J.C.: I don’t know, what 70 or 80?

Fritz: Well realize that as a partner, the hours are only going to get worse.

J.C.: I never complain about these things. You know me, I like work.

Fritz: Yeah I know, I know. Just let me get this off my chest, OK?... Look you know that normally I don’t think of you as a woman. But in this case, I do have to look at you as a woman/partner. I mean, what if you and Stephen decide to get married somewhere down the line. I mean what if he expects a wife?

J.C.: Fritz, first of all, may I? Stephen and I are not getting married. Basically you know how we are. We both eat, sleep, and dream our work. That’s why we’re together. Fritz I understand what it takes to make it.

Fritz: But do you understand the sacrifices you’re going to have to make? I mean a man can be a success and still have a personal life, a full personal life. My wife is there for me whenever I need her. I mean she raises the kids, she decorates, she, I don’t know what the hell she does, but she takes care of things. I guess what I’m saying is I’m lucky. I can have it all.

J.C.: Is that what you’re worried about? Forget it. I don’t want it all. I don’t.

J.C. has reached the pinnacle point in her career. She is being asked to become a partner in her account management firm. Motherhood is the furthest thing from her mind, and she has no intention of marrying her cohabitating boyfriend Stephen. In fact J.C. and Stephen decide they cannot even assume the responsibility of owning a pet, let alone a child. Susan
Faludi (1991) suggested that by having chosen career over marriage and maternity, J.C. "scoured away any trace of womanhood - of humanity" (p. 130).

The twist to the movie is that J.C.'s life and personality are turned upside down when her only relative, a long-lost cousin in England, dies and names J.C. the legal guardian of his toddler daughter Elizabeth. Not knowing that she is inheriting a child, J.C. leaves work to meet the contact person at the airport. The British social worker explains the situation to J.C. and hands Elizabeth over to her care. J.C. tells the woman:

J.C.: I can’t have a baby because I have a 12:30 lunch meeting.

Social Worker: She’s going to take care of you and love you very much...

J.C.: I’m not the right sort of person for this.

Social Worker: You’re the only person for this...once you get the hang of it, I’m sure you’ll be a wonderful mother.

J.C. is left standing in the airport looking dazed and questioning this new role, "Mother?" Indeed, it is as if J.C. has never handled a baby before in her life. She does unheard of things with the child such as place her with the coat check desk while trying to have a business luncheon and weighs Elizabeth on a vegetable scale in the supermarket to figure out what size diapers to purchase. Although J.C. has a Yale and Harvard education, it takes her several attempts to get Elizabeth’s diaper changed. In the process, she massacres five different diapers and ends up securing the “successful” diaper with black electrical tape.

Elizabeth is a clear disruption of J.C. and Stephen’s lives, and Stephen reads through the will to see if there is an “out clause.” He finds out that J.C. can either keep Elizabeth and raise her as her adopted daughter or find suitable parents for Elizabeth.
Stephen: You do want the out clause?

J.C.: Well of course I want the out clause. What do you think?

Stephen: I thought I heard your biological clock ticking.

J.C.: Oh Stephen, please.

J.C. has no intention of keeping Elizabeth and takes her to the social service office in the morning. Aware of the fact that it does not seem normal to give up a perfectly beautiful and healthy child for adoption, J.C. tells the social worker:

I hope this doesn’t appear like I’m a terrible person for not keeping her....I’m not the motherly type, I never have been, and I didn’t have little brothers and sisters, so you see, I didn’t baby-sit, plus I’m not, well I’m not you know natural with kids, I’m a manager. I’m a management consultant, I work 12 to 14 hours a day, and I just really feel that Elizabeth needs, uhm, a more equipped situation.

Since it will take a day to process the papers for Elizabeth’s adoption, J.C. has to take Elizabeth home and care for her one more evening. On the way back to her apartment, J.C. buys Elizabeth $1,400 worth of clothing and half the toys in stock at FAO Schwartz. Since it seems that J.C. will have to nurse Elizabeth through a cold, she also purchases a copy of Dr. Spock’s *Baby and Child*. During this evening of caring for the sick child, J.C. starts to grow more attached to Elizabeth, and there seems to be a maternal bond developing between J.C. and Elizabeth. When the time comes for J.C. to hand over custody of Elizabeth to what J.C. considers less than qualified parents, she decides to keep and care for Elizabeth herself. This is a decision that Stephen cannot except, and he leaves J.C. and Elizabeth. Naively, J.C. thinks that she will be able to care for Elizabeth and continue to be the “Tiger Lady” at work. The inability of J.C. to be both a mother and
“Tiger Lady” becomes apparent within a few days. The string of nannies that J.C. hires to care for Elizabeth while she is at the office do not work out. J.C.’s business accounts go to less senior employees, and her office is taken over by her protégé. The final blow comes when J.C. is passed over for the promotion to partner. Fritz is not pleased with J.C.’s decision to keep Elizabeth. As warned during their business luncheon several days earlier, he does not feel she can handle both jobs.

The role conflict between the “Tiger Lady” and her new found motherhood is too great, and J.C. decides to quit the fast paced New York City lifestyle and purchase an old farmhouse in Vermont. Since she is becoming more proficient in her role as mother, J.C. believes that she will be able to relax, sleep late, bake apple pies, and learn to quilt in her new quieter life with Elizabeth. What J.C. soon finds out is that Betty Friedan was not joking when she wrote the Feminine Mystique. Although clearing developing a strong love for Elizabeth, J.C. is not happy as a full-time stay-at-home mother. Her dissatisfaction with full-time parenting is coupled with the isolation in her secluded Vermont farmhouse, and J.C. suffers a nervous breakdown. J.C. confesses to the doctor (who is actually a veterinarian), “I need to work. I need people. I need a social life. I need sex.” At this point, the film tells us that J.C. has turned her life around too much. The presence of Elizabeth has forced J.C. to slow down her pace in life and take time out to enjoy the little things. At the same time, we are told that if you slow down too much, you might have a nervous breakdown. J.C. needs to strike a happy medium, and the remainder of the film is devoted to J.C.’s new idea to sell her own homemade gourmet baby food. J.C.’s self-employment allows her to have the flexible hours she needs to care
for Elizabeth, and by working in her home, Elizabeth can be nearby at all times. J.C. never has to let Elizabeth leave her sight.

The final twist in the film comes when J.C.’s company has been so successful that her old New York firm wants her to sell her company and come back to New York to work for them again. She is offered a very lucrative deal that includes a salary of approximately one million dollars a year. While J.C. is at first ecstatic about the deal, she decides that she is no longer the “Tiger Lady.” She then explains to the board members that she does not have to give anything up by working at her business from her house. She is a successful business woman who can be good to her employees, work with her daughter sleeping in a crib in her office, and hang a child’s mobile over her desk.6 This final scene shows that life with a baby and new country veterinarian love interests is worth more than all of the money in the world could buy. Having it all for a woman, according to this film, includes being able to set your own work agenda, loving a good father figure, and having a beautiful baby in your life. In order to become a responsible and caring mother, J.C. had to become more aware of the needs of others and re-evaluate her definition of success. Assuming the role of mother helped change J.C. in several facets of her life. She has slowed her pace, moved from the city to the picturesque town in Vermont, enjoys a more fulfilling love life, has a community of friends, and is a more compassionate boss to her subordinates.

6 Of course, caring for a child is easy when the child never physically ages or changes developmentally. Throughout the film Elizabeth remains the same size, same age, and same developmental level. Part of the challenge of raising children is that they grow and change. With each new developmental change, children have different needs. Since the film never addresses Elizabeth’s changing needs, it is easy to see that a woman could become very proficient in a mothering role.
In *Beaches* we meet CC Bloom (Bette Midler), a self-absorbed Broadway singer whose career comes before her personal relationships with her mother, her husband/ex-husband, her best friend, and her fiancé. The bulk of the film is devoted to the friendship between CC and her best friend Hillary Whitney (Barbara Hershey). The two form an unlikely friendship. Hillary is a well-bred, rich, reserved, cultured WASP lawyer, and CC is a working class Jew from the Bronx trying to strike it big in show business. CC is extremely talented, and her childhood spent in front of audiences helped her develop into a brash, egocentric, materialistic woman. CC’s rise to stardom begins when she is cast in the lead role of a vulgar Broadway musical about the invention of the brazier. CC is completely committed to her career and has a difficult time thinking of the needs of others even in simple conversations. For example, after Hillary and her husband Michael had seen CC’s Broadway show, CC asks Michael, “Enough about me, let’s talk about you. What did you think of me? Tell me the truth, what did you think about the show?”

CC’s personality is incompatible with motherhood beyond her self-absorption. CC knows that she could never give up her career to be a stay-at-home mother, and Hillary sees this as a flaw in CC’s personality. While spending an afternoon shopping together, CC and Hillary discuss the possibility of children in each of their marriages:

**Hillary:** I can’t wait to have a baby.

**CC:** I know what you mean.

**Hillary:** You do?

**CC:** Of course I do. Why wouldn’t I?
Hillary: I don’t know I just thought someone like you wouldn’t care about children. You’re so obsessed with your career and all.

CC: I’m not obsessed. Just because I work doesn’t mean that someone like me doesn’t want to have children.

Hillary: Well wanting them and caring for them properly are two different things. It’s a full-time job.

CC: For some people.

Hillary: Yes, the ones who take the responsibility seriously and don’t just have children to gratify their overweening egos.

Hillary obviously believes that CC would make a terrible mother and that she is only considering having children as one more form of her self-absorption. This fight between CC and Hillary serves as their last conversation for about one year. It is not until Hillary’s marriage ends while she is pregnant that she tries to rekindle her relationship with CC. CC’s egocentrism has already led to the demise of her own marriage, so she is free to move to California to help Hillary prepare for the arrival of her baby. While in California helping out Hillary, CC is called back to New York to star in a new production. Although CC returns to help Hillary with the delivery, CC is not much help and faints in the delivery room, taking all of the attention away from Hillary. CC returns to New York to resume her career, and Hillary begins her new life as a single working mother. It is not until Hillary develops an acute illness that CC does the first unselfish act of her life. After several years of being a single working mother, Hillary is diagnosed with an acute heart disease and given only a few months to live. She asks CC to come to California for the summer to help care for her daughter Victoria at their beach house. CC’s first reaction is to decline the invitation, but once she realizes that this will, in all likelihood, be Hillary’s
last summer, CC agrees to come. At first, CC and Victoria do not get along very well. Being somewhat of an over-grown child herself, CC demands too much attention, and Victoria feels that CC is invading her space and time with her mother. As the summer progresses and CC assumes more of the responsibility for the care of Victoria, CC and Victoria forge a friendship and mutual respect and admiration of each other. Pauline Kael (1989) suggested that "through the (slow, slow) deathwatch, CC learns to transcend her self-involvement; she becomes a better person" (p. 91). Hillary is aware of this transformation in CC and after Hillary's death, CC learns that Hillary wants her to be Victoria's adoptive mother. CC tells Victoria that she does not know what type of mother she would make since she has always been very selfish. CC is not sure what Hillary was thinking when she wrote her will, but CC agrees to be Victoria's mother if that is what Victoria wishes. There is nothing that CC would like more at this point than to be with Victoria.

The final scene of the film shows a softened CC singing her signature song *The Glory of Love* to a sold-out audience. After the show she takes Victoria by the hand and tells her the story of how CC and Hillary met on the beach in Atlantic City. Through her summer with Victoria and the death of her best friend, CC has become a changed woman. She no longer parades around on stage in outlandish, brash costumes. Her hair has been softened, her clothing elegant, and her singing has even taken on a softer tone. As a child CC sang *The Glory of Love* in a choppy staccato style and did not stop to think about the meaning of its words. With the loss of her closest friend, CC finally understands the meaning of *The Glory of Love* in a whole new way. She sings the song with warmth, and
we can almost see her thoughts of Hillary. The words to the song seem to represent the change that has taken place in CC through her mothering relationship with Victoria. She sings:

You've got to give a little, take a little, and maybe your poor heart breaks a little, that's the story of, that's the glory of love. You've got to laugh a little, cry a little, until the clouds go by a little, that's the story of that's the glory of love. As long as there's the two of us, we've got the world and all its stars. And when the world is through with us, we got each other's arms.

CC's selfish tendencies have faded, and she has placed Victoria at the center of her life. The self-absorbed CC that Hillary questioned while shopping in New York is no longer with us. She has not taken on the responsibility of mothering Victoria to "gratify her overweening ego," but cares for Victoria as the first completely selfless act she has ever done.

Differences in the Meanings of Childlessness by Choice and Chance

The representation of the childless women in the six films outlined in the above two sections provide evidence of certain underlying cultural beliefs about the women who are childless by choice (transformative) and women who are childless by chance (traditional life-course and traditional infertile). Because of their inability to fulfill the fundamental task of reproduction, childless women by chance sometimes view themselves as less than complete women. Traditional women experience childlessness as a loss and seek nurturing roles through other caregiver relationships. In these caregiver relationships, infertile women find an outlet for their need to mother people. While some of the infertile women "mothered" elderly people, Karen Carr of Unlawful Entry worked

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directly with small children as an elementary teacher. Single traditional childless women were characterized by their disappointment, loneliness, and their need to insulate themselves from further pain and rejection. They were unattractive, frumpy, aged beyond their chronological years, and generally unhappy. In contrast, childless women by choice embraced their independence and their choice to remain childless. These women were assertive, self-absorbed, nondomestic, and most often preoccupied with their careers. Since they did not view themselves as having a void in their womanhood, they did not look for alternative nurturing roles. They were not preoccupied with the possibility of being an incomplete woman. When faced with the possibility of the mother role, they immediately rejected the role and claimed that they were not the right sort of person for the job.

In addition to showing separate representations of women who are childless by chance and childless by choice, these films also over-simplify issues about motherhood and nonmotherhood. The films tended to dichotomize women into two separate groups: (1) women who mother or want to become mothers (as in the case of the three traditional life-course women) and women who do not want to mother (transformative women). Women who did not want to mother had personality traits that were different than the traditional life-course women. In order for the transformative women to become mothers, they had to become more like traditional life-course women to successfully perform the role of mother. In each case, once the transformative woman had made the transition to motherhood and accepted her role as mother, she was regarded by the other characters of the films as a more suitable woman. In order to perform the role of step-mother
proficiently the women had to become more loving, more feminine, less selfish, and more child-centered. Additionally the transformative women had to become less committed to fast track careers. While they were still able to work, they made changes in their career plans to accommodate their new role as mother.

The dichotomization of women into mothers/potential mothers and nonmothers is even more evident in the next section of this chapter. A number of personality traits are consistently associated primarily with transitional and transformative childless women that make them less than suitable candidates for motherhood. The incompatible personality traits profiled in the next section stand in stark contrast to the positive images of the traditional life-course women such as Sydney Ellen Wade, Annie Reed, and Sadie Radliff who easily stepped into the role of mother.

**Personality Traits and Behavioral Patterns of Childless by Choice Women**

A number of negative personality traits and behavioral patterns were found primarily among childless by choice women. These women were often portrayed negatively through characteristics such as selfishness, narcissism, cold-heartedness, mental instability, compulsive lying, overt sexuality, and homicidal tendencies. Part of my overall argument in this research project is that cultural representations of women are dichotomized into two distinct social categories including mothers/potential mothers and childless by choice women. This helps to create an understanding of women as either

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7 These characterizations are consistent with modern mothering ideology as outlined by researchers like Hays (1996), McMahon (1995), and Ruddick (1989).

8 Overt sexuality is used in films as both a negative trait and a positive trait. In Chapter 6 I discuss the use of sexuality as a positive trait and concentrate here on the use of sexuality to differentiate childless women from mothers or to raise questions about their personalities.
good (domestically oriented and mothers) or bad (career oriented, nondomestic nonmothers). I must concede, however, that I cannot make definitive statements about the representations of motherhood versus the representations of childless women since I do not have a representative sample of films involving mothers to complement my sample of films involving childless women. I have drawn my conclusions about cultural beliefs of mothers and mothering from three sources including: (1) the representations of mothers in the films of this sample; (2) the discussions by film critics of the representations of mothers; and (3) the research literature on dominant mothering ideology. I give a brief discussion of the mothering ideology research literature below, and the ideals of motherhood and mothering activities should be taken as a backdrop for the discussion of the childless by choice women.\textsuperscript{9}

Although the activities of mothers and the practice of mothering differ across historical, cultural, and racial divides, late twentieth century America seems to be saddled with a dominant mothering ideology that emphasizes an idealized model of motherhood that requires child-centeredness and constant care of children (see Glenn 1994; Hays 1996; and Ruddick 1989). Through her examination of expert advice guidebooks for parents, Hays (1996) found that an ideology of intensive mothering permeates these best-selling resource manuals. The intensive mothering ideology involves three elements: (1) children require a primary caregiver who is most often and most appropriately the biological mother; (2) child-rearing activities are "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally

\textsuperscript{9} My discussion of the mother images in the films of this study and the discussion of the representations of mothers by film critics is intertwined within my discussion of the negative representations of childless by choice women.
absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive”; and (3) children represent all that is innocent and pure and therefore deserve special value and treatment (Hays 1996:8-9).

Imbedded in this intensive mothering ideology is the notion that mothers are of high moral standards and are physically and mentally prepared for the job of raising the next generation. Sara Ruddick (1989) suggested that even if mothers do not immediately start their mothering role having embodied the ideals of motherhood, they are bound to become more caring, patient and peace-loving through the hands on activities associated with protecting, nurturing, and training children. Martha McMahon (1995) echoes this idea that the dominant cultural ideology regarding motherhood intimately links female morality (achieved through caring for others) with mothering activities. Survey research also provides us with some sense of the cultural beliefs about mothers as Callan’s (1983a and 1983b) studies found that parents are frequently described as concerned, loving, hard-working, conventional, and patient. Kaplan (1992) noted that media representations of mothers show them to be gentle, kind, and loving women who seek self-fulfillment through the bearing and rearing their children. Many of the personality traits and behavioral patterns associated with childless by choice women (transitional and transformative) are contradictive to these ideals about mothering. Personality traits or behavior patterns that conflict with mothering traits can be placed in seven broad categories, including:

1. Selfishness or Self-Absorption
2. Cold-Hearted or Mean
3. Consumption by Revenge
4. Mental Instability or a History of Mental Breakdown

5. Living a Life of Lies or Compulsively Lying

6. Sexuality as a Primary Source of Identification

7. Homicidal Tendencies

The repeated representation of transformative and transitional childless women as selfish, deceitful, mentally unstable, mean, cold-hearted, overtly sexualized, consumed by revenge, and homicidal helps to create and reinforce negative role images of childless women as a group and perpetuates the stigma associated with rejecting motherhood as a central role in a woman's life. The next section outlines the seven different themes identified with regard to the behavioral patterns or personality traits of the childless women in these films.

Selfish or Narcissistic

Fourteen of the childless women were portrayed as selfish or narcissistic. None of the infertile women of the films were classified as selfish or narcissistic.\textsuperscript{10} The selfish and narcissistic women include: Edwina Cutwater and Terry Hoskins of \textit{All of Me}; Catherine of \textit{Black Widow}; Meg MaGrath of \textit{Crimes of the Heart}; Joanna Stayton of \textit{Overboard}; CC Bloom of \textit{Beaches}; Katherine Parker of \textit{Working Girl}; Marianne Graves in \textit{Bird on a Wire}; Brontë Parrish in \textit{Green Card}; Suzanne Vale in \textit{Postcards from the Edge}; Caroline Polhemus in \textit{Presumed Innocent}; Madeline Ashton in \textit{Death Becomes Her}; Tracy Safian in \textit{Malice}; and Elise Elliot in \textit{The First Wives Club}. A few of these women (Edwina Cutwater, Brontë Parrish, and Elise Elliot) were able to become less selfish through developing caring or loving friendships with other people. Edwina and Brontë were

\textsuperscript{10} Although she was not portrayed as selfish or self-absorbed, Irene Walker of \textit{Prizzi's Honor} was greedy with money.
transformed through the love of a good man, and Elise’s self absorption was softened by her rekindled friendships with old college roommates.

In many cases these women were literally called selfish by some other character of the film. In the first scene involving Suzanne Vale (Meryl Streep) in the film *Postcards from the Edge* she is called a “spoiled, selfish, coked-up, little actress.” In the film *Crimes of the Heart*, Lenny MaGrath is angered by her selfish sister Meg and tells her, “It’s just that you have no respect for other people’s property. You just always take whatever you wanted.” In addition to Meg MaGrath and Suzanne Vale having been called selfish by other characters, Marianne Graves in *Bird on a Wire*, Madeline Ashton in *Death Becomes Her*, Caroline Polhemus of *Presumed Innocent*, and Brontë Parrish in *Greencard* were all called selfish by other characters in the films.

While some childless women were specifically called selfish, Edwina Cutwater (Lily Tomlin) in the film *All of Me* is a self-admitted selfish person. Edwina is a wealthy woman who has never been able to enjoy her life or her wealth because of her “lemon of a heart.” In order to have a second chance at life, Edwina hires a Middle-Eastern swami who claims he can transport her soul into the body of another human being. While performing this ceremony, Edwina’s soul is accidentally transferred into Roger Cobb’s (Steve Martin) body rather than the intended Terry Hoskins (Victoria Tennant). Roger is now stuck with half of his body belonging to himself and the other half of his body belonging to Edwina. Having despised each other before Edwina’s death and soul transference, Roger and Edwina compete for possession of his body. Eventually as they come to know and respect each other, Edwina asks the swami to releaser her soul and let
Roger have his freedom back. Upon asking this of the swami, Edwina tells Roger that this action is the first unselfish thing she has ever done in her life.

The self-admiration and adoration of several of the women was apparent from the decorations in their homes. A technique used to emphasize self-adoration in several of the films was to have self-portraits of the childless women as the focal point of the living room. Katherine Parker (*Working Girl*), Madeline Ashton (*Death Becomes Her*), CC Bloom (*Beaches*), and Elise Elliot (*The First Wives Club*) all had paintings of themselves in the style of Andy Warhol’s paintings of Marilyn Monroe. In each film an unsuspecting visitor would come across these striking portraits and immediately understand the egocentric nature of this woman.

Two comedies (*Death Becomes Her* and *The First Wives Club*) explicitly dealt with youth obsessed vain middle-aged childless women. In *Death Becomes Her*, both Helen Sharp (Goldie Hawn) and Madeline Ashton (Meryl Streep) are middle-aged women who pay a great deal of money to obtain a youth potion. The potion transforms their sagging wrinkling bodies into firm fit bodies of twenty year olds, and they are guaranteed eternal youth as long as they take care of their bodies. Unfortunately, the women do not heed the warning and each woman is killed. Because they have taken the youth potion, they immediately come back to “life” as the walking dead. Although each woman is murdered, they do not really die because of the youth potion. The ironic twist to the film is that as walking dead women, their skin deteriorates and must constantly be touched up with spray paint. The film ends by showing that in their quest to be young and beautiful they missed out on those things which are far more precious like family and friends.
The 1996 film *The First Wives Club* deals with three middle-aged women who are brought together through the suicide of their college room-mate. Realizing that each of the their husbands have recently left them for younger women, they form the First Wives Club and promise to exact revenge against their husbands. Brenda (Bette Midler) and Annie (Diane Keaton) each have one child, and Elise (Goldie Hawn) is a childless woman. There are stark differences in the personalities of these three women and many of these differences are drawn along the mother/non-mother line. Brenda and Annie have both committed their lives to helping their husbands start their successful businesses and raise their children. Elise’s life has been spent in her own successful career as an actress. At 46, Elise is struggling to maintain her youthful beauty and has had numerous plastic surgeries to enhance her body. The other two women have let nature take its progressive aging course. Elise is thrown into a fit of depression when she is caste in a new film as the mother of a young beautiful “babe.” Elise is beginning to realize that her days of playing the “babe” have passed. Depressed about her acting prospects and her aging body, she drunkenly asks a bartender, “Is this the face of a mother?” Apparently the film has drawn certain distinctions about the beauty and vanity of mothers versus non-mothers. Brenda and Annie wear either baggy clothing or tailored pant suits, and Elise struts around the film in tight pants and high heels. Additionally, Elise’s vanity does not allow her to pass a mirror without taking the opportunity to check her appearance. It is interesting that the film chose to create the childless woman rather than either of the mothers as the vain, narcissistic, chain-smoking beautiful drunk who has had numerous plastic surgeries. She is also the character who was most likely to end up committing suicide like their friend.
Cynthia. Unlike the mothers of the film who selflessly gave of themselves to their husbands and children, Elise is told how perfect she is for a theater character who is a bitter, unloved, and emotionally barren woman.

The idea that self-absorption and motherhood do not mix well comes across in three films that portray selfish mothers (*Big Business*, *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, and *Postcards from the Edge*). Rather than having selfish and narcissistic childless women as the source of certain problems, these films show three different mothers who have performed the role of mother less than successfully because of their emphasis on their own lives. As we saw in the beginning of this chapter, the narcissistic Sadie Shelton eventually gave her spoiled child over to her ex-husband and long-lost identical twin sister so that she could continue her own pursuits of happiness in big business and love affairs. The 1990 film *Postcards from the Edge* is the most explicit in representing the problems in a family when a mother is too narcissistic. Doris Mann (Shirley MacLaine) is a Hollywood star who has spent her life singing for the camera and audiences. She is the narcissistic, domineering, overshadowing drunken mother of Suzanne Vale (Meryl Streep). Although Doris means well, her own obsession with herself and her own career have helped to created Suzanne’s spoiled personality, lack of self-esteem, and addiction to drugs. Although Doris has always loved her daughter and meant well in how she raised her, Suzanne cuts to the heart of their relationship problems when she tells Doris:

You don’t want me to be a singer. You’re the singer. You’re the performer. I can’t possibly compete with you. What if somebody won? You want me to do well, just not better than you.
Suzanne is unable to get her own life under control until Doris concedes the spotlight and allows Suzanne to reach her full potential without having to be overshadowed or out-performed by her own mother.

Finally, the last film in this sample to show how a narcissistic mother can ruin a child’s life is the 1996 film *The Mirror Has Two Faces*. Rose Morgan (Barbra Streisand) is the ugly ducking daughter in a family of otherwise beautiful women. Rose’s mother Hannah (Lauren Bacall) was so concerned about having two beautiful daughters that she ended up creating Rose’s self-esteem problem in regards to her physical appearance. Despite Rose’s many accomplishments as a talented professor, Hannah insists on constantly correcting Rose’s physical appearance. Hannah’s obsession with physical appearance is a direct cause of Rose entering into a marriage with a man who does not love her. Rose settles for this marriage because she fears that there will be no other proposals in her lifetime. Although Barbra Streisand tried to create a film to state that outward physical appearance is unimportant, she ended up reinforcing the belief that personal happiness can come through personal beauty. In the end, Hannah’s long wished for physical make-over of Rose takes place.

The idea that selfishness and self-absorption are negative personality traits that conflict with good mothering skills comes through loud and clear in films such as *The Mirror Has Two Faces* and *Postcards from the Edge*. Social researchers have noted that contemporary mothers are well aware of the fact that selfishness is not a good characteristic for mothers. The majority of the mothers interviewed by McMahon (1995) noted that a woman’s selfishness would make her a bad mother. Additionally, Hays
(1996) found that mothers actively condemn selfishness and selfish people as part of their mothering role. The mothers of Hays’s study consistently held the belief that appropriate mothering involves unselfish nurturance of children.

Cold-Hearted or Mean

The title song to the 1996 remake of the Disney classic *101 Dalmatians* sums up this next negative characteristic of childless women. The song reminds all of the film’s viewers of the villainous nature of Cruella DeVil:

_Cruella DeVil, Cruella DeVil, if she doesn’t scare you, no evil thing will._
_To see her is to take a sudden chill....All innocent children had better beware, she’s like a spider waiting for the kill. Look out for Cruella DeVil....She ought to be locked up and never released, the world was such a wholesome place until Cruella, Cruella DeVil._

As the puppy killing madwoman with “no use for babies,” Cruella DeVil epitomizes the childless cold-hearted villain. Of course, Disney’s *101 Dalmatians* is a children’s film and the evil characteristics of villains are often exaggerated. Nonetheless, this remake not only over-emphasizes Cruella’s mean nature, but the baby hating villain is also set within the context of an otherwise pronatalist film message. The sweet and innocent newlywed couple Anita and Roger (Joely Richardson and Jeff Daniels) are thrilled to find out that they are expecting their first child only a short time after their marriage. In their excitement, they tell Cruella about the pregnancy. Cruella replies:

_Cruella:* Oh you poor thing, I’m so sorry._

_Anita:* We’re very excited about it Cruella.

_Cruella:* You can’t be serious.

_Roger:* She is._
Cruella: Well, what can I say. Accidents will happen.

Not only are Roger and Anita thrilled to have their first child, but the film ends with Roger and Anita surrounded by their hundreds of Dalmatian dogs in their Dalmatian house. Apparently they saw no need to spay and neuter the animals. They talk about how great their lives are because they have each other, their daughter, their nanny, two great dogs, and the dogs have their children, and their children have their children. The last thing we hear in the film is Anita telling Roger, “Roger darling, I have the most wonderful news.” It is time for Roger and Anita to have their second child. Cruella’s cold-heartedness and desire to kill small puppies might not have been so effective if it were not set within the context of the film’s message about the inherent goodness of procreation.

In addition to Cruella DeVil, mean or cold-hearted childless women appear in just under a third of all of the films. Descriptions of childless women by other film characters include: Caroline Polhemus as the “blonde bitch” (Presumed Innocent); Lindsey Brigman as the “queen bitch of the universe” (The Abyss); Rose Radliff’s “heart the size of an unstuffed pinto bean” (Big Business); Meredith’s Johnson’s “heart made out of the plastic they use for football helmets” (Disclosure); Elise Elliot as the “bitter, unloved, emotionally barren woman” (The First Wives Club); and Brontë Parrish as the woman who “likes [her] plants better than people” (Green Card). A more thorough description is given of Laura Alden in the film (Wolf). A prospective suitor tells Laura:

You know, I think I understand what you’re like now. You’re very beautiful, and you think men are only interested in you because you’re beautiful. But you want them to be interested in you because you’re you. The problem is that aside from all of that beauty, you’re not very interesting. You’re rude, you’re hostile, you’re sullen, you’re withdrawn. I know you want someone to look past all of that at the real person underneath. But the only reason that anyone would bother to look past all
of that is because you’re beautiful. Ironic isn’t it? In an odd way, you’re your own problem.

A number of the transformative women were described in the films as having been cold-hearted and mean. There were no traditional life-course, traditional infertile, or transitional women who were described as mean or cold-hearted. Apparently this distinction is bestowed only upon women who have voluntarily chosen not want to have children.

**A Life Consumed by the Need to Seek Revenge.**

A number of women were unable to focus their lives on anything except their need to seek revenge. While this characterization of voluntarily childless women is not unique to the mother and non-mothering axis, I place it in this section because it does contrast with the belief that maternal work leads to or requires patients, love, nurturance, and peaceful thinking (see Ruddick 1989). Films with the theme of revenge include *Sudden Impact, Batman Returns, Prizzi’s Honor, Death Becomes Her,* and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle.* In addition to the major theme of revenge in these five films, revenge also plays a minor role in the lives of the women of *Ruthless People, Thelma and Louise,* and *Malice.* In their quest for their own personal justice, women seeking revenge often found it through the death of their victimizers or perceived victimizers. The first of these unforgiving women was Jennifer Spencer (Sondra Locke) in the Dirty Harry film *Sudden Impact.* Jennifer is the female equivalent of Clint Eastwood’s tough guy Dirty Harry and seeks her own brand of justice when the judicial system fails her. While having a drink with Harry Callahan, Jennifer tells him that, “this is an age of lapse responsibilities and
defeated justice. Today an eye for an eye means only if you’re caught and even then it’s an indefinite postponement and let’s settle out of court.” Jennifer developed this attitude after she and her sister were gang raped ten years earlier, and the assailants had escaped criminal prosecution. Unable to let go of the past and haunted by the fact that the rapists were never punished, Jennifer hunts down and kills six different people who were involved in the gang rape. When Dirty Harry figures out that Jennifer has been killing these ‘scumbags,’ he sympathizes with her and fudges the evidence to cover up her involvement. Harry is satisfied that justice has been served. A second film to follow a similar plot line is *Batman Returns*, in which the meek secretary Selina Kyle (Michelle Pfeiffer) discovers more than she should know about her corrupt boss’s business dealings. Selina is pushed out of a skyscraper window by her boss and is presumed to have plunged to her death. In a strange twist, Selina is resurrected as Catwoman and spends the remainder of the film seeking her own personal justice through her plot to kill her corrupt boss.

The two films *Prizzi’s Honor* and *Death Becomes Her* are built on female jealousy turned to spiteful revenge. In *Prizzi’s Honor*, Maerose Prizzi (Anjelica Huston) sets up an elaborate plan to break up the relationship between her lost lover Charlie (Jack Nicholson) and his new wife Irene Walker (Kathleen Turner). Maerose is successful in setting a trap for Irene that forces her Mafia family to put a contract out on Irene. The irony of the story is that Charlie is contracted to kill his own wife at the same time that Irene is contracted to kill Charlie. As it turns out, Charlie is faster with a knife than Irene is with a gun. Having killed Irene, Charlie returns to his former love Maerose to presumably live happily ever after. Female jealousy also gets the best of Helen Sharp (Goldie Hawn) in
Death Becomes Her. When Helen's friend Madeline (Meryl Streep) steals Helen's fiancé Ernest (Bruce Willis), Helen spends seven years of her life pining for him in a mental institution. Mistaking the advice of her therapist, Helen spends the next seven years planning her revenge that will destroy Madeline and get her Ernest back. The character whose revenge is supposed to put fear in the minds of every working parent in America is Peyton Flanders (Rebecca de Mornay), the crazed nanny in The Hand that Rocks the Cradle (discussed at length in Chapter 6).

Mental Instability or History of Mental Breakdown

Of all of the negative characterizations of childless women, the mental instability characteristic is the only one that was used in the portrayal of infertile women. In both Fatal Attraction and The Hand that Rocks the Cradle the mental instability of the childless women was attributable, at least in part, to having suffered a miscarriage. These films suggest that the trauma of a miscarriage coupled with the intense ticking of the biological clock can lead to severe depression, delusions, and homicidal tendencies. In addition to these two infertile women, a number of the transformative and transitional women had suffered mental breakdowns in the past (Meg MaGrath in Crimes of the Heart and Dian Fossey in Gorillas in the Mist) or were currently being portrayed in the films as mentally unstable. The mildest case was Nadia Gates's (Kim Basinger) loss of inhibitions when she had the slightest bit of alcoholic beverages in the film Blind Date. The worst cases involved women who terrorized other people as a part of their mental instability (Misery, Fatal Attraction, and The Hand that Rocks the Cradle). For Jennifer Spencer of Sudden

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11 Both of these films are discussed at length in Chapter 6 during the theme of childless women as a threat to the nuclear family.
Impact and Selina Kyle of Batman Returns, their mental state was brought about by having been the victim of either a gang rape or an attempted murder. However in Stephen King’s horror film Misery, there is no explanation given for Annie Wilkes’s mental instability. Kathy Bates gave an academy award winning performance of Annie Wilkes, a woman prone to severe episodes of depression, bouts with uncontrollable rage, and a tendency towards killing people who stood in her way of happiness. This psychotic woman had a history of killing babies while working as the head nurse in a maternity ward. The film insinuates that Annie was named head of the maternity ward only after she had pushed her predecessor over a cliff. It also comes out that Annie seems to have killed her own father in the same manner that she killed the maternity nurse. Annie’s one source of pleasure in life is reading Paul Sheldon’s (James Caan) romance novels about a fictitious heroine named Misery. Annie claims to be Paul’s “number one fan” and is thrilled when she is able to save his life after a near fatal car accident. Annie’s trust in Paul is destroyed when she reads his last Misery novel and finds that Paul has killed off her heroine. In an attempt to revive her beloved Misery, Annie holds Paul captive in her home for several months and forces him to write a new novel to bring Misery back to life. Paul is subjected to the dangers of Annie’s rage and depression and eventually must fight for his life at the expense of hers. The audience is supposed to take comfort in the knowledge that these crazed villainous women are killed in the final act of the films. Peyton Flanders was killed by Claire, Paul Sheldon is able to finally kill Annie Wilkes and the most famous of all psychotic femme fatales, Alex Forrest, is killed in the suspense thriller Fatal Attraction.
An exception to suspense thrillers and horror films ending with the killing off of the *femme fatales* is the 1992 film *Basic Instinct*. The film begins with an erotic sex scene that turns into a brutal murder as the unidentified *femme fatale* savagely murders her lover with an ice pick. The prime suspect is Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone) “who writes murder mysteries that have a nasty way of predicting actual crimes” (Schickel 1992:65). Of course, the books also give Catherine a perfect alibi, and it is up to police detective Nick Curran (Michael Douglas) to decide if she is the guilty party. The police psychologists describe the killer in *Basic Instinct* as someone with a “devious diabolical mind” and a “deep seated obsessional hatred and an utter lack of respect for human life.” Catherine has either written a novel several years earlier that would provide her with an alibi for this current homicide, or someone has read her book and is trying to frame Catherine for the murder. The second suspect is also another single childless over-thirty woman (Beth Garner played by Jeanne Tripplehorn). The film suggests that both women may have mental problems, but never clarifies this point. The film also never provides a satisfying answer as to the identity of the real killer. In the end Beth has been killed by Nick, and all of the evidence points to Beth as having committed the opening scene murder. While the detectives have neatly wrapped up their murder files, we are left to question Catherine and her intentions. The final scene shows Nick and Catherine having sex in the same manner in which the opening scene was performed. The suspense builds as the audience does not know if Catherine will now kill Nick. The climax is actually only

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12 This film had received a good deal of negative publicity generated from the gay and lesbian community because the primary murder suspects are either lesbians or bisexual women (Burke 1993), but both Schickel (1992) and Ansen (1992b) argue that Catherine’s bisexuality is not a cause of the murders but another aspect of her shock value personality.
a sexual climax, and Nick is not harmed by Catherine. However, we are still left to wonder if she is a crazed murderer because of an ice pick that Catherine leaves under their bed.

**Living a Lie or Compulsive Lying as Part of their Personality**  

In just over one third of the films, deceit was a significant component of the lives of the childless women. The childless by choice women did not tell little white lies, but were more often wrapped up in a life of deceit. Compulsive lying seemed to come easily for many of these characters. Meg MaGrath (Jessica Lange) in *Crime of the Heart*, sat with her ailing grandfather and told tall tale after tall tale about her fictitious career in Hollywood. Meg could not bring herself to tell her grandfather that she had failed miserably in pursuing a career as an actress in Hollywood. Sandy Brozinski (Bette Midler) of *Outrageous Fortune* and Wanda Gerschwitz (Jamie Lee Curtis) of *A Fish Called Wanda* spent their lives conning other people into giving them what they wanted or needed, and cocktail waitress Gwen (Goldie Hawn) of *Housesitter* was dubbed “the Ernest Hemingway of bullshit.” Gwen had a unique gift of making up her life as she went along. She masterfully charmed everyone around her through her fluent use of convenient lies and stories. Other women were living lives of lies and deceit including Catherine Tramell of *Basic Instinct*, Selina Kyle of *Batman Returns*, Catherine of *Black Widow*, Brontë Parrish of *Green Card*, Peyton Flanders of *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, Tracy

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13 This section outlines numerous characters who lived lives of lies or were compulsive liars. In most cases, the lies were seen as a negative aspect of the women’s personalities, however, in some comedies (*Sister Act*, *Sister Act 2*, and *Working Girl*), the heroines lies were forgiven and portrayed as an undercover operation of necessity rather than a life of deceit.
Safian of *Malice*, Annie Wilkes of *Misery*, Irene Walker of *Prizzi’s Honor*, and Jennifer Spencer of *Sudden Impact*. Still other women had told a specific lie to create deception in the films *All of Me, Congo, Disclosure, Fatal Attraction, Presumed Innocent*, and *Wolf*. A number of women invented pasts in order to portray a more conventional upbringing (*Fatal Attraction, Housesitter, Malice, Presumed Innocent, and Up Close and Personal*). Lies and deceit are common to the representations of women without children. Since mothering is idealized as an act of female morality (McMahon 1995), what does this say about nonmothers who were wrapped up in lives of deceit?

**Sexuality as a Primary Source of Identification**

Media critic E. Ann Kaplan has noted that there is some cultural ambiguity with regard to the association of mothers and sexuality; however, she has also noted that Hollywood films show a distinct absence of sex in representations of motherhood (1991; 1992; 1994). Kaplan states, “What representations still cannot produce is images of sexual women, who are also mother...” (1992:183). Suzanna Danuta Walters (1995) has made an even stronger argument about mothers and sexuality stating:

One of the classic ways Hollywood tells women to get back in the kitchen and obey her master is by punishing her for wayward behavior...Hollywood has always maintained its support of oppressive social roles for women by refusing to acknowledge that women are both sexual beings and potential parents at the same time. (P.140-141)

The incompatibility of sexuality and motherhood was also evident in the few representations of mothers in this sample. Many mothers in these films were the actual mothers of the childless characters (*Best Friends, Agnes of God, Moonstruck, Beaches, Green Card, Postcards from the Edge, Frankie & Johnny, Sleepless in Seattle, Dead Man Walking, Waiting to Exhale, and The Mirror Has Two Faces*) or mother-in-laws (*Best
Friends, Blind Date, Housesitter, and French Kiss). As was discussed above in regards to Hannah Morgan (The Mirror Has Two Faces) and Doris Mann's (Postcards from the Edge) obsession with their own beauty, both were portrayed as having poor parenting skills that were direct causes of their daughter's personal problems. Hannah and Doris were also the only two mothers represented in these films who were supposed to have been beautiful sexy women in their younger years. Both Hannah and Doris were intent on keeping themselves beautiful throughout their later years. All other representations of mothers of childless women (or their mother-in-laws) lacked any hint of sexuality as a part of their self-identity.

In addition to the portrayal of childless women's mothers, several of the films portrayed mothers who were about the same age as the childless women (9 to 5, Best Little Whore House, Fatal Attraction, Big Business, A Fish Called Wanda, Presumed Innocent, The Hand that Rocks the Cradle, Disclosure, and Waiting to Exhale). With the exception of Big Business, all of the mothers in these eight films were portrayed as less sexually appealing than the childless women. The difference in sexual representation of mothers versus the childless women in these films is striking and perhaps a scene from A Fish Called Wanda best exemplifies this difference. Wanda (Jamie Lee Curtis) is a young woman (30) who is defined in this film by her sexuality and is explicitly described as "a very sexy girl." Archie Leach (John Cleese) is a reserved Englishman stuck in a marriage to a woman he stopped loving years ago. The film contrasts Wanda's love affair with Otto (Kevin Kline) to that of Archie and his wife Wendy (Maria Aitken) in a scene that cuts back and forth between two different couples. First we see Wanda and Otto
forcefully removing their clothing for each other and throwing the clothing away in a carefree manner. Next we are shown Archie and Wendy sitting on their opposing twin beds with their backs to each other laboriously removing their clothing. Otto removes Wanda’s boot and inhales deeply from it as Archie removes his socks and sniffs them before placing them in the wash hamper. Otto rips off Wanda’s underwear and places it on his head while Archie clips his toenails and scratches his head. Otto spreads Wanda’s legs and enthusiastically makes love to her while Wendy carefully removes her underwear from beneath her nightgown. The scene ends with Otto’s climax and satisfaction while Archie ignores his wife’s drowning sounds of family problems. While *A Fish Called Wanda* presents the sexual differentiation of married mothers and childless single women in a comical sense, suspense films such as *Presumed Innocent, Fatal Attraction*, and *Disclosure* maintain that the sexual promiscuity of single childless women is no laughing matter (see Chapter 6). The married mothers of *Presumed Innocent, Fatal Attraction*, and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* even displayed feelings of sexual inadequacy.

A qualitative difference in the sexual representations of mothers and non-mothers is in the act of sex itself. Mothers are never shown having sex with their husbands (or any another man). In the scenes in which women who are mothers (or step-mothers) are supposed to have sex, the women are either interrupted before they can make love to their husbands (*Fatal Attraction*) or are shown just before or just after the act of sex (*Baby Boom, Overboard, Presumed Innocent, Waiting to Exhale, The First Wives Club*). For example, in *Baby Boom*, J.C. Wiatt and the local veterinarian finally connect on a romantic level, and after a night spent at the local dance, they consummate their relationship. We
do not see the sexual activity, but only see them kissing in the kitchen. As viewers, we are not shown the bedroom scene and are reunited with the couple the morning following their incredible night of passion. In contrast to the lack of sexual content in films with mothers, 60 percent of the childless women in this sample have sexual relationships. Like the mothers, some of the childless women are shown either as the sexual activity is about to begin or the morning after, but eighteen of the childless women are shown actually engaging in sexual activity. Of these sexually active women, nine were shown fully exposed during a sex scene.

In addition to the tendency to represent childless women in sexual activities, at least one third of the childless women in this sample were described as beautiful, sexy, hot to trot, or objectified by a combination of a male character(s) and the camera angles. Archie Leach describes Wanda Gerschwitz in *A Fish Called Wanda* as “the sexiest, most beautiful girl I have ever seen my entire life.” Caroline Polhemus (Greta Scacchi) of *Presumed Innocent* is described as a “beautiful sexy gal” by her boss and current lover. In *Bull Durham* Annie Savoy (Susan Sarandon) goes to great lengths to establish her sexuality and becomes perturbed with Nuke (Tim Robbins) when he calls her cute. Annie tells Nuke, “I want to be exotic and mysterious, not cute.” Several sexually repressed women underwent a beauty metamorphosis in the films like *Romancing the Stone, Moonstruck, Batman Returns*, and *French Kiss*. Even the ugly duckling childless woman Rose Morgan of *The Mirror Has Two Faces* is turned into a beautiful and sexy woman by the end of the film. Rose’s students are so stunned by her new sexual look that Rose has
to stop the class and address her new found appearance. She tells the students, “Yes, I have breasts. They cannot, however, be the subject of one of your papers.”

The sexual representations of childless women moved to borderline pornographic representations with the release of the 1992 film Basic Instinct. Catherine Tramell is the woman who likes to defy conventionality just because she can. She knowingly undresses in full view of interested men, uncrosses her legs to expose her underwearless genitals, sleeps with men because she “likes fucking them,” and is the only bi-sexual woman in the sample. Basic Instinct is the first film to use explicit language to describe the sex or sexuality of a childless character as exemplified by the description of Catherine by her male lover Nick Curran. Nick tells Catherine’s lesbian lover that he thinks she is the “fuck of the century.” This use of explicit language by and about childless women comes through in Batman Returns, Malice, Sliver, and Disclosure. In addition to Basic Instinct, 1992 saw the entrance of Michelle Pfeiffer’s Catwoman in Batman Returns. Catwoman was the sexual dark side of the otherwise timid and repressed secretary Selina Kyle. Upon transferring herself into Catwoman, Selina tells her cat, “I don’t know about you Miss Kitty, but I feel much yummier.” Catwoman is later described by the Penguin as “just the pussy I’ve been looking for.”

Camera shots are often used to objectify childless women. While being followed by her male counterpart, Joan Wilder (Kathleen Turner) in Romancing the Stone is objectified when the camera focuses in on a long lasting look at Joan’s exposed upper thigh through her ripped skirt. One of Goldie Hawn’s most adored assets is her behind which is shown in close-up shots during both Bird on a Wire and Overboard. The first
time we see Meredith Johnson (Demi Moore) in the film Disclosure is on her first day on the job. The camera, taking the gaze of Tom Sanders (Michael Douglas), focuses on her legs and behind and follows her as she climbs a staircase. She is wearing a tight skirt and high heels that show off her shapely curves. Again, there is a clear break between mothers and non-mothers in terms of objectification. An example of the break in sexual objectification between childless women and mothers can be seen in the film Overboard. Joanna Stayton (Goldie Hawn) is constantly shown in thong swim suits as she parades around her yacht waiting impatiently for Dean Proffitt to finish remodeling her closet. Joanna knows that she is beautiful and sexy, yet becomes upset when she realizes that Dean occasionally sneaks a peak at her scantily covered backside. In contrast to the camera shots that zoom in on Joanna’s bare behind, as Annie Proffitt mother of four she is originally dressed in frumpy over-sized dresses that the boys picked up at a local yard sale. When Annie finally purchases clothing that fit, she chooses jeans and button down shirts. On the night that Annie and Dean finally consummate their relationship, we see them kissing in the bed and then the camera cuts away to the morning after. Although Annie is nude in these scenes, her body is fully covered by either Dean or the sheets. Annie makes an effort to keep herself covered by the sheets and only exposes her bare back when she sits up to see the new washing machine that Dean and the boys have purchased for her.

Unlike the representations of mothers in these films, sex, sexuality, objectification, and explicit foul language are all used in conjunction with representations of traditional and transformative childless women. Traditional life-course and traditional infertile women are rarely shown in sexual activity. The only traditional infertile woman shown
partially naked and having sex was Karen Carr of *Unlawful Entry*. Stanley Kauffmann (1992) attributes this to the director’s reliance on “tease stuff as superfluous shots of Stowe in a skimpy bathing suit” (p. 34). With the exception of the objectification of infertile Karen, women who wanted to be mothers and women who did not want to be mothers had different approaches to the use of their sexuality. Childless by choice women were sexually uninhibited while traditional or traditional life-course women were more likely to be sexually discreet.

**Homicidal Tendencies**

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the childless women’s behavioral traits is their tendency towards murder or attempted murder. In their defense, two women murdered men who had either raped them or were raping their friend (*Sudden Impact* and *Thelma and Louise*); however, the majority of the murders were for selfish gains or profit. The women of *Black Widow*, *Malice*, and *Prizzi’s Honor* all committed murder for money. Alex Forrest of *Fatal Attraction*, Annie Wilkes of *Misery*, Peyton Flanders of *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, and Catherine Tramell of *Basic Instinct* all committed or attempted to commit murder as part of their mental instability. Revenge, as was noted above, played a key role in the murders committed by Madeline Ashton and Helen Sharp14 of *Death Becomes Her* and Selina Kyle of *Batman Returns*.

Certainly, childless women are not the only women who have committed murder or been pushed to kill someone in Hollywood films. There are a few films in which women who were mothers or surrogate mothers either committed murder or were forced

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14 Helen had planned to kill Madeline, but Ernest had already killed Madeline before Helen had the opportunity.
into positions of defense. The difference between the violent actions of childless women and the violent actions of mothers is that mothers kill to protect their families from direct threats or perceived danger. Both Alex Forrest of Fatal Attraction and Peyton Flanders of The Hand that Rocks the Cradle have final physical battles with the mothers Beth Gallagher and Claire Bartel. Both Beth and Claire win the battles by killing the villainous childless woman. These murders are justified not only for immediate self defense, but are also necessary to protect their intact nuclear family. Although she is never in a physical battle with Caroline Polhemus, Rusty Sabich’s wife Barbara of Presumed Innocent feels she must destroy Caroline before Caroline destroys Barbara’s family. Caroline is the woman who had cast a spell over Barbara’s husband and rather than commit suicide herself, Barbara fights for her man and child by destroying the destroyer. Suzanna Danuta Walters (1995) noted that in Aliens and Terminator 2 warrior-like mothers15 are forced to bear arms to defend their children and the entire human race. These muscular mothers do not kill for their own personal gain or financial earnings but because they are the final defense against the annihilation of the human race. This noble cause is far removed from the psychotic killings that are committed by childless women. With the exception of Presumed Innocent, each mother is fully justified in taking the life of another to directly defend their own lives. A final difference between the killings is that the warrior mothers in Aliens and Terminator 2 were fighting off futuristic evil monsters, and the childless women attacked innocent human beings.

Making Sense of Transitional and Transformative Women

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15 Actually Aliens heroine Ripley does not have any children of her own, but is protecting her pseudodoughter from the evil aliens.
The majority of the Hollywood portrayals of transitional and transformative women used negative behavioral and personality characteristics to create them as bad or evil women. Unlike the traditional and traditional life-course women who were often portrayed as loving, kind, sweet, innocent, and motherly, the traditional and transformative women were often classified as cold-hearted, mentally unstable, homicidal, deceitful, narcissistic, selfish, consumed by revenge, and/or overtly sexual. Znaniecki (1965) theorized that in order to successfully perform a role, an individual had to possess certain personality traits. Taken together these films suggest that an underlying belief about women who chose childlessness is that they generally have negative personality traits. The notable exception to the portrayals of transformative women as bad women is the specialized group of transformative women who have chosen childlessness as part of the piety in their role as nuns. Sister Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon) of Dead Man Walking and the quasi-nun Sister Mary Clarence (Whoopi Goldberg) of Sister Act and Sister Act 2 were women who were able to avoid negative stereotypes of women who were childless by choice through their commitment to a life with God.

In concluding my thoughts about the different meanings of childlessness based on the reasons for the childless status, it is important to note once again the dichotomization of women into two specific categories with differing personality and behavioral traits. The films depict women as either mothers/potential mothers or nonmothers. The category of mothers/potential mothers includes traditional women who want to be mothers but cannot because of their infertility. Mothers and potential mothers are portrayed as kind, caring, loving, supportive, and selfless. Mothers do not work full-time jobs and devote the bulk of their time to their family responsibilities.

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16 The category of mothers/potential mothers includes traditional women who want to be mothers but cannot because of their infertility.
Nonmothers, as we have seen through the themes identified in this chapter, hold personality and behavioral traits that make them less than desirable for the mothering role.

Race Matters

As a final thought to this chapter, I would like to address the matter of race for a moment. In both Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, I noted that lack of racial diversity among the women of this sample. With so few women of color, I am reluctant to make definitive statements about racial differences in the meaning of childlessness; however, there is an interesting point to address regarding the representation of African American childlessness. All of the evil women of this sample whether traditional, traditional life-course, transformative, or transitional were white. In total there were three African American childless women of this sample including: Lee Cullin (Vanessa Williams) of *Eraser*, Savannah Jackson (Whitney Houston) of *Waiting to Exhale*; and Sister Mary Clarence/Deloris Van Cartier (Whoopi Goldberg) of *Sister Act* and *Sister Act 2*. In each case, it was difficult to classify these women into specific categorizations of their childlessness because of the lack of information provided in the films. Savannah Jackson was traditional life-course in terms of wanting to find a husband, but she never mentioned if she wanted to have children. Deloris Van Cartier was most often posing as Sister Mary Clarence so children were not a question for this quasi-nun. The film *Eraser* is really a male action/adventure film with little need for a woman character, but Lee Cullin provides the role of the modern day damsel in distress. She is actually a small part of the film, and too little information is provided about her personal life to conclude her feelings about

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17 I do not include the character Robin (Lela Rochon) of *Waiting to Exhale* because she becomes a mother by the end of the film.
marriage and family. What is interesting about all of these African American childless women, regardless of their childlessness classification, is that they are all portrayed in positive roles. Lee Cullin entered a special branch of the FBI's witness protection program because she was willing to testify against her high tech arms smuggling employer. The FBI agents marveled over the fact that they had a "real live bona fide honest person" to protect. In *Waiting to Exhale*, Savannah tried to get her mother to look past the fact that she was 32 years old and single by telling her mother, "I have a job, I have friends, I have interests that you don't even ask about...I'm smart, I work hard, and I'm a good person." Savannah was a self-described good woman who performed a number of positive social roles. The positive portrayal of African American female childlessness comes at a time of growing concern about the lapse of African American male family responsibility (Wilson 1987 and 1996). The biggest problem facing African American women, as detailed in *Waiting to Exhale*, is the lack of eligible black men (see Ansen 1996; Samuels and Adler 1996). The film builds a positive image of an African American childless woman who feels that the men in her life have been less than worthy of her love. Savannah's message to single childless black women is that it is better to embrace your singleness than waste your time with a loser.

Although Deloris Van Cartier started out in *Sister Act* with a shady past and a married lover, her time in the convent transformed her into a "woman of virtue, generosity, and love." Deloris was called upon in a second film (*Sister Act 2*) to work her good deeds by bringing together a group of floundering inner-city high school students and transforming them into an award winning choir. This pattern of African American
women possessing positive personality traits also appears in several films outside of the realm of the sampling criteria. Films such as The Bodyguard, Boys on the Side, Eddie, Corrina Corrina, Jumpin’ Jack Flash, and The Associate all star either Whitney Houston or Whoopi Goldberg and depict childless African American women with admirable personality traits. Although there are only a few instances of leading female African American childless characters in mainstream Hollywood films, these women, unlike so many of their white counterparts, are positively represented.
CHAPTER 6

THE LIVES OF THE SINGLE CHILDLESS WOMEN

Single, never married women constituted the largest proportion of the childless characters in the 67 films. Fifty-six percent of the women in this sample were single women who had never been married. 1 Although the single childless women are a diverse group, a number of themes regarding these women are identified in this chapter. The themes associated with single childless women include:

1. Occasional Social Pressure to Marry and Have Children
2. Single Childless Women and Their Contradictory Relationships with Men
   a) Breathing New Life into Washed-Up Men
   b) The Single Childless Women as a Threat to the Nuclear Family
   c) The Man Shortage - Two Single Women in Competition for the Same Man
   d) What Man Shortage? - Two Men Vying for the Same Childless Woman
3. Childless Women's Lives as Lonely but Not Spinsters
   a) Defined as Lonely by Others
   b) Older Age and Loneliness

In addition to the themes explored below, 94 percent of the single childless women worked in paid employment. Employment themes regarding all childless women are discussed in depth in Chapter 8 and are therefore not covered in this chapter.

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1 In addition to discussing the single, never married women, this chapter also encompasses the divorced and widowed women who were ready to start new relationships.
Occasional Social Pressure to Marry and Have Kids

An overriding theme that childless women express in the experiential literature on childlessness is the social pressure they feel to conform to standards to marry and have children. Jane Bartlett (1994) discussed the direct social pressures that childless women feel from family members and friends to procreate. The women of Bartlett's study recalled countless times when they had heard statements such as: “Just you wait until you have children...”; “Have you got children?”; “It’ll be your turn next.”; or “Putting him to practice.” Direct pressures often came from would-be grandparents who urged their children to “settle down and start a family.” Particular pressure can come from a mother-in-law who feels that the childless woman is not fulfilling her wifely duty to her husband by providing him with a child. Of course the amount of social pressure can vary based on the reasons for the childless status. Infertile women are less likely to receive direct pressure to have children than women who actively choose not to have children.

For the single childless women of the film sample, 40.5 percent were classified as transformative women who chose not to have children. The majority of the rest of the single childless women either wanted to have children or were actively looking for a husband. Since so many of the women were seeking a husband, they seemed to be the target of less social pressures about marriage and fertility than the accounts of real life.

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3 This is not to say that infertile women are free from social stigma. Charlene Miall’s (1994; 1989; 1986; 1985) work explores informal sanctions against involuntary childlessness.
childless women. Table 6.1 reconstructs Table 4.4 (Reasons for Leading Character's Childless Status) to reflect only the 42 single, never married childless women.

Table 6.1: Single, Never Married Childless Women’s Reasons for Childless Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childless Status (N =42)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Transformed Women - Voluntarily Childless</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Transitional Women - Wanted Children but Postponed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Traditional Women - Infertility Problems</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Traditional Life-Course Women - Want Children, but Haven’t Found the Right Man</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Had an Abortion</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Goal to Find a Husband, and No Mention of Fertility Intentions</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Not Enough Information about Fertility Intentions Given to Determine a Category</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For just under one quarter of the single, never married childless women, their goal was to find a husband, and they did not need to be prodded by family members or friends to find a husband. These women wanted to be married and spent a considerable amount of time in the films looking for a husband. About one half of the women who wanted to be married fulfilled their wishes and were either engaged or married by the end of the films. The traditional life-course women and the traditional infertile women comprised another one fifth of the women who wanted to be married. Although seventeen of the single childless
women were categorized as transformative (childless by choice), this did not necessarily mean that they were not interested in love or marital relationships. Seven of the seventeen transformative childless women were either in steady dating relationships or married by the end of the films. In total, over one quarter of the single childless women were married or engaged by the end of the films, showing that many single childless women were successful in meeting Mr. Right and settling down. Other single childless women (*Death Becomes Her, Fatal Attraction, Outrageous Fortune, Postcards from the Edge, Sister Act, and Waiting to Exhale*) wanted to “have it all,” but were never able to find the right man and ended up either alone or dead by the end of the films.

Women who did not want to get married or could not get married because of the lack of men in their lives were occasionally subjected to suggestions from family members or friends about their need to settle down. Films involving pressures to conform to traditional standards of marriage and/or children included: *Absence of Malice, Basic Instinct, Batman Returns, Beaches, Black Widow, Dead Man Walking, Frankie and Johnny, French Kiss, Gorillas in the Mist, Green Card, Housesitter, Moonstruck, Prizzi’s Honor, Romancing the Stone, and Waiting to Exhale*. Transformative women such as Megan Carter of the 1981 film *Absence of Malice* were questioned about their marital or childless status. Still single at age 34, Megan’s life choices were called into question when a potential suitor asked her why she was not married. Megan explained that she was a liberated woman which was meant to imply that she could chose not to marry if she wished. In *Prizzi’s Honor*, Maerose Prizzi was told by her former boyfriend Charlie that she needed to, “find yourself someone who has nothing to do with the families, you know.
Settle down, couple of kids, a life, practice your meatballs.” The problem with Charlie’s advice is that Maerose wanted to settle down with Charlie, but he was is already in love with another woman. Thirty-seven year old widow Loretta Castorini’s (*Moonstruck*) life was also called into question when her uncle asked her father about her upcoming second marriage. Loretta’s uncle Raymond asked her father, “What’s she gonna do with the rest of her life if she don’t get married?” Not only was Loretta’s family worried about Loretta’s marital status, but her mother asked Loretta directly about her plans for children. Loretta dismissed this suggestion telling her mother that she was too old for children and that she lost her opportunity to have kids when her first husband passed away. Loretta’s mother informed her that, “it ain’t over ‘till it’s over,” and she herself did not have her last child until after she was 37.

Occasionally unlikely mother candidates were also questioned about their fertility intentions. In the 1992 suspense film *Basic Instinct*, suspected ice-pick murderer Catherine Tramell was faced with questions about marriage and children. Catherine’s boyfriend suggested that they could get married and raise “rug rats.” Catherine agreed with the marriage part of the deal, but informed Nick that she hates rug rats. At the other end of the good/evil spectrum, the film *Dead Man Walking* raised questions about Sister Helen Prejean’s lack of children. Sister Prejean reluctantly agreed to be the spiritual counselor for death row inmate Matthew Poncelet. When Sister Prejean went to the family of one of Matthew’s victims, they became enraged that Sister Prejean was helping out Matthew. The mother of one of Matthew’s murder victims angrily asked Sister Prejean, “You don’t know what it’s like to carry a child in your womb and give birth and

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get up with a sick child in the middle of the night. You just say your prayers and get a
good night’s sleep, don’t you?”

Whether the epitome of goodness or the definition of danger and excitement, some
unlikely mother candidates were questioned about their lack of children. However, the
social pressures that seem to exist for real life childless women did not seem as prevalent
in the film portrayals of childless characters. Social researchers studying childlessness
consistently discuss the direct pressures from friends and family members and the indirect
pressures of a pronatalist society to have children (i.e. Bartlett 1994; Campbell 1985;
Griffith 1973; Hollingworth 1916; Morell 1994; Reti 1992; and Veevers 1980). However,
relatively few childless characters in these films experienced direct pressure from anyone
about the need to have children. Single childless women were more likely to be told about
their need to find a good husband. Indeed, finding a good man led to positive
transformations for several single childless women (All of Me, French Kiss, Moonstruck,
Romancing the Stone, Up Close and Personal, and Working Girl). In each of these films,
single childless women met and fell in love with men that helped them become better
individuals.

Single Childless Women and Their Relationships with Men

An almost universal theme among the single women was that they became
involved in some type of dating or sexual relationship with a man. For a fair number of
these women, the relationships had worked out by the end of the films, with 25 percent of

4 Only two women had not been involved in a dating or sexual relationship with a man
including Sister Helen Prejean of Dead Man Walking and Cruella De Vil of 101
Dalmatians. In addition to these two women who had no dating relationships, Meredith
Johnson of Disclosure had no real dating relationship. Instead, Meredith used her sexual
aggression as a way to weed out unwanted professional male subordinates.
the women engaged to be married or having gone through the marriage ceremony before the end of the film. An additional 31 percent of the single women were happily dating steady boyfriends at the conclusion of the films. The remaining 44 percent of the single women who experienced dating relationships during the films did not experience the traditional “and they lived happily ever after” conclusions since 29 percent of their dating relationship had dissolved by the end of the films. An additional 13.5 percent of the single women were dead by the film conclusions.

The relationships that childless women formed with men were varied in nature and presented contradictory images of single childlessness. Several of the single childless women were presented as saviors to men who were either professionally or personally washed-up. These women helped pull middle-aged men out of slumps and put them back on an positive life track. These women represented sexual freedom, independence, assertiveness, and a second chance for middle-aged men. In contrast to these new and exciting relationships, other single childless women were created as a distinct threat to men and their families. Films such as Fatal Attraction, The Hand that Rocks the Cradle, and Presumed Innocent showed that childless women can be predatory in nature with the nuclear family as their primary target. Although still sexually appealing, these women and their sexuality were threatening to the middle-aged man and his nuclear family.

In addition to these competing images of good and bad childlessness sexuality, the films also portrayed single childless women as somewhat lonely and sad. At the same time that many single childless women were portrayed as sexually and personally free and fulfilled through their careers, they also experienced loneliness and sadness. The
loneliness was often combated through a new relationship with a man or strong female friendships. An interesting point of the portrayal of childless loneliness is that it seemed to strike women in their late thirties and early forties rather than the over fifty group. More importantly, at no time in any of the films was a single, divorced, or widowed childless woman referred to as an old maid or as a spinster. The absence of the use of the terms old maid and spinster may be evidence of the weakening stigma associated with later age female singlehood. While these women still experienced times of loneliness, their singlehood was not constructed as a constant source of pain and tragedy.

Breathing New Life into Washed-Up Men

Thirty-four of the 51 single childless women had begun new dating relationships as part of the story plot lines. Within one week of starting these new relationships, 85 percent of the 34 women had engaged in sexual intercourse with their new boyfriends. In some cases, these new, and often sexual relationships, seemed to breath a new life into professionally or personally washed-up men. In nine different films, new relationships involving single childless women helped to pull men out of some type of slump (All of Me, Arthur, Bull Durham, A Fish Called Wanda, Grumpy Old Men, Grumpier Old Men, Tin Cup, Wolf, and Working Girl). The two earliest films of this group (Arthur, 1981 and All of Me, 1984) were the only two films that did not include sexual intercourse as a part of the developing relationship. Arthur is the story of a millionaire playboy who has never been able to make his own decisions and has never grown up. Arthur Bach (Dudley Moore) compensates for his unhappiness through excessive drinking and outlandish social

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5 This number includes the 42 single, never married women along with 7 divorced women and 2 widowed women who were ready to begin new love relationships.
behavior. Just as Arthur is being forced by his family to marry a women he does not love (Susan played by Jill Eikenberry), Arthur meets a poor waitress from Queens. It is love at first sight for Arthur, and for the first time in his life, he is happy with his new girlfriend Linda Morilla (Liza Minnelli). Arthur tells Linda, “I’ve never taken care of anyone. Everyone’s always taken care of me. But if you got sick or anything, I’d take care of you.” His love for Linda, coupled with the death of his dearest friend, give Arthur the strength he needs to refuse the marriage to Susan and risk losing his 750 million dollar inheritance. With Linda by his side, Arthur was able to give up his drinking and playboy days and assume adult responsibilities.

In the 1984 film *All of Me*, Steve Martin played Roger Cobb, an unhappy man who has just reached his 38th birthday. At 38, Roger assesses his life and finds he does not like what he sees. His dream is to play full-time in a jazz band, but he feels forced into working as an associate in a law firm that does not respect him. He is also pushed into a marriage proposal that he had not intended to extend. Roger’s life seems to get worse when the soul of an overbearing heiress is accidentally transferred into his body. Edwina Cutwater’s (Lily Tomlin) soul now controls one half of Roger’s body while Roger has control over the other half. Having lost the ability to control the right half of his body, Roger ends up losing his dog, his fiancée, and his job at the law firm. In their quest to get Edwina’s soul removed from Roger’s body, Roger falls in love with Edwina. Through his new friendship with Edwina, Roger gains his self-respect and the push he needed to pursue those things in life which make him the happiest. By the end of the film, Edwina’s soul is removed from Roger and placed in the body of a beautiful woman, and Roger is a
transformed man who is happier and more excited about his future prospects as a full-time jazz musician.

In the 1994 film *Wolf*, a washed-up middle-aged businessman is helped out of his slump by a beautiful single woman. Will Randall (Jack Nicholson) is a senior editor with a large New York City book publishing company. The story begins with the changes taking place in Will as he seems to be transforming into a werewolf. With his new wolf-like senses, he finds out that his wife Charlotte (Kate Nelligan) has been cheating on him with his protégé Stuart (James Spader). Infuriated by Charlotte’s marital infidelity, Will leaves their 16 year marriage and moves into a local hotel. Meanwhile, the publishing firm’s CEO wants to make some changes and gives the aging Will the choice between no job and a job nobody would want. With his marriage on the rocks and career on a downslide, Will meets the young and beautiful Laura Alden (Michelle Pfeiffer) and is drawn to her youth and beauty. Laura is drawn to Will at first because she knows that her father (Will’s boss) will disapprove of the relationship, but she quickly grows to love Will. Laura quickly moves their relationship to a sexual level and is even a bit domineering with Will. Through the new relationship with Laura and his wolf-like heightened senses, Will gains the strength he needs to turn his life around at the publishing firm. In a bizarre twist, the film ends with Laura having been bitten by another werewolf. Laura heads off into the woods to take up her new animal life with werewolf Will.

Three separate films (*Working Girl, A Fish Called Wanda,* and *Bull Durham*) were released in 1988 in which new sexual relationships with single transformative childless women helped to breath new life and energy into aging men. The most subtle of
these films is *Working Girl*. Melanie Griffith plays Tess McGill, a secretary with a “head for business and a bod for sin.” While posing as a partner in mergers and acquisitions, Tess enlists the help of Jack Trainer (Harrison Ford), an executive at an outside firm. Jack’s career is in a slump, and he really needs to come through with a big deal to pull him out and save his job. Working as both business partners and sexual couple, Tess and Jack come through with the radio deal of the century. The deal secures both professional and personal success for Jack. In the end, Jack dumps his snobbish Harvard-bred girlfriend and starts a co-habitating happily-ever-after relationship with Tess.

In a less legitimate business deal, jewel thief Wanda Gerschwitz (Jamie Lee Curtis) cons barrister Archie Leach (John Cleese) into helping her locate 20 million dollars worth of stolen diamonds that have been hidden by a fellow thief. Archie is a repressed Englishman who is stuck in a mundane and loveless marriage. At first Wanda only flirts with Archie, but when he seems receptive to her attention, she pushes the affair to a sexual level. The two try repeatedly to consummate their relationship, but are constantly interrupted by Wanda’s current lover Otto (Kevin Kline). Seeing Wanda as a way out of his oppressive professional and personal life, Archie tells Wanda that she makes him feel free and alive. Although it is difficult to ascertain Wanda’s true feelings about any of the men in this film, it does seem as if Wanda has developed strong feelings for Archie. At this point, Archie has nothing to loose as his wife has found out about his affair with Wanda and has told him to “stuff the marriage in his bottom.” When Archie and Wanda discover the location of the stolen diamonds, they recover the jewels and make a hasty departure.
from London. Having been awakened by the young and vibrant Wanda, Archie and Wanda live happily-ever-after in Rio.

In 1988 Hollywood also released the first of two primarily male sports films that involved a sexy woman cheering on the sidelines. In Bull Durham Susan Sarandon plays Annie Savoy, an avid fan of the minor league baseball team the Durham Bulls. Annie is a middle-aged single childless woman who has never been married and is unable to commit to a relationship that lasts longer than a baseball season. Each new season Annie picks a rookie player to fill her sexual life. Annie states,

I make them feel confident, and they make me feel safe and pretty. Of course, what I give them lasts a lifetime, what they give me lasts 142 games. Sometimes it seems like a bad trade, but that is part of baseball.

With the start of the new season, the Durham Bulls have signed on a young pitcher with a strong but wild arm (Nuke LaLoosh played by Tim Robbins). In order to help train Nuke, the team pulls in an experienced catcher (Crash Davis played by Kevin Costner) to show Nuke the professional ropes. Annie has her eye on both players and invites them to her home one evening to lay out the ground rules. Annie tells Nuke and Crash:

I hook up with one guy a season. Usually takes me a couple of weeks to pick the guy. Kind of my own spring training. Oh well, you two are the most promising prospects of the season so far.

Although intrigued by Annie, Crash informs her that he is not interested in anyone that is interested in a kid like Nuke. Crash excuses himself from the house and refuses to accept any of Annie’s advances. The film continues with the sexual relationship between Annie and Nuke and the mentor/protégé relationship between Nuke and Crash. With Crash’s help, Nuke brings his game under control and is drafted by a major league team. Having
no use for Crash now that Nuke has made it to "the show," the Durham Bulls release this otherwise washed up baseball old-timer. Crash wanders the streets of Durham until he ends up on Annie’s doorstep. Annie gladly accepts Crash into her home and her bed, particularly since she has been interested in Crash all along. Their sexual relationship is passionate and uninhibited, but in the morning Crash leaves Annie with nothing but a note and breakfast. Crash heard about a team that was looking for a new catcher, and Annie tells herself that she has to respect a ballplayer who is just trying to finish out the season. However, when he realizes that there is more to life than finishing up the baseball season, Crash returns to Annie and announces that he is giving up minor league playing. Annie, in turn, announces that she is giving up boys. The film ends with both Crash and Annie happier and more mentally stable through their relationship with each other.

_Bull Durham_ was the first of two male sports films that used a beautiful sexy woman as an incentive for improved sports performance. In the 1996 film _Tin Cup_, Roy “Tin Cup” McAvoy (Kevin Costner) is a washed up golfer who is close to financial ruin. Roy lives in a camper with his business partner Romeo (Cheech Marin). Together the men manage a rundown Texas driving range. Roy had been a great golfer in college, but was never able to get his mental game under control and in line with his physical golf game. When Dr. Molly Griswold (Rene Russo) enters onto the scene, Roy’s whole life is changed. Molly is a local psychologist and the girlfriend of Roy’s nemesis David Simms (Don Johnson). She comes to Roy to take golf lessons so that she can play golf with her pro-golfer boyfriend. Roy immediately falls in love with Molly and decides to impress her and gain her love by winning the U.S. Open. With the help of Molly’s professional advice
for his mental game, Roy is able to make a spot on the U.S. Open tournament. Molly tells Roy that she can help him prepare mentally for the U.S. Open, but once they arrive there, her loyalties will be with David. During the first round of the tournament, Roy is unable to concentrate without Molly and gives a poor performance. Roy’s wish to have Molly by his side comes true that evening when Molly comes to the realization that David is a fraud who hates children, old people, and dogs. With David out of the scene, Molly gives herself completely to Roy. Now that Roy has Molly by his side, he makes golfing history by completing the biggest comeback ever at the U.S. Open. Roy almost wins the U.S. Open, but allows his mental game to breakdown on the last hole. Rather than playing the safe shot and guarantee himself a chance to win, Roy goes for the hard shot and misses, ten times. He finally makes the shot over the water and straight into the cup for a 12 on the last hole. Roy’s chances of winning having gone down the drain, but Molly is proud of him. She tells him that no one will remember who won this particular U.S. Open, but they will remember his 12. The film ends with Roy’s career and love life back on track.

The final two films to show this theme of bringing washed-up men back to life are the sequel films Grumpy Old Men and Grumpier Old Men. John Gustafson (Jack Lemmon) and Max Goldman (Walter Matthau) are life-long friends and rivals. John’s wife had divorced him several years earlier and Max is a widower. Both men are terribly lonely, and they have all but given up on life and await what they hope will be a painless death. Their obsession with their own inevitable death comes through in the following passage:

John: Did you hear about Eddie Hicks?

Max: Hypothermia’s a bitch. Not quick like a stroke.
John: A stroke is no different. You could end up like a vegetable. Give me a cardiac any day.

Max: You know what Jacob said? Jacob said that Old Billy Henchill was killed in a car crash. Head on collision with a freight truck. Cleared his car straight over the bridge into the Mississippi.

John: Lucky bastard.

Max: You bet.

Their small town life is shaken up when a new vibrant widow moves in across the street from Max and John. Ariel Truax (Ann-Margret) is a professor of American literature who enjoys life to its fullest extent. Ariel snowmobiles in the middle of the night, takes in a sauna before rolling around in the snow to cool off, and enjoys meeting new people. She lives by the philosophy “the only things you regret in life are the risks you don’t take.” Even though the whole town is wondering about this new “hot to trot” woman, Max and John are reluctant to introduce themselves to Ariel and prefer peering at her through their windows. They are encouraged by their children and their friend Chuck to go over and meet Ariel, and they eventually take up this suggestion. Max beats John to the door and is the first one to have a date with Ariel. While Ariel appreciates Max’s friendship, she is interested in a relationship with John. Since John has not called on her, she takes the liberty of cooking him a meal while he is out fishing. When John arrives home, she is in his kitchen cooking up a spicy Szechwan dish. John protests and tells her that he can not have spicy food, but they eat the dinner anyway and enjoy each other’s company. Ariel then takes John on an exciting snowmobile ride, and they drop and make angels in the snow. John is regaining some of his youth and enjoyment of new
experiences. On their second date, Ariel reintroduces John to sex, an activity he has not participated in for 15 years. The following morning he is a transformed man. Suddenly, John is eating fried eggs and digging out the Tabasco sauce from the back of the cupboard. The music “I’m a Love Man” plays into the scene as he whirls around his kitchen with the spunk of a teenager.

Although John and Ariel have an excellent relationship, John decides to give up on Ariel because of his problems with the I.R.S. John is a 68 year old man who is losing his house and his pension to the I.R.S. because of previous filing mistakes on his returns. John feels that he has nothing to offer Ariel and asks her not to see him any longer. Having been rejected by John, Ariel turns to Max for company and friendship, but she quickly returns to John’s side when he suffers a heart attack. Ariel tells John that her husband died at Easter, and if he leaves her at Christmas, she will not have a holiday to look forward to. Through the strength he receives from his love of Ariel, John recuperates fully and is married to Ariel in the final scene. The film’s ending is great for John, but it still leaves Max a lonely widower. This problem is solved when Maria Ragetti (Sophia Loren) enters onto the scene in the sequel Grumpier Old Men. Maria and her mother purchase the local bait shop to transform it into an Italian lakeside restaurant. At first Max despises Maria because she is trying to change the bait shop, but there is a sexual tension between Maria and Max. With some coaxing from Max’s son and John, Max eventually asks Maria for a date to which she agrees. Like the original relationship between John and Ariel, Max and Maria’s relationship also quickly turns sexual. As was the case with John, Max also becomes a new man and the film’s music “Staying Alive”
helps to put a new bounce in Max’s step. As was the case with *Grumpy Old Men*, *Grumpier Old Men* ends with the marriage of the new couple.

None of the women who breathed new life into the washed up men were traditional childless women (infertile). Each of these women were difficult to classify because of the limited amount of information given about their feelings towards children. As was discussed in Chapter 5, sexuality and motherhood are not typically coupled together and since most of these women were highly sexual women, the idea of them as mothers is difficult to imagine. These women were able to devote their energy and attention to their new lovers precisely because they were not mothers. While the single childless women had responsibilities, none of their responsibilities were as consuming as full-time motherhood. For the childless women that breathed new sexual energy into washed up men, not only was there little discussion of their feelings towards children, but they were very seldom shown in interaction with children. These women lived lives that were outside of the world of anything remotely associated with motherhood and nurturing roles.

**The Single Childless Woman as a Threat to the Nuclear Family**

The single childless women who rejuvenated washed up men were all portrayed as good influences on the men. Two of the men (*A Fish Called Wanda* and *Wolf*) were in failing marriages, and the single childless women were additional incentives to end the marriages. The single childless women were not seen as a threat to the institution of marriage, because the wives were to blame for Archie Leach and Will Randall’s failed marriages. The single childless women helped Archie and Will escape from bad marital
situations. While films such as *A Fish Called Wanda* and *Wolf* treated the extra-marital affair of the husbands with the single childless women as positive events, several others films were quite explicit in showing that single childless women can be a threat to the nuclear family (*Fatal Attraction, The Hand that Rocks the Cradle, and Presumed Innocent*). This is a theme that has been outlined by other feminist and post-modern film researchers (i.e. Denzin 1995; Faludi 1991; Walters 1995), but must be included in this study for a complete view of single childless women. While the theme of the single childless woman as a threat to the safety of the nuclear family showed up in only a couple of the films, the impact of these films on American culture was great. *Fatal Attraction* alone had nineteen articles listed in the *Reader’s Guide to Periodic Literature* and seven articles in the *New York Times* alone. The image of the crazed single childless woman entered onto the film culture scene in 1987 and has become an important cautionary tale to American men.

Single childless women had been a threat to the nuclear family before *Fatal Attraction* came along, but the intense fear associated with the childless women was not present in these films. In *The Best Little Whore House in Texas* Sheriff Ed Earl Dodd (Burt Reynolds) was able to enjoy the best of both worlds. Miss Mona Stangely (Dolly Parton), the Madame of the Chicken Ranch whorehouse summed up Ed Earl’s situation when she told him:

> You’re just a kid playing at being a cowboy and you ain’t never gonna grow up. You use me as a mistress, you use that damn Dulci Mae as your in town wife, and you even use that little boy of hers so you can play weekend daddy.
Ed Earl had a sexual relationship with Miss Mona and a weekend and holiday family relationship with Dulci Mae and her son. By the end of the film, Ed Earl has to decide which woman he will finally commit to, the Madame of the whorehouse or the single mother and her son. When push comes to shove, Ed Earl professes his love to Miss Mona and proposes marriage. Miss Mona wants to get married and live a normal life with Ed Earl, but she does not think that her former status as a whore will ever allow them to have a healthy life together. Miss Mona breaks into song (this is a musical after all) to show Ed Earl why she cannot be with him:

If I should stay, well I would only be in your way. And so I’ll go and yet I know that I’ll think of you each step of the way. And I will always love you...Bitter sweet memories, I guess that’s all I’ll be taking with me. Good-bye, oh please don’t cry, ‘cause we both know that I’m not what you need.

Miss Mona concludes her song by telling Ed Earl that she knows he will get his dream of being in the state legislature, but if he were to marry her, she would ruin his chances. Ed Earl refuses to hear Miss Mona’s argument and insists upon getting married. As the film ends, the narrator tells us that they did get married, and Ed Earl even made it to the state legislature. In this film, Ed Earl had the opportunity to be a husband and father to a single mother and her child, but he chose to follow his heart and marry the former prostitute. The film builds no hard feelings about Ed Earl leaving Dulcie Mae and her child and even builds great sympathy and respect for Miss Mona when she tries to tell Ed Earl that a marriage between them would be a bad idea.

In the 1986 film *Crimes of the Heart*, Meg MaGrath (Jessica Lange) is a single childless woman who left the man that she loved to pursue her career in Hollywood.
When she comes back to her hometown several years later, she finds that her former boyfriend, Doc Porter (Sam Shepard), now has a wife and two children. Doc is still obviously in love with Meg and comes calling on her one evening. Doc and Meg spend a night together talking, and when Meg returns home the following morning, she wonders to herself about the possibility of Doc running away with her. If Doc did ask her to run away, would she be willing to sacrifice the happiness of his wife and children for her own happiness? She decides that most assuredly yes, she could sacrifice their happiness for her own. As it turns out, Doc never makes the offer to Meg, so the film does not pursue the possibility of her breaking up the family. Rather than chastising Meg for her feelings towards Doc and his family, her sisters understand this as all part of Meg's egocentric personality. No real harm has been done to Doc and his family, and the subject is dropped.

It was not until the 1987 film Fatal Attraction that the single childless woman became the number one threat to the nuclear family in America. Much has been written about the themes of the film (see Denzin 1991; Faludi 1991; Walters 1995). Even in the experiential literature on childless women, researchers are quick to point to the image of Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) as the childless psycho-maniac (see Bartlett 1994 and Morell 1994). Morell states:

Fictional characters such as Alex Forrest, the antagonist in Fatal Attraction, represent the most negative version and feared outcome of a stereotype of the childless woman: a socially isolated, career-driven woman consumed by a fatal jealousy and envy of motherhood and the nuclear family. (1994:8)
*Fatal Attraction* is the story of a married man (Dan Gallagher played by Michael Douglas) who has what he thinks will be a one night stand with Alex Forrest. When Alex will not settle for the one night stand, Dan tries to explain to Alex that an “opportunity was there, and we took it.” For Alex though, this relationship meant more to her than a one night stand, and she refuses to let Dan simply walk out of her life. Consumed by rage and jealousy, Alex attacks Dan and his family, vandalizing the family Volvo, boiling the pet bunny, kidnapping the daughter, and even physically attacking Dan and his wife with a butcher’s knife. Suzanna Danuta Walters (1995) describes Alex as the “working woman from hell” (p. 123), but I believe a more appropriate description would be the childless working woman from hell. After having suffered a terrible miscarriage the previous year, Alex had believed herself to be infertile. Now at 36 and pregnant with Dan’s child, Alex is determined to keep the baby as “it may be [her] last chance to have a child.”

Although Dan believes that Alex is trying to destroy his family life, Alex feels she is simply trying to get Dan to own up to his responsibility to her and their unborn child. Dan pleads with Alex to have an abortion, but she wants to have the family life that Dan has built with his wife Beth (Anne Archer). Dan confides to his friend and lawyer that he is scared and does not want to lose his family, but this is precisely what happens to him when he is finally forced to tell Beth the truth about his affair with Alex. Beth insists that Dan leave their home, and for a brief time, Dan is separated from his wife and child. Unsatisfied with just this breakup, Alex continues to terrorize Beth when she kidnaps their daughter for an afternoon. In a fit of panic, Beth ends up in a car accident while frantically searching for her daughter. This accident and Beth’s hospital stay reunite Dan with his
family. While home recuperating from her injuries, Beth is attacked in the final showdown between Alex and the nuclear family. Alex attacks Beth with a butcher’s knife, and Dan comes to Beth’s rescue. He is able to drown Alex in the bathtub, but she must be shot by Beth when Alex rises out of the water to attack Dan once more. The film ends with Alex dead and the nuclear family reunited. The last shot we see is of a family photograph of Beth, Dan, and their daughter. Although the family has been shaken by this episode, they will persevere.

Everything about this film places the single childless working woman against the nuclear family and the good mother (Walters 1995). Beth, the good mother, only has one school aged daughter, but is still a full-time stay-at-home mother who spends her time preparing their new home in the country for the family’s move. Dan and his family represent everything that is good about America and traditional family life including the pet dog, the Volvo station wagon, the male breadwinner, the female full-time homemaker, and the new home in the country complete with a white picket fence and in-laws down the street. On the other hand, Alex is “the figure of evil...living in the hell-like neighborhood of Manhattan’s meat district, who smokes, has wild blonde hair, and whose ‘biological clock’ is ticking rather like a timebomb. She is a homewrecker...” (Walters 1995:123). In addition to Walters’s point of contrasting the good mother to the evil single woman, I would add to the discourse of Fatal Attraction that the single childless woman represents certain freedoms for the married man. If we take for a moment the actual weekend affair between Dan and Alex, Alex represents uninhibited sexual freedom, freedom from work responsibilities, short-term interpersonal relationships, and freedom from age restrictions.
With Alex, Dan behaved like a teenager, engaging in sexual intercourse several times over a two day period, dancing at all hours of the night, running around Central Park, and putting off his weekend work while enjoying the company of Alex. The film does a poor job of explaining why Dan is with Alex. He is clearly having an excellent time with Alex, and she asks him why he is with her. Dan tells Alex, “I think you’re terrific. But I’m married. What can I say?” Later when Dan tries to leave Alex and return to his family life, Alex becomes furious with Dan and rips his shirt:

Dan: Alex come on. What’s the problem? Jesus Christ. I mean, let’s be reasonable.

Alex: Be reasonable? What? Thank you, good bye, don’t call me, I’ll call you.

Dan: Look, you knew about me. I didn’t hide anything. I though it was understood.

Alex: What was understood?

Dan: Opportunity was there, and we took it. Come on now we are, we are adults aren’t we?

Alex: What’s that supposed to mean?

Dan: I thought we would have a good time.

Alex: No you didn’t, you thought you would have a good time. You didn’t stop for a second to think about me.

Dan: That’s crazy. You knew the rules.

Alex: What rules?

Dan: Look Alex, I like you and if I wasn’t with someone else maybe I’d be with you. But I am.
To Dan, Alex represents a throw-away weekend fling that was fun while it lasts, but must come to an end when it is time to resume his family responsibilities.

If Alex Forrest represents numerous types of freedom and "a good time," then Dan’s nuclear family represents stability, fiscal and personal responsibility, long-term interpersonal relationships, and sexual repression (Dan and Beth try to have sex, but are interrupted by company and their daughter). In this serious suspense drama, the film producers have chosen to set up the childless woman as the evil temptress.6 To fall into her web of evil is to risk the loss of everything that is dear to Dan. What the film doesn’t explore is the immense sense of freedom that Alex represented for Dan. This sense of freedom is exactly what Archie Leach ran to in the comedy *A Fish Called Wanda*. There was no great public outcry when Archie ran off with single childless Wanda while his wife explained that he could “stick this marriage in your bottom.” But audiences cheered when the threat of Alex was finally silenced by Beth’s fatal gunshot. The oppression of family life is something that can be joked about in a comedy form, but when it is time to get serious about the matter in the form of a suspense drama, single over-thirty childless women are no laughing matter.

Perhaps Americans need cautionary tales like *Fatal Attraction* to serve as a reminder of what might happen if a man was faced with an opportunity to escape the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood for the freedom of a single childless woman. This appears to be the case in three other films that draw reference to *Fatal Attraction* when a man is faced with the possibility of dating a new woman (*Grumpy Old Men, The

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6 See Faludi (1991) for a discussion of the filmmaker’s decisions that went into creating the single career woman as the threat to the nuclear family.
Mirror Has Two Faces, and Sleepless in Seattle). While discussing the possibility of
dating the new widow in town, Max and John of Grumpy Old Men make reference to
Fatal Attraction:

Max: Now you tell me you’re gonna go after her?

John: She’s too, she’s too disturbed for me. For you maybe?

Max: Oh I don’t want to have anything to do with her. You see women
fall too hard for me. They get obsessed with me. It’s like one of them fatal
attraction things.

Max and John are not the only film characters to make reference to Fatal Attraction and
the images it stirs up. Recall from Chapter 5 that in Sleepless in Seattle Sam’s son Jonah
pleads with him to fly to New York to meet Annie at the top of the Empire State Building:

Jonah: Why can’t we go to New York?

Sam: There is no way we are going on a plane to meet some woman who
could be a crazy sick lunatic. Didn’t you see Fatal Attraction?

Jonah: You wouldn’t let me.

Sam: Well I saw it, and it scared the shit out of me. It scared the shit out
of every man in America.

The image of the psychotic single over-thirty childless woman made its way into American
culture loud and clear with Fatal Attraction and has been reproduced through further film
references.

The image of the single over-thirty childless woman as a threat to the nuclear
family came through again in the 1990 film Presumed Innocent and the 1992 film The
Hand that Rocks the Cradle. In Presumed Innocent, an over-thirty, single, and childless
(purposefully had a tubal ligation) assistant prosecuting attorney used sexual affairs with
male co-workers to further her career. Caroline Polhemus (Greta Scacchi) initiated an affair with family man and deputy prosecuting attorney Rusty Sabich (Harrison Ford). Although Caroline never directly broke up Rusty’s family, the affair led indirectly to the potential demise of Rusty’s nuclear family. The film begins shortly after Caroline is found murdered in her apartment and all evidence is pointing toward Rusty. What we learn in the end is that Rusty is innocent of the murder, and the case is placed in the books as unsolved. Unlike Beth Gallagher who was forced at knife point to defend her family from the evil Alex Forrest, Rusty’s wife Barbara (Bonnie Beedelia) destroyed Caroline before Caroline became too great of a threat to her family. In the film’s finally, Rusty finds the instrument that Barbara used to murder Caroline. Barbara explains to Rusty:

Barbara: You understand what happened had to happen. It couldn’t have turned out any other way. A woman’s depressed with herself, with life, with her husband who made life possible for her until he was bewitched by another woman. Destroyed her. Abandoned. Like someone left for dead. She plans her suicide. Until a dream begins. In the dream the destroyer is destroyed. That’s a dream worth living for. With such simplicity. Such clarity. Everything falls into place. It must be a crime that her husband can declare unsolved and be believed by all the world. She must make it look like a rape, but she must leave her husband the clues. Once he discovers who it was, he’ll put the case into the file of unsolved murders. Another break-in by some sex-crazed man. But all his life, he’ll know it was her. She remembers a set of glasses she had bought for the woman some time before. A housewarming gift from her husband and his office. She buys another set. Her husband has a beer one night. Doesn’t even comment on the glass. Now she has the finger prints. And in a few mornings she saves the fluid that comes out when she removes the diaphragm. Puts it in a plastic bag. Puts the plastic bag in the freezer and waits. She calls the woman and asks to see her. Stops first at the university to log into the computer. Now she has her alibi. She goes to the woman. The woman lets her in. When her head is turned, she removes the instrument from her bag and strikes. The destroyer is destroyed. She takes the cord out that she brought along and ties her body in ways her husband described the perverts do. She feels power, control, a sense that she is guided by a voice beyond herself. Takes a siring and injects the contents of the ziplock bag. Leaves the glass on the bar. Unlocks the door and windows. Goes home.
And life begins again. Until a trial when she sees her husband suffer in ways she never intended. She was prepared to tell the truth right up until the very end. But magically the charges were dismissed. Sufferings over. And they were saved.

Rusty: Saved?

[The film then continues with Rusty’s narration.]

Rusty: The murder of Caroline Polhemus remains unsolved. It is a practical impossibility to try two people for the same crime. Even if it wasn’t, I couldn’t take his mother from my son. I am a prosecutor. I have spent my life in the assignment of blame. With all deliberation and intent I reached for Caroline. I cannot pretend it was an accident. I reached for Caroline and set off that insane mix of rage and lunacy that led one human being to kill another. There was a crime. There was a victim. And there is a punishment.

Walters (1995) has pointed out that unlike Fatal Attraction which pitted the good wife against the evil childless woman, Presumed Innocent has no good women. Walters argued that:

Presumed Innocent not only makes the sexual, working woman evil incarnate, but constructs the frustrated housewife as warped killer; driven by jealousy to murder her husband’s lover: hardworking, white-collar dolts become the fall guys for ambitious, demanding women. (P. 131)

While I agree that there is no good woman in this film, I disagree that with her assessment of Rusty’s part in this whole situation. From the passage above, Rusty admits his guilt and blames himself for having set off “that insane mix of rage and lunacy.” At least in this film, the husband has admitted his willful part in an extra-marital affair. Dan Gallagher never admitted that he was partially to blame for his family’s problems with Alex. Like Beth Gallagher, Barbara, as wife and mother, protected her family from the evil childless over-thirty working single woman. In Fatal Attraction, Beth Gallagher had to kill or be
killed in a literal final showdown between wife/mother and single childless woman. The difference in *Presumed Innocent* from *Fatal Attraction* is that Barbara’s kill or be killed scenario was necessary to save herself from her own suicide.

The final film that specifically sets up the wife/mother with the childless evil woman in a kill or be killed scenario is *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*. The film begins with a successful yuppie Seattle couple living in a large house with a white picket fence. Claire and Michael Bartel (Annabella Sciorra and Matt McCoy) have a lovely young daughter and are expecting their second child. Claire’s obstetrician has retired, and she is taken on by Dr. Mott (John de Lancie), a man who has a nasty habit of molesting his female patients. During her first visit, Dr. Mott touches Claire in sexually inappropriate ways, and she and Michael issue a complaint to the medical board that brings forth four other women who issue similar complaints. The scandal is too much for Dr. Mott to handle, and he commits suicide which leaves his first time pregnant wife behind to deal with the problems. The scandal and subsequent seizure of all of Dr. Mott’s assets are too stressful for Mrs. Mott (Rebecca De Mornay), and she suffers a miscarriage followed by an emergency hysterectomy. Unable to deal with the loss, Mrs. Mott turns her sorrow and pain to Claire, the woman she believes has created her unbearable situation. Knowing that Claire is looking to hire a nanny so that she can build a greenhouse in the backyard, Mrs. Mott shows up for an interview one day as the sweet, loving, and kind Peyton Flanders. Peyton’s plan is to come between Claire and her husband, Claire and her children, and Claire and her friends, taking from Claire all that Peyton believes Claire took from her. The Bartel’s friend Marlene (Julianne Moore) is suspicious of Peyton and warns Claire:
You never, never let an attractive woman take a power position in your home. It's very bad business... All I'm saying is you need to watch your back. What is that saying? The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world.

Claire does not heed Marlene's warning before Peyton is able to set up a series of situations that has Claire looking like a bumbling idiot and a crazed jealous wife. Not only does Peyton make Claire look like a bad mother and a jealous wife, Peyton also has taken over breast feeding the Bartel's infant son and has turned their daughter Emma against Claire. Peyton even tries to make a sexual play for Michael while Claire is in the hospital, but the good husband reminds Peyton that there is only one woman for him, his wife. When Peyton tries to set up a trap to kill Claire, she ends up having to kill Marlene instead because Marlene has discovered Peyton's true identity. After Marlene's death, Claire follows her leads and is also able to uncover Peyton's identity as Mrs. Mott. The Bartels order Peyton to leave the house, but she returns that evening to take "her children." In a final showdown between Claire and Peyton, Claire screams to Peyton that "this is my family." In order to gain the element of surprise in their physical battle, Claire fakes an asthma attack. While Claire is lying on the floor pretending to have trouble breathing, Peyton tells her:

When your husband makes love to you, it's my face he sees. When your baby is hungry, it's my breast that feeds him. Look at you. When push comes to shove, you can't even breath.

When Peyton turns her back to get the infant son, Claire attacks her and pushes Peyton out of the attic window to her death. Peyton's life and the threat to the nuclear family end when she is impaled by the white picket fence. The nuclear family is again intact and safe from the single childless woman.
In *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, it is not the single working childless woman who threatens the nuclear family, but the psychotic barren woman who is seeking revenge and restitution. By 1994 in the film *Disclosure*, it was not the childless or barren woman who threatened the family out of jealousy and rage, but the childfree transformative career woman who threatened a man’s family life through his professional destruction. What these films show is that regardless of the reasons for the childlessness status, infertility or purposeful tubal ligation, single childless women pose a distinct threat to the American nuclear family. Apparently, though it is the single *white* childless woman who is a threat to American families. In the film *Waiting to Exhale*, the white single childless woman is still a threat to the black nuclear family, but the black single childless women is portrayed in a different manner. *Waiting to Exhale* explored a year in the lives of four different black female friends. Savannah (Whitney Houston) is the single childless woman who is looking for love and a lasting relationship but keeps coming back to her married lover. Robin (Lela Rochon) is also a single childless woman who wants everything including a house in Scottsdale, a husband, children, and dinner out maybe three or four times a week. Bernadine (Angela Bassett) is the mother of two and has just lost her husband to a younger childless white woman. Finally, Gloria (Loretta Devine) is the divorce mother of one who is looking for a new love in her life. Unlike *Fatal Attraction*, *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, or *Presumed Innocent* that present the white single childless woman as villainous, *Waiting to Exhale* builds sympathy for the black single childless women and is written from their perspective. In fact, the wives and children of the married men are

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7 *Disclosure* is discussed at length in Chapter 8 on childless working women.
never even shown. Savannah is painfully aware of her status as a single over-thirty woman and is terribly uncomfortable at a New Year’s party with mostly married couples. When Savannah tries to take a seat at a dinner table of married couples, the husbands jump up to get her chair, but the wives shoot her looks to kill. Savannah thinks to herself, “Hell yeah. I’m single and desperate and have no morals. And as soon as one of you turns your back, I’m gonna flirt my butt off and then take your man.” But in fact, Savannah does not operate this way and politely excuses herself from the table.

Both Savannah and Robin have had married lovers. Robin has been asking her lover to leave his wife, but Russell only makes promises and never follows through. When Robin realizes towards the end of the film that she is pregnant with Russell’s child, she tells Russell that she does not want anything from him and lets him know that she and the baby do not need him in their lives. Savannah and Robin have both realized that if married men are willing to cheat on their wives with them, what would stop the married men from cheating on Savannah and Robin once they were wives. Like Russell’s behavior with Robin, Kenneth has been stringing Savannah along for some time. Kenneth swears he does not love his wife, but he is afraid of losing his daughter. The more Kenneth builds up the idea that he will leave his wife when the time is right, the more Savannah realizes that he “looks like the scum of the earth.” Savannah accepts her responsibility for taking part in an extra-marital affair but differentiates herself from Kenneth because she is not going to be an “asshole” any longer. Unlike Alex Forrest who desperately tried to hang onto Dan Gallagher, Savannah and Robin have both told their married lovers to take a hike.8

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8 Savannah and Robin were not the only black women who decided to leave their married lovers. In *Sister Act*, Deloris Van Cartier (Whoopi Goldberg) wants her married lover 232
Robin and Savannah knew deep down that their lovers were never going to leave their wives, so they knew they were not a true threat to the black nuclear family. In contrast to Savannah and Robin's situations in which little sympathy is built up for the wives of their married lovers, we are shown the pain and suffering that Bernadine must bear as her husband of 12 years walks out on her for a younger white childless woman.

Again, although the theme of the single white childless woman as a threat to the nuclear family does not appear in a great number of films, these role-images, particularly in *Fatal Attraction* and *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, provide strong cautionary tales. These cautionary tales inform people to approach single childless women with caution and be prepared to protect your nuclear family from their threats. Additionally attributing the role of psychotic barren villain to single childless women denigrates the social category of childlessness and helps to create negative stereotypes.

**The Man Shortage - Two Single Women Compete for the Same Man**

In her 1991 book *Backlash*, Susan Faludi demystified the myth of the college-educated desperate single women. A prominent research team had reported that college educated women have about a 20 percent chance of marrying if they have not done so by age 30. By age 35 their chances drop to 5 percent, and by age 40 the dismal chances are 1.3 percent. Faludi noted that although these research findings were erroneous, they had found their way into the press and popular belief. “Conventional press wisdom held that

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Vince (Harvey Keitel) to leave his wife, but Vince tells Deloris that he cannot leave his wife because his Catholic priest told him that he would burn in hell for getting a divorce. Angered by the fact that she and Vince can never be a normal happy couple, Deloris wants to tell Vince that she is leaving him. Unfortunately for Deloris, she doesn’t get this opportunity because she walks in on Vince and his hired gunmen while they are killing a snitch.
single women of the '80s were desperate for marriage - a desperation that mounted with every passing unwed year” (Faludi 1991:15). The myth of the man shortage also made its way into film culture as 21 of the single over-thirty women of this sample had to compete with another woman for the love and affection of Mr. Right. Perhaps Alex Forrest stated this theme best when she asked of married Dan Gallagher, “I was wondering, why is it all of the interesting guys are always married.” In total, over half of the single women found Mr. Right when he was already emotionally or legally involved with another woman. Often times, their efforts went unrewarded, and they did not win over Mr. Right. Table 6.2 shows the data on women who had to compete for the love of a man. Most often, two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Competing Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td><em>Arthur</em></td>
<td>Linda Morilla and Susan Johnson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td><em>Best Little Whore House</em></td>
<td>Mona Stangely and Dulcie Mae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td><em>Prizzi’s Honor</em></td>
<td>Maerose Prizzi and Irene Walker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td><em>Black Widow</em></td>
<td>Alex and Catherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td><em>Crimes of the Heart</em></td>
<td>Meg MaGrath and Doc Porter’s wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td><em>Fatal Attraction</em></td>
<td>Alex Forrest and Beth Gallagher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td><em>Outrageous Fortune</em></td>
<td>Lauren Ames and Sandy Brozinski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td><em>A Fish Called Wanda</em></td>
<td>Wanda Gerschwitz and Archie’s wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td><em>Gorillas in the Mist</em></td>
<td>Dian Fossey and Bob Campbell’s wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td><em>Working Girl</em></td>
<td>Tess McGill and Katherine Parker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td><em>Bird on a Wire</em></td>
<td>Marianne Graves and Rachel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Basic Instinct</em></td>
<td>Catherine Tramell and Elizabeth Garner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Death Becomes Her</em></td>
<td>Madeline Ashton and Helen Sharp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Housesitter</em></td>
<td>Gwen and Becky</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Sister Act</em></td>
<td>Deloris Van Cartier and Vince’s wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>French Kiss</em></td>
<td>Kate and Juliet</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Waiting to Exhale</em></td>
<td>Savannah Jackson and Kenneth’s wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td><em>Twister</em></td>
<td>Melissa Reese and Jo Harding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
single women were competing for the same man, but in seven of films (*Crimes of the Heart*, *Fatal Attraction*, *A Fish Called Wanda*, *Gorillas in the Mist*, *Sister Act*, *Twister*, and *Waiting to Exhale*) the single childless woman was competing for a man against his wife. When competing against a wife, only two of the single women got their men (*A Fish Called Wanda* and *Gorillas in the Mist*).

**What Man Shortage? - Two Men Vying for the Same Childless Woman**

While one half of the single childless women were competing for the attention of an already attached man, ten other single childless women were the object of affection for more than one man, including the women of the films: *Bird on a Wire*, *Blind Date*, *Bull Durham*, *A Fish Called Wanda*, *Grumpy Old Men*, *Medicine Man*, *Moonstruck*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Sliver*, and *Tin Cup*. In each of these films, the single childless women had to make a choice between two difference men who were vying for their love. In some cases (*Blind Date* and *A Fish Called Wanda*), there was direct competition between the two men that even lead to a physical confrontation. In other cases (*Medicine Man*, *Moonstruck*, and *Sleepless in Seattle*), one of the two men was unaware that the woman he loved was being drawn towards another man. The women controlled their own lives, and in every case they followed their hearts to chose the man they truly loved. A difference between the man shortage theme versus the two men vying for the same woman was that the man shortage was apparent as early as the 1981 film *Arthur*, but the theme of two men in competition for the same woman did not come about until 1987 with *Blind Date* and *Moonstruck*. 

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Childless Women's Lives as Lonely, but Not Spinsters

In her 1996 study of interviews with mothers, Sharon Hays had asked her respondents how they would feel if they never had children. Hays reported that she found the "stunningly consistent" answers of loneliness, emptiness, and the feeling that something was missing. Indeed many of the single childless women portrayed in Hollywood films were lonely and had the sense that something was missing. For the majority of the single women, what they missed was not a child but a man. One quarter of the sample had been described as lonely or were questioned by others about their potential for loneliness. With the exception of two married women who were lonely when their husbands were traveling, all of the women living lonely lives were either single, never married women or divorced women. Loneliness cut across all categories of childless women and inflicted traditional infertile women, traditional life-course women, and transformative women. Loneliness was a part of the lives of 42 percent of the single childless women. Even the nun Sister Helen Prejean was questioned about whether she missed having a husband and a family. Sister Prejean did admit that, "Sometimes on Sundays when I smell the smoke from the barbecue and hear the children laughing, I feel foolish and lonely."

Defined as Lonely by Others. Some of the childless women specifically stated that they were lonely, but for the most part, the ideas about loneliness came from other people questioning the childless women's lives. Dan Gallagher described Alex Forrest in Fatal Attraction as "lonely and very sad," and in Misery, the sheriff of the small town questioned Annie Wilkes about her living arrangements when he stated, "must get lonely living out
here all by yourself.” In *Batman Returns* Bruce Wayne described Selina Kyle as having the “lonely secretary syndrome.” Chapter 5 already addressed the loneliness experienced by infertile women Lenny MaGrath of *Crimes of the Heart* and Frankie of the film *Frankie and Johnny*. In addition to these two films that dealt specifically with the loneliness of the single childless woman, *Waiting to Exhale* also addressed head on the single woman’s loneliness. After Savannah had broken up with her married lover, she received an angry telephone call from her mother. Savannah’s mother had just heard from Kenneth and was shocked to hear about how terrible Savannah had treated him. In the conversation that follows, Savannah stands up to her mother and faces the fact that she may never find a suitable man to live out her life with:

*Savannah:* First of all. Ma I am sick of you telling me how I should live my life, who you think I should love, marry. Ma I’m sick of it.

*Mama:* Don’t you raise your voice with me.

*Savannah:* Mama I’m 33 years old, and I live alone.

*Mama:* Yeah, tell me about it.

*Savannah:* Yes, and I may have to accept the fact that I may live alone for the rest of my life.

*Mama:* It ain’t too late Savannah. He’s beggin’ on his damn knees and you’re lettin’ him get away.

*Savannah:* Mama do you hear me? I have a job, I have friends. Ma I have interests that you don’t even ask about. Because only one thing counts with you mama.

*Mama:* With any damn woman unless they lyin’ to themselves.

*Savannah:* Well I’m being honest with myself Ma. I’m smart, I work hard and I’m a good person. Ma if I allow myself to think like you, I’d guess I’d be a dead woman. Ma you should be proud that I’d rather live alone than crawl behind some two timing loser like Kenneth.
Mama: He’s a good man Savannah, a good man. He is just in a bad situation right now, and he’s trying to get out of it.

Savannah: Mama I tell you what, why don’t you fucking marry him then?

[Savannah hangs up on her mother but calls her back and apologizes.]

Mama: I just don’t want to see you end up like me. Alone.

Savannah: I know Mama. And I love you.

Although most women’s loneliness was solved by the love of a good man, Savannah recognized that she has not been able to seek fulfillment through relationships with boyfriends. She insulated herself from loneliness through strong female friendships, family ties, and her career. Women like Joan Wilder of Romancing the Stone and Maerose Prizzi of Prizzi’s Honor were cured of their loneliness through their new relationships, but other women were not as successful in negotiating their loneliness. For Cynthia Swann Griffin (Stockard Channing) of The First Wives Club, she leapt to her death when her husband left her for a younger woman. As one of her last acts, she had sent a letter to her college girlfriends warning them that “loneliness is the problem.” Cynthia had urged the three women to rekindle their friendships and take care of each other as they entered their later years. The women of The First Wives Club heeded Cynthia’s warnings and probably saved divorced and childless Elise Elliot from a similar fate to Cynthia. When male companionship did not materialize, the childless women built strong friendships with other females.

Older Age and Loneliness. Social researchers who have conducted interviews with childless women sometimes find that a fear of younger childless women is that they may
grow lonely in their later years (Burgwyn 1981; Morell 1994). Additionally, national surveys have shown that there is “substantial agreement” among Americans that children insulate elderly people from loneliness (Blake 1979). Although many of the single or divorced childless women under 45 were often portrayed as lonely, the women over the age of 50 were generally portrayed as well adjusted and happy. Loneliness did not seem to present a problem for Clairee Belcher (Olympia Dukakis) of Steel Magnolias, Ariel Truax (Ann-Margret) of Grumpy Old Men, Maria Ragetti (Sophia Loren) of Grumpier Old Men, or Rose Morgan (Barbra Streisand) of The Mirror has Two Faces. Clairee was involved in many community and church activities and had strong friendships with five different women. As was discussed in the first section of this chapter, the energy and excitement for life of both Ariel and Maria helped to turn around the lives of two lonely old men. Although Rose Morgan wanted a husband to help fill her life, she managed just fine with her friends, family, and her teaching career at Columbia University. Elise Elliot of The First Wives Club had experienced great loneliness when her husband left her, but she was able to combat that loneliness through cultivating friendships with her old college roommates and helping to build a women’s crisis center.

Good-bye to the Spinster? None of the films portrayed single, divorced, or widowed childless women as sad and lonely spinsters who watched each day pass them by. The closest that the films came to presenting women as spinsters were in the portrayals of Lenny in Crimes of the Heart, Frankie in Frankie and Johnny, and Rose in The Mirror has Two Faces. While these films hinted at spinsterhood, they never directly called these women spinsters or old maids. Historically Hollywood films have been very explicit in
stating that women who have reached the age of thirty without marriage prospects are threatened by or even condemned to a life of spinsterhood (Haskell 1987). If Hollywood has never been shy about calling a single woman a spinster, why drop the term in the 1980s and 1990s? Perhaps this is evidence of cultural ambiguity with regard to spinsterhood. Whereas the identification as a spinster may have historically constituted a master status for women, the single women of these films tended to identify themselves as simply women rather than single women, spinsters, or old maids. Their womanhood most often included a strong career in which they gained a great deal of self identification. The saddened spinster image which was prevalent in films between the 1920s and the 1970s (Haskell 1987) seems to have dissipated in contemporary film representations, and single over-thirty childless women are now often portrayed as fresh and vibrant women.

Conclusion

The representations of the single over-thirty childless women are contradictory and confusing. It is difficult to know if men are to run to them with open arms and embrace their independence and sexual freedom or if they are to run from single childless women because of the distinct threat they pose to the nuclear family. Single childless women can either be rejuvenating to middle-aged men or they can threaten to destroy all that a middle-aged man has worked hard to accumulate. In addition to this contradiction in the representations of childless women’s independence and sexuality, there are also competing images of women in their relationships with men. On the one hand, single childless women are portrayed as desperate for a man’s love and having to compete with other women for a precious few good men. Without a man in her life to provide love and
companionship, the single childless woman is condemned to loneliness and despair. To some extent these images serve as cautionary tales to those who might delay marriage for career or personal goals. Delaying marriage can lead to missing the marriage boat altogether. Through these representations of single lonely, desperate women, we get the sense that childless singlehood is a less than desirable role and one in which women often regret.

On the other hand, single childless women are represented as beautiful, vibrant, sexy, and uninhibited women. These single childless women were often the object of affection and desire for more than one man. Freedom and excitement characterize many single childless women, and they often awake figuratively dead men. Their lack of parental responsibilities allow them time to pursue self-interests and pamper men with their undivided attention. Childless women who are presented in a positive manner rather than as a threat to families are often shown in films that have no scenes with children and no references to children. These women seem to exist in a world that does not include children and stands apart from families and traditionalism. These single childless women constitute a new type of woman, the not-mother. These not-mothers are women who are defined by a sense of self that does not include motherhood and domesticity. In addition to their self-identification as a woman rather than a mother, they also gain self-identity through their personal relationships with their boyfriend/lover/fiancé. These relationships with men do not automatically lead to the procreation of children. Many times fertility intentions are not discussed in the relationships and the issue of family life is side-stepped.

These women also exist in the world of light hearted comedies or comedy dramas. In contrast, women who are a threat to the family are portrayed in suspense thrillers.
Finally, these women also gain self-identification through their work, a subject that is explored at length in Chapter 8.

A subtle but important discovery in looking at the films involving single childless women is the lack of the use of the terms spinster or old maid to describe single childlessness in the 1980s and 1990s. At no time did the single childless women identify themselves as a spinster or old maid, and the label of spinster or old maid was never applied to them by another film character. While some of the women did experience loneliness, the negative imagery of spinsterhood was combated with the positive images of single childless sexual energy, youthful vitality, and personal freedom. The not-mother single childless women are by no means the equivalent to the historical figure of the saddened, broken hearted spinster.
CHAPTER 7

NEGATIVE ROLE-IMAGES OF CHILDLESS WOMEN IN THE ROLE OF WIFE

Evidence of Marital HappinessReported in Real Life Childless Marriages

The experiential literature based on in-depth interviews with childless couples often points out that childless marriages can be characterized by freedom, equality, and an intense intimacy between partners (Burgwyn 1981; Morell 1994; Veevers 1980). Marriages without children are immune to problems associated with the financial difficulties incurred by children or the emptying nest syndrome. Childless marriages do not experience the initial drop in marital happiness associated with the birth of the first child. White, Booth and Edwards (1986) found that the presence of children in a marriage was negatively associated with marital happiness and financial satisfaction, and they also found that wives with children show more dissatisfaction with the division of labor between spouses. Houseknecht (1979) found that childless by choice wives scored higher on marital happiness scales than wives who were also mothers. Childless wives also reported being engaged in more outside interests and worked on more projects together with their spouses than wives who were also mothers. In contrast to the potential problems associated with marriages with children, individuals in childless marriages often express deep satisfaction with their intimacy level, financial freedom (including the ability to be downwardly mobile if they choose), and level of equality in the division of labor (Burgwyn 1981; Morell 1994; Veevers 1980). There is no reason to believe that
marriages in which both partners are committed to their childlessness are more prone to divorce than marriages with children.¹ This is not to say that all childless marriages are immune to divorce. Statistically childless marriages do experience higher rates of divorce; however, the relationship between childless marriages and divorce may be a spurious relationship since many first marriages fail early on and prior to the onset of children. Burgwyn (1981) noted that there is one special situation in which childlessness can lead directly to divorce. Couples entering into marriage who fully expect to have children are often deeply disappointed and experience guilt when one partner is diagnosed as infertile or sterile. The tensions brought about by long, painful, expensive, and often unsuccessful infertility treatments can prove to be too much for even the strongest of relationships to withstand, and the marriage may dissolve.

**Marital Themes**

Although equality, freedom, and intimacy are words often used to describe childless marriages by researchers who have conducted intense interviews with childless women or couples, these are not exactly the types of words one might use to describe the marriages portrayed in these 67 films. The childless marriages of this study are plagued with divorce, hate, conflict between career and marriage, stagnation of individual growth, and even murder. Of the 75 leading childless women studied in these 67 films, 33 women had been or were currently in a marital relationship. Of these 33 women, 36 percent were married throughout the duration of the films, 45 percent were divorced or separated, and

¹ Research conclusions about the differences in divorce rates between childless couples and couples with children are inconclusive. For a review of the literature, see Houseknecht 1987.
21 percent were widowed. This chapter outlines several themes with regard to the marriages of childless women, including:

1. A History of Failed Marriages

2. Marriages that are Jeopardized by the Wife’s Career
   a) career versus marriage
   b) estranged marriages reunited in the face of death
   c) dual career couples

3. Rich and Loveless Marriages

4. Marriages that End with Murder or Attempted Murder

5. Marriages Formed for Financial or Personal Gain Rather than Love

6. The Institution of Marriage as Inconsistent with Personal Growth or Independence
   a) marriage as an oppressive institution
   b) singlehood as a viable alternative to marriage

Each of these themes is detailed below and include a discussion of several films that exemplify the themes.

Failed Marriages

The idea that childless women have a history of failed marriages comes through in eleven films, including Agnes of God, Bird on a Wire, Dangerous Minds, First Wives Club, Forget Paris, Grumpier Old Men, Housesitter, Misery, 9 to 5, Presumed Innocent, and Sliver. In each of these films, little detail is given about the former marriage, divorce, and reason for the childlessness. What we generally find out is that the women of these eleven films were married at one point in their lives, and their marriages failed. In Agnes

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2 The percentages equal 102 percent because in one film a woman is married throughout the film, but had been divorced at the start of the film.
3 First Wives Club is the only film that deals with failed marriages of both childless women and mothers.
of God, Dr. Martha Livingston (Jane Fonda) is a divorced psychologist who had an abortion during her marriage and has now reached menopause without conceiving a child. Although she is dating a police detective, she tells her patient Agnes that she has no intention of getting married any time soon since she is content living alone. The film does not explore Dr. Livingston’s failed marriage or her feelings about her abortion. We only learn of Martha’s abortion and divorce through the ramblings of her senile mother. Martha’s mother believes that Martha will end up in hell for her divorce and abortion, both of which went against the Catholic faith.

In the film Bird on a Wire, Marianne Graves (Goldie Hawn) had intended to marry her high school sweetheart Rick Jarmin (Mel Gibson). However, before they were able to marry, Rick allegedly dies in a plane crash. Marianne is devastated and feels that she has been left standing at the alter. Her grief and loneliness lead her to marry another man within four months of Rick’s death. When the film opens, it is set approximately 20 years after Rick’s alleged death, and Marianne has already been through one marriage that ended in divorce. The film does not give any details about Marianne’s failed marriage, but when Rick shows up alive and well, he implies that Marianne had married her first husband for his family’s money. Rick implies that the marriage to the wealthy ‘napalm king’ was directly responsible for the development of Marianne’s selfish and spoiled personality.

Annie Wilkes (Kathy Bates) is the psychotic captor in Stephen King’s horror film Misery. As part of the development of Annie’s mental instability, Annie tells her hostage Paul Sheldon (James Caan) about how her husband left her several years earlier. Since she had not been expecting her husband to leave her, Annie did not handle the separation very
well and threw herself into her work as a nurse in a maternity ward. Although the timing of certain events is left a bit murky, it seems that the divorce was just prior to the time when Annie started killing babies in the maternity ward. While it looks from Annie’s personal scrapbook that she has never been fully mentally stable, her husband walking out on her did not help matters and may have pushed her even further over the edge. For other marriages that fell apart before the time frame of the films, a variety of reasons were to blame including: being left for a younger woman (First Wives Club, 9 to 5); marrying too young and for the wrong reasons (Housesitter); simply falling out of love (Forget Paris); having bad luck with men and marriage (Grumpier Old Men); wife abuse (Dangerous Minds); and not getting what she wanted from a man of power (Presumed Innocent).

Certainly marriages with children are not immune to divorce. The U.S. National Center for Health Statistics estimated that 1,075,000 children under the age of 18 had been involved in divorce proceedings during the year 1990. This number has been fairly stable since 1984. Although Hollywood did not ignore divorces involving couples with children (e.g. Mrs. Doubtfire, She-Devil, and War of the Roses4), these films seemed to be overshadowed by the sheer number of films focusing on the joys of marriage enhanced by pregnancy, child birth, and raising children. At the same time that Hollywood’s childless characters had experienced failed marriages, other films were produced which specifically showed marriages and pre-marital relationships that grew stronger through the birth or

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4 In War of the Roses, the marriage does not reach shaky grounds until after the children have been successfully raised and are off at college. During the empty nest years the couple grows to hate each other, and their irreconcilable differences lead to their joint deaths.
adoption of a child (For Keeps, Immediate Family, Look Who's Talking, Look Who's Talking Too, Parenthood, and She's Having a Baby). Even unmarried individuals were becoming better people through the inheritance or adoption of a new child (Baby Boom, Beaches, Three Men and a Baby, and Three Men and Little Lady). In the case of Overboard, a rich childless woman in a loveless marriage left her husband to begin a new life as the mother of four young boys and has hopes of creating a little girl with her new husband. In each of these films, children are a source of happiness and can even lead to strengthening marital or pre-marital relationships.

In contrast to building better characters through the birth or adoption of a child, the writers of the films involving childless women often used the history of divorce as a way to stigmatize the women or to enhance negative aspects of their personalities. Having a past that involved a failed marriage helped to develop the sense that Agnes of God's Dr. Martha Livingston was leading an unsatisfied life and sought comfort from her past failures through her addiction to cigarettes. For Marianne Graves of Bird on a Wire, her divorce helped to create her throw-away spoiled personality, and for Annie Wilkes in Misery, her divorce was one more factor that contributed to her psychotic behavior. Maria Ragetti of Grumpier Old Men had been divorced five different times, creating a sense that she has no ability to judge a man's character and made poor choices about relationships. This is a fact that is reiterated several times by Maria's mother in order to keep her away from a potential sixth marriage. These films suggest that one belief about childless women is that they are unable to perform the role of wife in a satisfactory manner and are therefore prone to divorce.
Marriages that are Jeopardized by the Wife’s Career

Not all marital separations or divorces were left unexplored as in the movies above. Several of the films of this study (all of which were produced after 1987) were explicit in stating that the reason for the marital strife was the strain of a wife’s career on the marital relationship. These films reflect certain anxieties about women who are committed to their careers and can be taken as cautionary tales about what happens to women when career comes before marital responsibilities. In *Beaches*, CC Bloom’s sensational singing career was directly responsible for her divorce from the man she loved. Both Dian Fossey of *Gorillas in the Mist* and Dr. Rae Crane of *Medicine Man* broke off engagements with their fiancés before they ever reached the alter in order to pursue their research in remote jungle settings. Tess McGill in *Working Girl* saw that the man who was proposing marriage to her was not going in the same upwardly mobile career path that she intended to pursue, so she declined his offer of marriage. When CC Bloom and Dian Fossey saw that a marital relationship would conflict with their career aspirations, they also broke off second serious relationships with men who were intent on marriage. In three similar films about life-threatening disasters (*The Abyss*, *Outbreak*, and *Twister*), strained marriages of three different head-strong career minded women were brought back together when they faced life or death situations with their estranged husbands. Finally, two films were produced which explored the difficulties faced by dual-career couples in the late 1990’s (*Forget Paris* and *Up Close and Personal*).

**Career vs. Marriage.** In the 1988 drama *Beaches*, CC Bloom (Bette Midler) meets her future husband John Pierce (John Heard) while delivering a singing telegram to his
apartment. John, a director for a small off-Broadway theater, is interested in CC’s singing talent and asks her to audition for his new production. CC is thrilled to have met John not only because he might further her career, but also because she has fallen in love with him at first sight. John, however, is only interested in CC for her singing talent and is instead instantly attracted to CC’s best friend and room-mate Hillary Whitney (Barbara Hershey). Just as Hillary and John are developing a romantic relationship, Hillary is called back to San Francisco to help care for her dying father. During her longer than anticipated stay in San Francisco, Hillary marries her father’s young lawyer Michael. With Hillary married to another man and out of New York, CC and John’s relationship moves from a professional relationship to a sexual one. CC asks John to marry her, and knowing that Hillary will never to be his, John agrees to the marriage. While one might think that John’s repressed love for Hillary would have eventually broken up his marriage to CC, it is instead CC’s career that eventually leads directly to their divorce. CC’s career takes off, and she moves from starring in John’s off-Broadway musical to starring in top Broadway hits. CC becomes one of the hottest talents in Broadway productions. Along with CC’s new found fame comes an expensive apartment with stylish furniture and an extravagant life-style, all of which do not agree with John’s less lavish personality. After a couple of years of marriage to John, CC leaves John. Her intent is to divorce John because he no longer pays enough attention to her. While visiting with her mother Leona (Lanie Kazan) in Miami, CC explains that John has stopped paying attention to her and her career. Leona is not sympathetic to CC’s problem and replies:

Why do you think I’m living down here in Florida?...You always wanted too much attention. You wanted so much attention from everybody all the time that you wore people out. You wore me out. You wore your father
out (may he rest in peace) by the time you were fifteen years old. I love you CC...but I just can’t pay any more attention to you. And if I were you, I wouldn’t leave anybody for not paying attention to me. Because sooner or later, you’re going to have to leave everybody. You understand me?

CC takes her mother’s advice and returns to New York to reunite her marriage. She asks John to forgive her and take her back, but John tells CC that he doesn’t want to go where she’s going. He is not cut out to live in CC’s world of the fame and fortune. John enjoys directing his small productions in his off-Broadway theater and prefers a simple lifestyle. John knows that CC could never give up her career and fame, and he does not ask her to do so. Instead, he prefers to end their marriage while they are still friends.

After her divorce from John, CC’s career goes through a bit of slump, and she is fired from a starring role in a motion picture. She moves to San Francisco to help recently divorced Hillary prepare for the birth of her child. While in San Francisco, CC falls in love with Hillary’s obstetrician Richard (Spalding Gray). With her career in a downward spiral and her divorce finalized, CC considers giving up her work for a traditional marriage to Richard. CC actually convinces herself that she is ready for a baby, a station wagon, and a quilting circle. However, before CC can walk down the isle for her second marriage, she receives a call from her agent with an offer to star in a new show on Broadway. Without hesitation, CC packs her bags and heads back to New York, leaving Hillary the task of breaking off the engagement to Richard. When faced with the possibility of rising to stardom once again, CC abandons her ideas about a traditional life of home and hearth and jumps at the opportunity to further her career, losing not one but a second love in her life.

Within this sample Dian Fossey of Gorillas in the Mist and Dr. Rae Crane of Medicine Man also leave their fiancés in order to pursue their careers. Neither woman...
had intended to break off their engagements for their research, but each of woman got caught up in her work at the expense of her impending marriages. *Gorillas in the Mist* was based on the life of gorilla researcher Dian Fossey (played by Sigourney Weaver).

Dian originally signs on with Dr. Louis Leakey to spend six months in Africa researching the mountain gorillas. She intends to return to the United States after her six months of research and marry her fiancé; however, she becomes so involved with the research of the mountain gorillas that she stays in Africa much longer than her original six month contract. Her fiancé tires of waiting for her to return to the United States and breaks off the engagement. This is the first relationship portrayed in the film that is jeopardized by her commitment to the mountain gorilla research.

After a few years of Dian’s successful field research, the National Geographic Society sends out a photographer (Bob Campbell played by Bryan Brown) to take pictures of Dian and the gorillas. Dian does not originally approve of Bob’s presence and feels he is intruding in her work. Bob counters her argument by explaining that the pictures that he takes will end up in *National Geographic* magazines all over the United States and in the same doctor’s offices who are indirectly responsible for the poaching of the mountain gorillas. When Dian realizes that Bob and his photographs could be of assistance to sustaining the gorilla population, she allows him to accompany her on several days of her field work with the gorillas. As Bob returns to Dian’s camp to take more photographs, their relationship develops into a romance. Eventually Bob leaves his wife because of his love for Dian. His intent is to marry Dian and move from the mountain for at least six
monthes of the year. In the following passage, Dian shows that she is not receptive to
Bob's offer:

**Bob:** Dian we can't stay on this mountain forever.

**Dian:** Sure we can.

**Bob:** The pictures are selling very well. Job offers are coming in.

**Dian:** But the gorillas are here. I'm here.

**Bob:** We'll get someone good to look after the setup half of the year - one
of those researchers that keeps on writing to you.

**Dian:** I don't want a lot of snotty little scientists with slide rulers up their
back pockets peering at my gorillas.

**Bob:** Now hold on. I'm talking about six months out of the year. Six
months here, six months out of here. That's all.

**Dian:** You know I just can't imagine not being out with them everyday.
Seeing their faces. Hearing them and smelling them. Every time I think I
know everything there is to know about a gorilla, something new happens.
I’m hooked. How can I give that up?

**Bob:** Yeah. [He looks troubled.]

Shortly after this exchange, Bob receives a job offer to photograph a study of primates in
another remote area of the world. Dian tells Bob that she cannot leave the mountain and
tells him that if he takes the new job, he should never return to her and never write to her.
Although Bob hesitates, he gathers his belongings, abandons their love, and leaves her
research site forever.

While *Gorillas in the Mist* is based on the true life story of Dian Fossey, several
critics have noted that the film portrays more myth than reality at times. *Mademoiselle's*
movie critic Ron Rosenbaum (1988) chastised the film for ignoring the contributions of
Dian’s nearly 20 years of research on the mountain gorillas. Instead the producers turned the movie into “some made-for-TV career/relationship movie. Suddenly it’s all about whether Dian Fossey, career girl, can balance her workaholic addiction to her career with her love for *National Geographic* photographer Bryan Brown” (p. 200) According to Marjorie Rosen of *Ms.* magazine, Brian was only one of many lovers who came and went during Dian’s years on the Rwandan mountain side. A commitment to any one of these lovers would have been at the expense of her research. In one of the ending scenes of the film, several friends are gathered around Dian’s grave at her funeral. Dian’s friend Roe Carr (Julie Harris) thinks back to an earlier conversation she had with Dian in which Dian told Roe:

Dian: You know, I always thought that I’d go back to the States sooner or later. I really expected to get married, have children.

Roe: But instead you got a mountain full of gorillas who wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for you.

This film portrays Dian’s life as a conflict between work and love. She could have either her work with the mountain gorillas or a husband and children. She did not see any possible way to combine both her work with the mountain gorillas and a family life. In the end, the gorillas became her family, and she was buried next to the grave site of her favorite male silverback gorilla, with rocks adjoining the two graves to join their souls in the afterlife.

The women of *Beaches, Medicine Man*, and *Gorillas in the Mist*, were all career oriented women who felt the need to chose between their careers and the men they loved. In each case, these women chose to put their career interests ahead of their engagements.
or marriages. These transitional and transformative women were able to live happy lives despite their lack of marriage and children. None of the traditional life-course women or traditional infertile women gave up their personal relationships to pursue their careers. In the next section, three other transformative women are faced with the decision of continuing their careers at the possible expense of their marriages.

**Estranged Marriages Reunited in the Face of Death.** Three assertive women with career paths in male dominated work worlds (oil rig engineer, medical researcher, and tornado researcher) find that the commitment to successful careers leads directly to marital separation and divorce. The first of these films is the 1989 science-fiction movie *The Abyss.* Lindsey Brigman (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), the engineer of an off-shore underwater oil drilling rig, is known to all who work with her as the “queen bitch of the universe.” When a United States Naval nuclear submarine is sunk close to the proximity of the oil rig, the oil rig company president agrees to help the Navy find the submarine and look for any possible survivors. This decision infuriates Lindsey as she is very close to proving that the oil rig can be sustained underwater for a particular period of time. Her concern is for her research, and she shows no grief for the many lives that were lost on the Naval submarine. Lindsey decides that she will accompany the Navy SEALs, who are descending to the oil rig so that she can be there in the event of any problems with the rig. During their decent, one of the Navy SEALs refers to Lindsey as “Mrs. Brigman.” Lindsey tells the navy man not to call her that name, and the navy man replies with, “All right, what would you like us to call you? Sir?” Lindsey is a liberated modern woman who refuses to be identified as someone’s wife.
When Lindsey and the Navy SEALS arrive at the oil rig, she is met by her estranged husband Bud (Ed Harris), the oil rig foreman:

Bud: Well, well, Mrs. Brigman.

Lindsey: Not for long.

Bud: You never did like being called that, did you?

Lindsey: Not even when it meant something.

[Bud asks Lindsey why she decided to make the trip down to the rig.]

Lindsey: I was worried about the rig. I’ve got over four years invested in it.

Bud: Yeah, but you only have three years invested in me.

Lindsey: [coldly replies] We have to have priorities.

Throughout the film it becomes apparent that Lindsey is the one who initiated the divorce proceedings. After the above exchange of unpleasantries, an emotional Bud goes into the bathroom to flush his wedding band down the toilet. Once the ring is in the toilet, Bud reconsider his actions and retrieves the ring. A part of Bud is still in love with Lindsey and is hoping for a reconciliation.

Bud gets his wish of reconciliation, but only at the expense of Lindsey’s life. Lindsey and Bud end up in a smaller water vessel that is filling with water. Bud had left the oil rig with a water suit and oxygen mask, but Lindsey left the rig unprepared and does not have an oxygen mask or water suit. With her drowning inevitable, Lindsey kisses Bud through his oxygen mask and hugs him until she has drowned. Bud swims with Lindsey back to the rig and tries to revive Lindsey through CPR. At first it looks as if Lindsey will
not be revived, and the other crew members give up on the CPR. Bud refuses to give up and breaths into her mouth, pounds on her chest, and screams “Breath! Breath!”

Through this emotional moment of life and death, we get an even better sense of who Lindsey is when Bud states:

She has a strong heart. She wants to live. Goddamn it you bitch. You never backed away from anything in your life. Now fight. Fight! Fight! Fight Goddamn it!

Bud’s persistence pays off, and Lindsey is revived. When she awakens after some time of rest, Bud is watching over her and crying. Even though Lindsey has been the person in danger, she is still the stronger of the two and tells Bud that, “Big boys don’t cry, remember?”

In addition to the near death experience of Lindsey, there is a series of other crises, and the problems of the rig crew culminate in the launching of a nuclear warhead down the abyss by one of the Navy SEALS. The warhead does not detonate and must be retrieved. Although he knows that it is a one way trip with little likelihood of survival, Bud volunteers for the job. Lindsey wants to know why it has to be him who will risk his life, but Bud feels it is his duty. Through a high-tech communication system, Lindsey is able to talk to Bud while he is descending down the abyss, and Bud can type messages back to Lindsey and the rig crew. Even in this life or death situation, Lindsey has a hard time being soft and caring. She talks him through the procedural items and gives him water depth updates. It seems that Bud is having troubles when his typing comes back jumbled. One of the crew members tells Lindsey to talk to Bud and let him hear her voice:

Lindsey: OK Bud, your depth is 8,500 feet. You’re doing fine.

Crew Member: No Lindsey. Talk to him.
Lindsey: Bud, there are some things that I need to say. It’s hard for me you know. It’s not easy being a caste iron bitch. Takes discipline and years of training. A lot of people don’t appreciate that. Jesus, I’m sorry I can’t tell you these things to your face. I have to wait until you’re alone in the dark, freezing, and there’s 10,000 feet of water between us. Bud I know how alone you feel. Alone in all that cold blackness. But I’m there in the dark with you. Oh Bud, you’re not alone. I’m with you. I’ll always be with you Bud. [She begins to cry, and someone else must take over talking to Bud.]

When the crew asks Bud for an oxygen reading, it shows that there is no way he will have enough oxygen to make it back to the rig. He tells Lindsey that it is all right, and he knew this was a one way ticket. The last words he types to her is, “I love you wife,” and she replies to him, “I love you.” Faced with Bud’s death, she sets aside her feminist feelings about marriage and is happy to be referred to as “wife.” But since this is a science fiction movie and there is an unidentified sea creature, in the end everyone is saved. The sea creature raises the oil rig to the top of the ocean, and the crew members and Lindsey are saved. They are remorseful that they lost several crew member lives during the crisis, but as luck would have it, Bud is saved by the sea creatures as well. Bud emerges from the sea creatures’ water ship, and Lindsey rushes to him with open arms. She smiles and greets him, “Hi Brigman.” He smiles back and says, “Hi Mrs. Brigman.” Lindsey accepts the title, smiles, and kisses Bud. The queen bitch of the universe has softened to become the loving, caring, Mrs. Brigman.

The second film to follow this pattern of pulling together nearly divorced people in the face of death was the 1995 film Outbreak. Dr. Robby Kaough (Rene Russo) and Colonel Sam Daniels (Dustin Hoffman) have recently divorced, divided their property, and
sold their house. Robby and Sam were married for several years and parented two St. Bernard puppies to full adulthood. They are also virologist colleagues who worked together for the Army. When we meet the couple, Robby is trying to move her life from California to Atlanta to begin her new career with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Unlike Lindsey Brigman, Robby is a kind woman. The divorce does not seem to be anyone's fault, but Robby did initiate the divorce proceedings and is adamant about leaving Sam even though he still loves her very much. Robby and Sam are pushed back together when a 100 percent fatal virus is brought to American from Africa by a small monkey. While trying to help an infected colleague, Robby accidentally jabs herself with a needle and becomes infected with the virus. It looks certain that Robby, like everyone else who has been infected, will die within the next two days from the virus. Sam is devastated that she is infected and is now even more determined to find the cure. Within the next 24 hours, Sam finds the virus host animal and is able to make an antiserum before Robby dies. While Robby is lying on what she thinks is her death bed, she confesses to Sam that she loves him. Sam does not want Robby to give up her fight against death and takes off his protective gear so that she can feel his face to see that he is serious about the antiserum. After this scene Robby falls asleep for several hours and awakens to find Sam sitting by her bed. Robby questions Sam about the antiserum and the recovery of the people:

Robby: Pretty unique experience.

Sam: Sort of like moving in with me. Would you go through it again?

Robby: Maybe. Now that I have the antibodies.
At this point the camera fades and the credits begin to run. Sam and Robby were not talking about going through the virus experience again, but instead were headed towards a reconciliation of their marriage.

The last of the marriages reconciled through near-death experiences is the 1996 blockbuster *Twister*. As critic Jack Kroll (1996) wrote in *Newsweek*, “Writers Michael Crichton and his wife Anne-Marie Martin give us two stormchasers, Bill (Bill Paxton) and Jo (Helen Hunt) who have split up but are blown into one last twister-tailing adventure (Recall ‘The Abyss’ and ‘Outbreak’? Same situation, with water and germs)” (p. 70). Jo and Bill were meteorology doctoral students together, and Bill designed a new research instrument to measure tornado activity. Although Bill quit the Ph.D. program and became a news station meteorologist, Jo followed through by building the instrument with the help of her research team. Bill has been waiting for Jo to sign their divorce papers so that he can marry his new girlfriend Melissa (Jami Gertz). It is obvious that Jo still loves Bill, but we learn in the film that Bill left Jo because she could not commit to their marriage the way she was committed to her research. Bill tells Jo that, “I may have walked out, but at least I showed up in the first place. You never had the slightest idea what being married means. Stability, supportiveness, a house, and all kinds of neat things like that.” Jo’s only relative, Aunt Meg, reiterates Bill’s concerns about their marriage when she tells Jo:

**Aunt Meg:** He didn’t keep his part of the bargain.

**Jo:** Which part?

**Aunt Meg:** To spend his life pining for you and die miserable and alone.

**Jo:** [sarcastically] Is that too much to ask?
Jo and Bill's relationship is given one final chance when the research team enlists the help of Bill to get the research instrument named Dorothy working. Bill and Jo spend the remainder of the film trying to launch Dorothy into the tornadoes and are almost killed several times. In the final scene, Bill and Jo have succeeded in launching their final Dorothy into the eye of a tornado and are nearly swept away by the tornado themselves. When the storm has passed and they are still alive, the research crew arrives on the scene to find Bill and Jo embraced and reunited in their love and research.

The trouble with each of these three films is that the couples are reunited through their near-death experiences, and the films cut to the credits. Their brush with death has made them realize their true emotions, but their experiences have done nothing to change the nature of the work-marital relationship conflict. Although Lindsey Brigman has softened a bit and comes to accept her role as "Mrs. Brigman," these women are presumably still committed to their work. After the film credits are done rolling, the women will still have to figure out how to manage their career and marital commitments.

**Dual Career Couples.** Two films were specifically designed to show the difficulty of dual career couples who truly love each other but find it difficult to negotiate their career responsibilities and their marital relationship. In the 1995 film *Forget Paris*, Mickey and Ellen (Billy Crystal and Debra Winger) are a couple who fall in love, get married, and spend the rest of the film trying unsuccessfully to negotiate their careers and their marriage. Ellen is a top executive of a French airline company, and Mickey is an NBA referee. Ellen is the first in the relationship to put her career in jeopardy when she quits her job in Paris to live with Mickey in the United States. When she first arrives in
the United States, she travels with Mickey to all of his games but eventually feels the need to work again. Ellen finds a low level job with a local airline company and misses Mickey terribly while he is traveling with the NBA season. The film goes back and forth between one person's career happiness at the expense of the other person's marital happiness. At first Mickey is happy with his job and the marriage while Ellen hates her job and is disappointed with their marriage. When Ellen asks Mickey to take a job that does not involve as much travel, he becomes miserable in his job as a car salesman, and she is now happy with their marriage. When the airline company realizes Ellen's true talents, her career soars as they promote her to a similar position she held in Paris. Now Ellen is happy in her job and marriage while Mickey is distressed with both his car salesman position and the marriage. So Mickey goes back to the NBA, and Ellen decides that she wants to take a promotion that involves moving to a new U.S. city. Mickey refuses to make the move and Ellen tells him that since he is so inflexible, she is leaving him and will take a job offered to her in Paris. Unable to come to a compromise, Ellen moves to Paris, and Mickey stays with the NBA. Now they are both happy in their jobs but miserable in life and love. The film ends with Mickey getting ready to head to Paris only to be met on the way by Ellen who is returning to the United States to be with Mickey. They are miserable separated and want to try to make their marriage work. Mickey and Ellen also know that they had difficulties together. They resign to work on their career and marriage problems because of their love for each other. Once again, there is no resolution of their work/marriage/happiness problems, and the film cuts to the credits before we know how they will ever resolve their problems.
In 1996 a second film was created about a professional couple in love with each other and in love with their own work. *Up Close and Personal* is the story of Tally Atwater (Michelle Pfeiffer) and her mentor/husband Warren Justice (Robert Redford). Warren is the producer of a Miami news station and is the only person in the news business willing to give Tally a shot at her dream of being a news reporter. Warren starts Tally off as a desk girl, humiliates her, shoots down her ideas, and makes her get his coffee and dry cleaning. Despite Warren’s demeaning treatment, Tally keeps coming at him with more ideas and more determination. Warren admires Tally’s determination and gives her a chance as a news reporter. Tally is coached closely by Warren through the first part of her career, and while working together closely, they give into their love for each other. Just as their personal relationship is getting under way, Tally is hired by a Philadelphia news station. Her career is soaring, and Warren refuses to hold her back in Miami. While in Philadelphia, Tally is broken-hearted. She misses Warren, and likewise, he is miserable without her. Eventually Warren tries to get a job in the Philadelphia area, but he has burned too many bridges in his past. Tally pulls some strings and tries to get Warren hired at her Philadelphia station, but Warren’s past conflicts with the station manager flare up again and he walks away from the job. Realizing that Tally has learned everything that he could teach her, Warren breaks from their professional relationship and becomes a freelance reporter. He knows that Tally will make it to the national networks and again does not want to stand in her way. On the night that Tally is hired by the national network news station, Warren tells Tally that he is going to Panama to do some freelance reporting on a story that the networks will not touch. Tally is disappointed and wants to know why...
Warren will not stay in the Philadelphia area with her, particularly since they have only recently been married:

Tally: Wasn’t the whole idea for us to be together?

Warren: It was. But it can’t be me putting wine on ice while you wrap up the evening news. And it can’t be you turning down a story because you don’t want to leave me at loose ends.

Tally: Do you want to be with me?

Warren: So much it hurts. I don’t want to be anywhere where I can’t see you or touch you. I don’t want to be anywhere I can’t hear your voice, or I can tell you a story and see this face smile. But I’ve got a narrow but very definite window of opportunity.

Warren pursues the story in Panama, but before he can return to the States with the story, his news party is ambushed with gunfire. Warren is killed in this ambush leaving Tally a widow at the same time that her career goal of being number one has just come true.

Warren and Tally are a couple who truly loved each other, but could not always be together because of their commitment to their own careers. Tally always wanted to be number one and with Warren’s help, she made it. When she moved to the Philadelphia news station, Warren gave up his job in Miami to be with her. His move to freelance reporting ended up costing Warren his life. Even if Warren had not died at the end of the film, their relationship would have continued to be disrupted by their career obligations.

The men and women of *Up Close and Personal* and *Forget Paris* loved their spouses. They all also loved their work. These are stories of the difficulties faced when neither member of the marriage is willing to play the role of full-time housekeeper and follow their spouse wherever their work takes them. In the case of Ellen and Mickey, they
risked divorce to pursue their individual career interests. For Tally and Warren, Tally’s career took her physically away from Warren, and he eventually could not wait around watching her success increase. Warren’s freelance reporting (brought about by Tally’s success) resulted in his early death and her premature widowhood.

Childless marriages which involved an ambitious career woman most often failed. Those relationships that did not fail faced constant problems with conflicts between career aspirations and marital responsibilities. Molly Haskell (1987) and Andrea Walsh (1984) both noted that women in Hollywood films have often had to choose between work and marital relationships. The overwhelming majority of female Hollywood characters in the 1930s through the 1970s gave up their careers to sustain their relationships. In the 1980s and 1990s, most childless film characters involved in ambitious careers seem more determined to keep their careers and juggle the responsibilities of both career and marriage. None of these women gave up their careers to become full-time wives and mothers.

Rich and Loveless Marriages

Perhaps the Beatles stated the next theme best when they sung their 1960s hit song, “Can’t Buy Me Love.” In five different films (Dave, Death Becomes Her, First Wives Club, Overboard, and Ruthless People), wealthy women were involved in loveless marriages. In the 1993 film Dave, Sigourney Weaver plays the first lady of the United States Ellen Mitchell. While Ellen and her husband, President Bill Mitchell (Kevin Kline), publicly display affection, they privately despise each other. They live in separate quarters of the White House and, with the exception of important public appearances, rarely see or
speak to one another. Ellen is well aware of Bill’s marital infidelity, but stays with him because she sees it as her public duty. She even forwent having children because it would take Bill away from his public service. Her life as a public servant and supporter of Bill’s political career did not allow time for children. Although there are many scenes in this film that show Ellen and Bill’s unhappy marriage, Ellen’s feelings for Bill are perhaps best displayed when President Mitchell seems to have recovered quickly from a serious stroke. Ellen storms into the Oval Office and asks him, “Why can’t you die from a stroke like everybody else?” When Bill finally does die from the stroke, Ellen is freed to start life over again and pursue happiness with a new love interest.

In the 1992 film Death Becomes Her, renowned plastic surgeon Dr. Ernest Menville (Bruce Willis) marries actress Madeline Ashton (Meryl Streep), and the two begin their lives together on a happy note. However, fourteen years into the marriage they are miserable with each other. Madeline’s acting career has turned sour, and Ernest is now an alcoholic working as a high paid undertaker. One morning when the maid brings Ernest his daily aspirin, he refers to his wife as “it” when inquiring Madeline’s whereabouts. Ernest believes that Madeline is a monster who has sucked the life out of him. Ernest finally ends his marriage to Madeline when he pushes her to her death down their marble staircase. Freed from the bondage of the marriage he was too weak to end, Ernest begins his life again at 50. The film ends 37 years later with the scene at Ernest’s funeral. In the eulogy, Ernest is remembered by his friends and family as a man of courage and vision, believing that life begins at 50. It was at age 50 that he met his wife Clairee and started their family of two sons and four daughters. Ernest’s sons and daughters gave
him many grandchildren, and the minister speaks of how Ernest found eternal life through the hearts of his friends and eternal youth through his children and grandchildren. Ernest was given a second chance after the death of his first wife, and he never spoke much about the earlier marriage to that self-absorbed monster.

Another rich character given a second chance in life is Joanna Stayton (Goldie Hawn) in the film *Overboard*. As discussed in Chapter 5, Joanna is an insufferable heiress who is married to a man she does not love and refuses to have his children. When knocked overboard their extravagant yacht, Joanna suffers from amnesia and is picked up by an impoverished carpenter Dean Proffitt (Kurt Russell). Dean pretends that Joanna is his wife Annie and mother of their four children. Through her experience with the Proffitt family, Annie learns the true meaning of happiness and love, even in the throws of poverty. She regains her memory and Annie/Joanna decides to leave her husband and live happily ever after with her new found love in Dean and his children. When asked by her husband why she is leaving him, Annie tells him she does not love him. Grant does not accept this answer and asks, “What does love got to do with marriage?” Apparently in wealthy circles love and marriage are mutually exclusive ideals.

Divorce is not unique to the elite class, but what is different about the marriages of the wealthy women in this sample is that they are often explicitly marked with hatred. While marriages of less wealthy people also failed, (e.g. *The Abyss, Beaches, Outbreak,* and *Twister*) these couples actually still loved each other, and in some cases could forge a reconciliation. In contrast, the wealthy marriages had absolutely no hope for reconciliation and no shred of love left between the spouses.
Marriages that End with Murder or Attempted Murder

Several of the childless marriages ended with the murder or attempted murder of a spouse. These films included Prizzi’s Honor, Black Widow, Death Becomes Her, and Ruthless People. In 1985, Kathleen Turner played Irene Walker, the former prostitute turned professional hit woman and accountant. Irene meets and falls in love with Charley Partana (Jack Nicholson). Charley is also a hit man for the Prizzi mob family. Irene lies to Charley about her occupation and her current marriage, and when Charley shows up to “ice” a couple of double-crossers for the Prizzi family, it turns out to be Irene and her husband Moxie Heller. Charley effortlessly kills Moxie but does not know whether to ice Irene or marry her. He decides to marry Irene and asks her to make amends with the Prizzi family. Irene agrees, and they are happily married for about a week. The marriage of the two professional hitters reaches rocky grounds when each is asked by different members of the Prizzi family to ice their spouse. The son of the Don of the Prizzi Mafia, Dominic Prizzi has never liked Charley, and after hearing the accusations made by his daughter Maerose that Charley had allegedly sexually assaulted her, Dominic contracts Irene to kill Charley. Charley, in turn, is asked to kill Irene because she double-crossed the Prizzi family and botched a kidnapping. The film becomes a final show-down between Irene and Charley, each planning to kill the other while pretending to prepare for bed. Irene misses Charley with a gun shot, and Charley hits Irene square in the throat with a knife, killing her instantly. After murdering his wife, Charley returns to New York to help run the Prizzi family mob business and take up a relationship with Maerose Prizzi.
While Charley and Irene entered marriage with full intentions of having a long and prosperous marriage, Catherine (Theresa Russell) of the movie *Black Widow* had no intention of seeing her marriages through. Catherine carefully picked a rich eligible older bachelor and proceeded to charm him, pamper him, marry him, and kill him. During her short marriage of just four months, she convinced her husband to change his will so that she would be the sole benefactor of his inheritance. After his death, she liquidated his assets, transfer the money to a Swiss bank account and moved to another city to try for a new husband/victim. Catherine was able to complete this pattern three different times before being caught by a federal investigator on the fourth try.

In *Ruthless People*, Sam and Barbara Stone (Danny DeVito and Bette Midler) are a rich couple who have been married for fifteen years. Sam married Barbara because she was the daughter of his rich boss. At the time of the marriage, Barbara’s father had been very ill, and Sam planned to marry Barbara, inherit the family fortune, and then divorce his wife after her father passed away. Sam’s original plan had been foiled by Barbara’s father when he recovered from his illness and lived an additional fifteen years. The movie opens with Sam having lunch with his mistress a short time after Barbara’s father has finally passed away. Sam has convinced himself that he deserves all of Barbara’s money for having put up with her for the past fifteen years. He hates everything about Barbara. He hates her pet poodle, her decorating taste, the way she licks her stamps, and the awful noise she makes at night while she is sleeping. With Barbara’s father safely buried in the ground, it is time for Sam to plan the murder of his wife. Sam’s plan is to drug Barbara, push her over a cliff, inherit her millions, and marry his mistress. This second plan of
Sam's is also foiled when Sam comes home to find that Barbara has been kidnapped by "ruthless people" who are demanding $500,000 ransom for her safe return. In this screwball comedy, Sam does everything that the kidnappers order him not to do in hopes that they will kill off Barbara. In the end, Barbara aligns herself with her captors (a sweet young couple who were double-crossed by Sam in a business deal) and drains Sam of every penny he has. It is presumed that Barbara will divorce Sam and live happily ever after in her new business deal with her former kidnappers. Similar to the marriage in *Ruthless People*, spouses Ernest Menville and Madeline Ashton in *Death Becomes Her* despised each other, and Ernest's ex-fiancée talks him into killing Madeline. Ernest kills Madeline by pushing her down a marble staircase.

Although three of these marriages were ended by the murder or attempted murder of the wife by the husband, in each case, the wife brought on her husband's actions either through her wicked personality or her greediness. So in a sense, each woman precipitated her own death or attempted murder.

**Marriages Formed for Financial or Personal Gain Rather than Love**

In several cases, marriage was not entered into for love, but instead was a cold calculated maneuver for financial or personal gain. This theme occurs in the films *Black Widow*, *Presumed Innocent*, *Green Card*, *Housesitter*, *Death Becomes Her*, and *Malice*. As was discussed above, in the film *Black Widow* Catherine married three different wealthy men in order to build her fortune. Once she had secured the proper paperwork to

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5 | I do not detail *Death Becomes Her* in this section since it is sufficient to say that Madeline Ashton marries a man simply so that she can steal him away from her friend Helen and ruin Helen's happiness.
ensure that she was the sole benefactor of her husband’s millions, Catherine would murder him, move to a new city, change her identity, and start the cycle over again. The marriages usually took about four months time. When asked why one wealthy husband was not enough, Catherine replied, “Rich is hard. You’re never really figure you’re quite there.”

The romantic comedy *Green Card* was advertised as the story of two people who get married, meet, and fall in love. Brontë Parrish (Andie MacDowell) is an assertive liberal horticulturist who desperately wants to have a prize greenhouse apartment in New York City. While vocationally she is more than qualified to care for the extraordinary greenhouse, she is not married, and the conservative review board that places tenants in this particular apartment building does not think highly of independent single women. So in order to claim married status and obtain the greenhouse apartment, Brontë agrees to marry a Frenchman who wants to marry an American citizen to apply for a green card. Brontë and George (Gerard Depardieu) marry in front of the justice of the peace. Afterwards, they shake hands and agree that they will never have to see each other again. The plan is to start the divorce proceedings once George has his green card and Brontë has her greenhouse. The snag to the whole plan is that the immigration department is cracking down on marriages formed to keep illegal aliens in the country. Brontë and George meet with the immigration officers and fail the initial interview, which moves their case to an official review for the following week. Brontë seeks advice from her family’s lawyer. He is an older gentleman who has known Brontë for some time and scolds her for her actions:
Frankly young lady I think you have your priorities all wrong. You married a man you didn’t know in order to get a greenhouse. That shocked me. All right, so I’m old fashioned when it comes to marriage. I happen to think that falling in love has something to do with it. You don’t.

Brontë is not the only person in this false marriage to receive a lesson about old fashioned family values. When George shows up at Brontë’s apartment under the pretense of being her husband returning home from a research trip in Africa, the doorman greets George with some friendly advice:

I hate to see a young couple like yourselves separated, you know, like you’ve been. It’s bad for the marriage. Call me old fashion if you want, but that’s what’s wrong with this country. The family is going down the toilet. Yeah, the toilet. Fifteen years I’m married to the same woman. [He pulls out a photo from his wallet.] See my kids there? I call her twice a day. I don’t go for that women’s lib stuff. No sir. Couples living in sin.

The movie’s point is to show that Brontë and George have made a mockery of the sacred institution of marriage. Brontë is known to her friends as a woman who is uninterested in marriage and traditional lifestyles, and while attending a dinner party to lobby for plants for her charitable gardening organization, Brontë’s friend Lauren (Bebe Neuwirth) challenges her ideas about marriage:

Lauren: B you’ll never get married.

Brontë: What makes you say that?

Lauren: Oh, you’ve turned down enough offers. You’re gonna wind up a kind of grand old Kate Hepburn surrounded by lots of beautiful plants.

Brontë: Most men I know are too vulgar or boring to spend the rest of your life with.

Lauren: Change your brand of men.
Changing her brand of men is exactly what happens to Brontë. Although George is the complete opposite of any man Brontë has ever dated or lived with, Brontë inadvertently falls in love with George while preparing for the immigration review board. Unfortunately the two fail the immigration review, and George is scheduled for deportation. In their final meeting before George’s deportation, they come to the realization that they are both deeply in love with each other and exchange wedding vows. The movie ends with them promising to find each other again.

In *Presumed Innocent*, the film about the murder investigation of promising assistant district attorney Caroline Polhemus (Greta Scacchi), we never meet Caroline in person. Instead, we come to understand this childless woman through the memories of those who knew her. Caroline was the kind of woman known to others as “bad news.” Unbeknownst to even her closest co-workers and lovers until after her death, Caroline had been married to one of her law school professors for a brief period of time. Although it is not specifically stated that she married this professor to further her career in law school, it is implied that this was the first relationship in a long pattern of relationships developed to further her career goals. Caroline had walked out on her husband when she realized that he was not the man that she had looked up to and left him begging her to come back. What Caroline had learned from the marriage was that it was not necessary to marry men to advance your position. Caroline could simplify this pattern by taking on new lovers rather than husbands who were advantageous to her career ambitions.

One childless character charmed her way into the hearts of both the film characters and the viewers. Gwen (Goldie Hawn) is a cocktail waitress who makes up her identity as
she goes along in life. While working a party for an architectural firm, Gwen meets Newton Davis (Steve Martin), a broken hearted man who has been dumped by the woman to whom he proposed marriage. Davis tells Gwen of how he designed and built a large home in a quaint New England town for the woman he loved. When he asked the love of his life to marry him, she was overwhelmed by the house and marriage proposal and said no. Unable to move to the house that he built for his love, Davis tells Gwen that the house is sitting empty. When Gwen realizes that the house is unoccupied, she picks up her limited belongings and moves to Davis’s vacant house. While living in the house Gwen meets Davis’s parents and his ex-girlfriend and tells them that she and Davis are married. When Davis finds out about Gwen’s lies, he plays along with the stories in hopes of getting back his ex-girlfriend, who can now see that Davis is a marrying kind of man. Through her talent for telling a tall tale, Gwen has obtained a furnished home, a husband, a dog, family members, and a sense of belonging. By the end of the film, Davis falls in love with Gwen and refuses to let her move away.

As the audience, we too are supposed to fall in love with Gwen in the film Housesitter. However we are supposed to despise Tracy Safian (Nicole Kidman) in the film Malice. Tracy and her lover, Dr. Jed Hill (Alec Baldwin) devise a plan to win a large settlement in a medical malpractice suit. The plan is for Tracy to find a gullible nice fellow, marry him, pretend to want to have his children, complete daily volunteer work, and live the life of Snow White. In the meantime, Jed injects large doses of a fertility drug into Tracy’s ovary so that she develops a cyst and needs to have emergency surgery. During the surgery, Jed makes a quick judgment call about her second ovary, consults
with Tracy's husband Andy (Bill Pullman), and removes the ovary. The pathology report shows that Tracy's second ovary was a healthy ovary, and in turn, she sues Jed for medical malpractice. Since Andy gave permission for Jed to remove the ovary, she has a convenient excuse to leave him and meet up with her lover Jed after she has been awarded the twenty million dollar malpractice settlement. Unbeknownst to Andy, his entire marriage and the dreams he had created with Tracy were all part of her devious plan. The plan would have worked for Tracy and Jed had it not been for the fact that during the emergency operation Jed found out that Tracy was pregnant. After the settlement has been made, Andy learns that he was actually sterile and the aborted fetus could not have been his. The suspicious Andy turns the tables on Jed and Tracy and threatens to expose their entire plan to the authorities. Andy's claims that a young neighbor boy witnessed Jed giving Tracy the injections. Tracy decides that the young boy must be killed, but Jed objects to killing the boy. In a fight over whether or not to kill the young boy, Tracy shoots Jed dead and returns to the neighbor's home to attempt to kill the young boy. Andy had notified the police and a trap was set for Tracy. In the end, the young boy is fine, Tracy's lover Jed is dead, and Andy has assured Tracy of a divorce and a long prison sentence.

The transformative childless wives of the films Black Widow, Death Becomes Her, Green Card, Housesitter, Malice and Presumed Innocent make a mockery of the institution of marriage. In each case, the women entered into their marriages as a calculated maneuver for personal gain. The irony of this for two of the films (Housesitter and Green Card) is that the women realize they have fallen in love with the men they

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married and no longer care solely about material possessions. Love becomes the more important issue for Brontë and Gwen. You might say that these were the lucky marriages within this theme.

The Institution of Marriage as Inconsistent with Personal Growth or Independence

While the women of the films outlined in the above section entered into marriage for financial or personal gains, several women of this sample saw marriage as a less than desirable institution. A couple of women were reluctant to enter into marriage because of the potential loss of their own identity, and other wives, who were already in oppressive marriages, found that they had to leave those marriages. Finally, a number of women saw marriage as inconsistent with their own personal growth and independence and made strong statements against marriage and domesticity. This theme is broken into two subsections including marriages as an oppressive institution and singlehood as a viable alternative to marriage.

Marriages as an Oppressive Institution. For Paula McCollen (Goldie Hawn) in the 1982 film Best Friends, marriage was feared as something that would take away her independence and ruin her relationship with her best friend and co-habitator Richard Babson (Burt Reynolds). At the start of the film, Richard and Paula have a five year history together and have been living together for three of those years. Paula and Richard are not only partners in love, they are also professional partners who write Hollywood screenplays together. They seem to have an egalitarian relationship and share equally the duties of their writing and household chores. They have recently signed the final papers to purchase their first home together and are getting ready to move from their apartment to
their new house. Feeling like he wants to make certain statements about his life, Richard asks Paula to marry him. Paula is reluctant to change their existing relationship and sees marriage as a potentially dangerous institution where she could possibly lose some sense of independence. While discussing her options with her girlfriend one afternoon, Paula states:

**Paula:** I don't know. I just keep thinking that life is in three stages. That you are born, you get married, and then you die.

**Friend:** Wait a minute. So you think that if you don't get married, you'll never die?

**Paula:** Something like that...I associate marriage with having to grow up. Now we've already done that, why have it rubbed in our faces? And another thing. You spend your whole life trying to achieve a little personality, a little individuality only to get married and you're referred to as someone's wife. The Mrs., Mrs. Richard Babson. No thank you, no thank you very much.

Realizing that she will most likely lose Richard if she does not agree to marry him, Paula agrees to a small ceremony and a honeymoon visit to each of their parent's homes. Paula makes Richard promise that getting married will not "screw everything up," and Richard assures her that exchanging vowels will only make things better.

As feared by Paula, the imposition of the marital institution on their relationship does change their relationship. The remainder of the film is the story of their honeymoon trip to the homes of their parents. Each set of parents impose traditional gender roles on Paula and Richard. For example while visiting with Paula's parents in Buffalo, her mother, Eleanor, tells Paula:

**Eleanor:** Paula, why don't you get Richard more pie. You're a married woman now. [Richard smiles smugly at Paula.]
Paula: Mother, Richard doesn’t want any more pie, and if he did, he could get it himself. [Richard frowns at Paula.]

The situation continues when they arrive at the home of Richard’s parents. Several times Richard’s mother Ann offers advice to Paula about their marriage:

Ann: You’re going to have plenty of time to do things for Richard, so you just take it easy.

Paula: Mrs. Babson, Richard and I have lived together for a long time. He knows how to do those things.

Ann: I’m sure he does, but now that you’re married.

Paula: Now that he’s married what?

Paula is frustrated with Richard as he becomes more accustomed to the traditional gender roles of marriage. One morning Richard and his father are getting ready to go play golf. They are drinking coffee and reading the newspaper when Ann asks Paula to see to it “that the boys get plenty of coffee.” Prior to the marriage ceremony, Richard always made sure he had his own coffee and would even have offered to get some coffee for Paula as well, but within two weeks of their wedding ceremony, their relationship has become exactly what Paula wanted to avoid.

At the start of the film, Paula was a confident successful screenplay writer with a wonderful relationship and a real sense of independence. By the second week of her marriage, the marital expectations imposed on Paula and Richard reduce her to a drug dependent needy woman. When Paula and Richard return to their home in Los Angeles, they decide that the marriage has been a failure, and they want to get a divorce. Fortunately for the couple’s relationship, their boss, who has been anxiously awaiting a new ending to Paula and Richard’s screenplay, locks them in an office together until they
finish the script. Realizing that they still love each other and that their marital problems were other people and not themselves, Paula and Richard reunite and the film ends.

In the 1980 film *9 to 5*, Judy Bernily’s (Jane Fonda) husband Dick leaves. Judy has spent fifteen years of her life as a devoted housewife, but Dick walks out on her for his younger, sexier secretary. The fifteen years as a housewife and subsequent divorce leave Judy with little income, no marketable job skills, the loss of her house, and the uncertainty of having to work outside of the home for the first time in her life. As the film opens, Judy is on her way to her first day of wage labor. She has taken a job in a secretary pool for a large firm in the city. Judy’s lack of confidence shows through when she spends an hour looking for a parking space, gets caught in the elevator, fumbles around with phone system, and loses a humiliating battle with the Xerox machine. Judy perseveres in the job and eventually gains a new found self-esteem through her independence in the “pink collar ghetto.” By the end of the film Judy is the one who is turning down Dick’s request to reunite the marriage. It seems that Dick’s younger, sexier secretary has left him for a younger man. Judy refuses Dick’s offer telling him, “Your leaving was the best thing that ever happened to me.” Judy’s new found success at work and her growing sense of independence are not everlasting. The final information given about Judy is that after turning down her ex-husband’s offer to reunite their relationship, Judy fell in love with the Xerox representative and quit her job to moved with him to Mexico. So much for the new independent woman. Although Judy’s new found independence and new self-awareness was short lived, her character did show that fifteen years of service as a housewife had

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stagnated her personal development. She gained a greater sense of independence and self-esteem only after she was forced to venture out into a new world.

In the 1991 controversial film *Thelma and Louise*, we see what can happen to an oppressed housewife, Thelma Dickenson (Geena Davis), when she escapes from her husband’s control for what is supposed to be one fun-filled weekend. Thelma is a southern housewife who never dated anyone except her husband and married at an early age. Her husband Darryl (Christopher McDonald) lives in his own little patriarchal world where his wife cleans his house, fixes his meals, and is not allowed to have outside interests or employment. Thelma would like to have children, but Darryl prides himself on being infantile and does not feel that the timing has been right up to this point. Not knowing any better, Thelma listens to Darryl’s reasoning and obeys his command.

During a weekend get-a-way from Darryl, Thelma and her best friend Louise (Susan Sarandon) stop by a country and western bar for a couple of drinks. Thelma wants to “let her hair down” and flirts with a local customer. When Louise heads to the ladies room, Thelma goes outside to get some air. She is attacked by the man she has been flirting with all evening, and he attempts to rape her. Louise stops the rape by threatening him with a gun, and when he makes a rude comment to her, she turns around and shoots him. Afraid that the police will not see this action as self-defense, Thelma and Louise spend the rest of the weekend on the run. Throughout their weekend on the run, Thelma becomes a more self-assured and independent woman who confidently robs a small grocery market. As the two women try to make their way to Mexico, Thelma tells Louise that something inside of her has changed, and she can never go back to her life with
Darryl. The thought of going back to the life they left is so unbearable, that when faced with turning themselves into the authorities, Thelma and Louise run their car over a cliff and plunge to their deaths. This film of questionable feminist values (see discussion in Walters 1995) tells the story of a woman who is oppressed by the institution of marriage and is only able to gain a sense of independence when she escapes her domineering husband.

**Singlehood as a Viable Alternative to Marriage.** Some women, particularly villains or tramps, were well aware that women can be oppressed through the marital institution and had absolutely no desire to get married. In the 1996 remake of the Disney film *101 Dalmatians*, the evil villain Cruella DeVil scolds a young and talented fashion designer for thinking that she may someday leave the fashion industry if she were to get married. Cruella, a single woman by choice, tells the sweet Anita, “More good women have been lost to marriage than to war, famine, disease, and disaster. You have talent darling. Don’t squander it.” In *Disclosure*, the back-stabbing, corporate ladder climbing Meredith Johnson tells her male subordinate that domesticity can be a bit inhibiting and then mocks his wife and children. Meredith has no intention of getting married and making a home for a man and children. In *Crimes of the Heart*, Meg MaGrath is described by her cousin as “cheep Christmas trash” and is chastised by her entire small southern community for having left her boyfriend to pursue a career in Hollywood. Meg could not see herself married, got scared, and left her potential husband to live for herself. Finally, Miss Mona Stangely, the Madame of the Chicken Ranch whore house, understood that marriage and prostitution do not exactly go hand-in-hand. She believed that marriage was a good way
to “screw up a relationship.” For transformative childless women like Cruella DeVil, Meredith Johnson, Meg MaGrath, and Miss Mona Stangely, marriage was not an attractive alternative in life. They preferred to live their lives as they wished and were reluctant to change their lives through marriage and children.

Concluding Thoughts about the Portrayal of Childless Wives

The six themes identified with regard to childless marriages do not paint a pretty picture of women without children and their ability to properly perform the role of wife. The childless marriages are prone to divorce and conflict and are often set aside by the wives in the pursuit of happiness through career. In Chapter 6, I mentioned that the goal of a number of the single childless women was to find a husband and settle down. It seems from these films that childless women are happier during the courting stage of a relationship than the actual marriage. The inability of childless wives to properly perform the role of wife helps to create a negative role-image of childless women. American society values the role of wife for women, and the childless women of this sample have shown that they are less than capable of handling that social role.

The Lack of Long-Standing Childless Marriages

In addition to the image that childless women do not perform the role of wife very well, a second stereotype evident in this sample is that childless marriages do not last. We see this pattern in the movies outlined above, and to compound these images, there is something missing in the portrayal of childless marriages. What we do not see in any of the 67 films of this sample is a long-standing happy childless marriage. In these films, childless women are denied the role of life-long marriage partner in a happy relationship.
At no time in any of these films was a long-standing happy childless marriage portrayed as a key element of the film. There were a couple of happily married childless couples, but these were generally newly formed relationships that had not withstood the test of time. Even newly formed happy childless marriages such as those of *Up Close and Personal* and *The Mirror Has Two Faces* had severe relationship problems that needed to be overcome if the relationships were to last.

Why do stories of long-standing happy childless marriage not exist? Perhaps the lack of long-standing childless marriages is the result of certain assumptions about the function of the marital institution. The functions of marriage have been:

> spelled out in almost every textbook of marriage and family [and] have traditionally included the following: procreation (reproduction) and the socialization of children; the provision to its members of care, affection, and companionship; economic cooperation (the sharing of economic resources, especially shelter, food, and clothing); and sexual regulation.... (Popenoe 1993:529)

Childless marriages lack the fundamental function of reproduction. Does the lack of reproduction also mean that childless marriages are less likely to perform the other functions such as care, affection, companionship, economic cooperation, and sexual regulation? The themes outlined above might suggest that an underlying belief in American society is that childless women are unable to provide the needed functions of marriage. Childless marriages are presented as inherently unstable and prone to divorce. The women are perceived as selfish, cold, and over-driven by career ambitions that often stand in stark contrast to their marital responsibilities. The childless wives have a difficult
time providing the care, cooperation, and companionship that is a key function of the institution of marriage and family.

Part of the commonsense understanding of childless marriages that is reflected in these Hollywood films is the notion that childless marriages do not last. The lack of films focusing on long-standing marriages portray a misunderstanding about childless marriages at the same time that they offer no help to women experiencing childlessness and childless marriages. Kay McArthur (1991), a middle-aged married childless woman, wrote an advice article to younger women who may be contemplating permanent childlessness. McArthur wanted to tell women that they could live a happy and full life without having to feel like all of life’s happiness came from conceiving children. Furthermore, McArthur wanted to serve as a role-model for younger childless women and expressed the difficulty of living a childless life and marriage without any examples or role models to look to for guidance.

There was a time when childless happy couples appeared in weekly television sitcoms. *The Bob Newhart Show* aired on CBS from 1972 until 1978 and featured a happily married professional couple. Bob Newhart played Dr. Bob Hartley a Chicago psychologist. Bob’s wife Emily began the sitcom in 1972 as a substitute teacher, but worked her way up to vice principle by the time the show left the air in 1978. In his second sitcom, *Newhart* (running from 1982 to 1990), Bob Newhart played writer Dick Loudon who had moved to Vermont with his wife Joanna to run a country inn. Both of these shows were examples of long-standing happy childless marriages.
In contrast to these positive images of middle-age childless marriages, the 1990s television show *Coach* seemed to confirm the fears expressed by some respondents in Carolyn Morell's 1994 study of intentionally childless couples. Some of the women Morell talked to were concerned about how they would feel about their childlessness when they reached later stages in their marriage. Morell quoted one of her respondents as saying, "The thought, ‘will I regret it when I’m old?’ is impossible to avoid...because it’s just out there" (1994:89). According to television character Christine Armstrong of *Coach*, the answer to that thought is yes, you will grow to regret not having had children when you were young and able to do so. While voluntarily childless couples may have enjoyed watching the seven year courtship of middle-aged couple Hayden Fox and Christine Armstrong’s on *Coach*, any connection with this couple may have disappeared once the couple finally married. Soon after reciting their marital vows, Christine, the strong, independent career woman who had previously never wanted any children, heard the loud ticking of her biological clock and longed for a child of her own. The couple endured painful and humiliating fertility treatments and a roller coaster of emotional ups and downs until they finally were able to adopt a baby boy of their own several seasons later. Contrary to the fictitious experience of Christine Armstrong, Morell found little evidence to suggest that intentionally childless women “suffer from ongoing or serious feelings of regret” (1994:97).

The only two women of this sample (Ariel of *Grumpy Old Men* and Clairee of *Steel Magnolias)*6 who experienced long-standing happy childless marriages were

6Very little details are given about Ariel’s first husband, their marriage, and their lack of children.
widowed women who were never shown in their marital relationships. The 1989 comedy-drama *Steel Magnolias* is a film that spans three years in the lives of six women who live in a small town in the rural south. Clairee Belcher (Olympia Dukakis) is the widowed childless woman whose husband had been mayor of the town. The other five women of the film include M'Lynn Eatenton (Sally Field), an over-protective mother of her diabetic daughter Shelby Eatenton Latcherie (Julia Roberts); Truvy Jones (Dolly Parton), the owner of Truvy's Beauty Spot, and her assistant hair stylist, Annelle Dupory (Daryl Hannah); and life-long aging friend of Clairee, Ouiser Boudreaux (Shirley MacLaine). All of the women except Clairee have at least one child by the end of the movie. The movie does not specifically mention that Clairee has no children, but since the other women of the film talk about their own children and Clairee only ever talks about her nephew and his family, we assume that she has no children of her own.

During the opening segments of the film, we find out that Clairee's life-long husband Lloyd has recently passed away. Since Clairee's husband died before the time frame of the movie, we never have a chance to see their marriage in action, but we do know that Clairee was a full-time homemaker while Lloyd was the mayor of the town. Clairee was involved in many community and church projects and upon Shelby's urging, decided to buy a local radio station and name herself as the color commentator for the broadcasting of the local football games.

While this movie could have provided a strong positive role model for active childless marriages, the message is diminished considerably by the context of the film. The film opens on the morning of Shelby's wedding day. While M'Lynn and Shelby are
having their hair done at the Truvy's beauty salon, they bicker about the impending
ceremony to their friends Clairee, Ouiser, Annelle, and Truvy. Clairee praises Shelby for
snagging such a good catch as a young Louisiana lawyer and hopes that Shelby and her
fiancé Jackson will be as happy in marriage as she and Lloyd had been. In an attempt to
turn the conversation away from the disagreements about the details of the wedding,
Truvy asks Shelby if she and Jackson had done anything romantic the night before the
wedding. Shelby jokes about how they had gone to a local lake to kiss and skinny dip, but
then ended up having an argument when Shelby told Jackson she did not think she should
marry him. The women express shock that Shelby had called off the wedding, but Shelby
reassures them that she and Jackson have worked things out, for now, and they will be
married that afternoon. The stress of the recollection of the previous evening’s events
and the excitement of the wedding send Shelby into insulin shock. While she is recovering
from the brief episode, the women talk about her fertility problem:

M'Lynn: Doctor told her on her last appointment that children aren’t possible.

Truvy: I am really sorry about the children part M'Lynn.

M'Lynn: I know. Shelby’s afraid that Jackson will be throwing away his chance to have children.

Shelby: Jackson said Shelby don’t be stupid. There’s plenty of children out there who need a good home. Well adopt ten of them. We’ll buy them if we have to.

Clairee: Jackson sounds like good people to me.

This is the only piece of advice that Clairee offers the young Shelby as she starts her
marriage with the possibility of not having children. The question that leaps to my mind
is, Why didn’t Clairee offer any words of wisdom from a woman who had lived a full and happy life in a childless marriage? Instead, Clairee is silent on the subject of her own lack of children and like so many others, is thrilled to hear of the news several months later that despite doctor’s recommendations, Shelby and Jackson are expecting a baby. Shelby explains the pregnancy to her worrisome mother by telling her that having a baby is the only thing that would make her happy. The courts would not allow a woman with her health record to adopt a child, so she and Jackson decided to risk Shelby’s health and have a baby of their own. Shelby pleads to her mother for some support stating:

I look at having this baby as the opportunity of a life time. Sure there might be risks involved, but that’s true for anyone. But you get through it and life goes on. And when it’s all done, there’ll be a little piece of immortality with Jackson’s good looks and my sense of style, I hope. Please, please. I need your support. I would rather have thirty minutes of wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special.

What do strong pronatalist statements such as this imply about Clairee’s marriage or other marriages without children? According to the overriding philosophy of Steel Magnolias, people in marriages without children are condemned to a lifetime of going through the motions. At the end of that life, there is no one there to remember you or carry on your family name. This strong message of pronatalism overshadows the fact that the morning of Shelby’s wedding, Clairee had been to a ribbon cutting ceremony for a new town park that has been named after her late husband. A town park dedicated in your name may be one form of immortality, but it evidently does not compare to the immortality received through your own children carrying on the family name and family traditions.
As anticipated by the doctors, Shelby’s pregnancy did put too much of a strain on her system, and Shelby is forced to endure kidney dialysis. When the dialysis interferes with Shelby’s ability to keep up with her toddler son Jack, Jr., Shelby decided to have a kidney transplant. Shelby’s mother M’Lynn donates one of her own kidneys to save her daughter’s life, but Shelby’s body rejects the kidney, and after a long death watch, Shelby passes away. Shelby’s risky pregnancy and eventual death from the strain of the pregnancy was seen as a selfless act of kindness to those around her. As a *New York* magazine critic David Denley (1989) observed, both Shelby and her mother M’Lynn were granted sainthood by the others of the film for their selfless motherly acts. In the end, Shelby’s immortality is realized not only through the life of her own son but through the impending birth of Annelle’s first child to be named Shelby.

Clairee and her late husband Lloyd had lived a long and happy life together. They had been supportive family members and life-long friends to others. Through their financial contributions, they helped to encourage the arts in their community and were strong leaders as the mayor and first lady of their small southern town. They also, presumably had no children of their own. Why is this fact never mentioned outright in the film and instead must be inferred based on the evidence presented? Would stating directly that Clairee could not or chose not to have children have diminished this otherwise charitable personality? Regardless of their many fine attributes, Clairee and her late husband’s lives of “nothing special” were overshadowed in *Steel Magnolias* by the stronger pronatalist message presented through Shelby’s conviction to have her “thirty minutes of wonderful.”
Concluding Thoughts on Childless Marriage Themes

Under the broad topic of childless marriage, several themes have been identified including the tendency toward failed marriages that end in divorce; marriages that are jeopardized by a woman’s commitment to her career; marriages that are entered into for financial or personal gain rather than love; marriages marked by murder or attempted murder of a spouse; and the fear that marriage is an institution that stagnates personal growth. All of these themes were generally portrayed in at least six films. The childless marriages portrayed in these films are not a picture of tranquility and refuge from the outside world. Instead they are a source of inherent conflict leading to separation, divorce, and even death. Taken as a whole, the childless marriages portrayed in these films suggest that childless women are incompetent when it comes to performing the role of wife. Even when childless women were involved in happy marriages, their marriages were cut short by the death of their husbands (Moonstruck and Up Close and Personal). Similar to Susan Faludi’s (1991) analysis of the backlash against working women in the mid-1980s, I would argue that this is not a conscious effort by movie producers to stigmatize childless marriages. Instead of consciously trying to create negative images of childless marriage, I believe that these films reflect certain assumptions about marriages without children. These films reflect the notion that married women who have not devoted a significant portion of their time to home and hearth through bearing and rearing children are less tied to their marriages than mothers who may be economically dependent upon their husbands as bread-winners. Childless women are able to make clean breaks from their husbands (either through divorce or murder) when their marriages no longer
provide a source of support or happiness. Take as an example the character of Catherine in the film *Black Widow*. Recall that Catherine had married and murdered three different wealthy men in order to amass her fortune. The task of mating and killing would have been far more difficult if Catherine had been a mother. First of all, she would have to have found men who were admirers of both her and her children. Secondly, a mother would need to explain to her children why their step-fathers keep dying suddenly and they need to move to new cities. Additionally, a woman without children is much more mobile than a mother, not having to worry about things such as proper school districts or transferring children's medical records. Perhaps the writers of a movie such as *Black Widow* created a childless character because they realized that it would be an easier task to transfer her from one location to another and quickly change her identity if she had no children. Perhaps it also reflects certain assumptions about mothers. Mothering ideology mandates that mothers are peaceful women who would not willfully and coldly kill their husbands in order to accumulate wealth. While films such as *Black Widow* may not constitute a purposeful attack against childless women, they do add to the impression that childless women and mothers are very different people with different rights, responsibilities, and relationships.

In the films of this sample, many childless women were portrayed in the role of wife. In terms of creating a role-image of childless women, this would perhaps at first glance be considered a way in which the films help to create a positive role-image of childlessness. However, Rothbell (1995) suggested that one way in which negative role-images are created is by attributing a valued social role to individuals of a certain social
group and then have them perform that role poorly. In the films of this sample, childless women were given the role of wife to perform, but in terms of family values rhetoric in which a woman is devoted to home and hearth, they consistently performed that role poorly. Often times the childless women placed their own personal needs above the needs of the relationship and were chastised by other film characters for not being more attentive wives. Thus, the poor performance of the role of wife helps to create a negative role-image of childless women. Additionally the negative role-image is enhanced because of the lack childless women in the role of long-standing happy marriage partner. Not only did childless wives who were shown in the films perform the role of wife poorly, but childless women as a social group were denied the ability to be involved in long-standing happy marriages. The denial of childless women as life-long marital partners helps to heighten the negative role-image.
CHAPTER 8

AMBIGUITY WITH REGARD TO CHILDLESS CAREER WOMEN

The majority of the childless characters in this sample worked outside of the home. Eighty-four percent of the childless characters were in paid occupations and of those women, 82.5 percent wanted to be employed and had trained for their positions. Before I discuss the themes of the career films, I would first like to mention a theme that is found among real life childless couples but is not present in this study. I have been stating all along in this research project that childless women enjoy a great sense of freedom. They enjoy freedom in their life decisions, freedom in their sexuality, and freedom in their careers. While for many childless women, childlessness is seen as an opportunity to become upwardly mobile, this is not the case for all childless women. Burgwyn (1981) and Veevers (1980) have both found that some childless women prefer their childless status so that they can afford to be downwardly mobile in their career paths. The experiential literature shows us that some real life childless women decide to pursue job satisfaction even if it costs them financial success. The ability to leave the “rat race” is seen as a freedom that can be enjoyed when one does not have the financial responsibilities of raising children. While this pattern is mentioned in several research studies involving in-depth interviews with childless women, Hollywood films seem to perpetuate the assumption that childless women are money-driven workaholics. Mardy Ireland (1993)

1 The ability to be downwardly mobile is also valued among childless men.
noted that a common cultural myth about childless women is that they are over-invested in their careers, and the films of this sample seem to enforce this stereotype.

Although the majority of the childless characters in the films of this sample worked outside of the home, this chapter focuses on the films that dealt primarily with the career films. Many of the films of this sample focused on topics other than career (e.g. private matters such as family and love) and offered very limited information about the careers of the childless characters. In order to analyze the childless women and their careers in more depth, I focus this chapter on the twenty-one films that dealt more exclusively with the work environment. These films are listed on Table 8.1. The main purpose of this chapter is to first cover the two typologies of career women, which includes ambitious workaholics and professional mother/supports. Secondly, I outline a historical development of the themes regarding the careers of childless women, including:

1. The Pink Collar Ghetto and Women's Right to Equal Pay
2. The Liberated but Incompetent Professional Woman
3. The Competent Career Woman, but Incomplete Woman
4. Working Her Way to the Top Over the Back of Her Fellow Woman
5. The Masculinized Career Bitch
6. The Proven Career Woman in a Dangerous Man's World

These themes show a progression in feminist career issues such as the movement of women out of the pink collar ghetto and into traditional male work environments and gains in female credibility in the work force. Although feminist strides are made, the
progressions are met with some ambivalence and even fear about women's role in the work force. While some films portray masculine working women as heroines, other films chastise the masculine working women and place them in the role of villain. Earlier films of the sample show women working together to improve the work environment for all women, but in later films, women seem to only be able to get ahead in the work force by pushing down female colleagues. These themes and film examples of these themes are presented below.

Table 8.1: Sub-Sample of Career Films

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Character(s)</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td><em>Nine to Five</em></td>
<td>(a) Judy Bernily</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(b) Doralee Rhoades</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td><em>Absence of Malice</em></td>
<td>Megan Carter</td>
<td>Reporter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td><em>Agnes of God</em></td>
<td>Dr. Martha Livingston</td>
<td>Psychiatrist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td><em>Black Widow</em></td>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Data Analyst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td><em>Baby Boom</em></td>
<td>J.C. Wiatt</td>
<td>Account Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td><em>Big Business</em></td>
<td>(a) Rose Radliff</td>
<td>Corporate VP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(b) Rose Shelton</td>
<td>Union Activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td><em>Gorillas in the Mist</em></td>
<td>Dian Fossey</td>
<td>Researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Working Girl</em></td>
<td>(a) Tess McGill</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(b) Katherine Parker</td>
<td>Mergers Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td><em>The Abyss</em></td>
<td>Lindsey Brigman</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td><em>Presumed Innocent</em></td>
<td>Caroline Polhemus</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Medicine Man</em></td>
<td>Dr. Rae Crane</td>
<td>Medical Researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td><em>Sister Act</em></td>
<td>Deloris Van Cartier</td>
<td>Pseudo-Nun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>In the Line of Fire</em></td>
<td>Lilly Raines</td>
<td>Secret Service Agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>Sister Act 2</em></td>
<td>Deloris Van Cartier</td>
<td>Pseudo-Nun/Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td><em>Disclosure</em></td>
<td>Meredith Johnson</td>
<td>Corporate VP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Congo</em></td>
<td>Dr. Karen Ross</td>
<td>Communication Expert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Dangerous Minds</em></td>
<td>LouAnne Johnson</td>
<td>High School Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Dead Man Walking</em></td>
<td>Sister Helen Prejean</td>
<td>Nun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Outbreak</em></td>
<td>Dr. Robby Kaough</td>
<td>Virologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td><em>Twister</em></td>
<td>Jo Harding</td>
<td>Meteorologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td><em>Up Close and Personal</em></td>
<td>Tally Atwater</td>
<td>Television Reporter</td>
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Career Woman Typologies

There are two basic career woman typologies found within the career films between 1980 and 1996 including the ambitious workaholics and professional mothers/supporters. Andrea Walsh (1984) defined professional mothers as women employed in positions that were thematically similar to maternal activities. Professional mothers include positions such as teachers, nuns, secretaries, and psychiatrists while ambitious workaholics were typically corporate executives, researchers, engineers, and reporters.

Ambitious Workaholics

Although ambitious workaholics appear throughout the films of the 1980s and 1990s, they are concentrated in the films released after 1987. Ambitious workaholics were found in fourteen of the twenty-one films of this chapter including: Absence of Malice, The Abyss, Baby Boom, Black Widow, Big Business, Congo, Disclosure, Gorillas in the Mist, In the Line of Fire, Medicine Man, Outbreak, Presumed Innocent, Twister, and Up Close and Personal. The women of these films represent the stereotypical childless woman who is over-committed to her career at the expense of personal relationships. As discussed in Chapter 7, three out of the four married workaholics allowed their careers to overtake their marriages, while the fourth married woman consistently struggled with marriage and career responsibilities. Four of the single women had given up relationships with men they loved in order to pursue their full-time careers. For these women, the demands of their careers and the demands of the relationships were not compatible, and they were forced to make a choice. Not only did the ambitious

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workaholics choose work over love, they also chose work over children. Most of the women who were ambitious workaholics were classified as transformative childless by choice women. While the men in films such as Fatal Attraction, Baby Boom, Presumed Innocent, and Disclosure are shown to have active family lives in conjunction with their productive careers, the ambitious workaholic career women emphasized their work to the exclusion of marital relationships and children. These portrayals help to construct and reinforce the idea that women cannot have it all and must make a choice between family and work. While several of the women in this sub-set of films were forced to choose between relationships and their careers (Megan of Absence of Malice, Dian of Gorillas in the Mist, Lindsey of The Abyss, Lilly of In the Line of Fire, Jo of Twister, and Robby of Outbreak), other women seemed to have no interest in “having it all” (Alex of Black Widow, Caroline of Presumed Innocent, Rae of Medicine Man, Meredith of Disclosure, and Karen of Congo). Films such as Absence of Malice, Black Widow, Presumed Innocent, and Disclosure center the childless women so firmly in the public professional world that they convey the message that childless women have no interest in the private family domain. Walters (1995) suggests that having films that build such strong separation between the family institution and the work institution helps to create the family/work dichotomy that has become a crucial part of contemporary women’s lives.

The ambitious workaholic women were also characterized by their competence on their jobs. Caroline Polhemus of Presumed Innocent was the only woman to have slept

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2 J.C. Wiatt of Baby Boom specifically stated that she did not want to have it all, but ended up inheriting a baby and later discovered that she could have it all through running her own company out of her home.
her way to her position. The rest of the women made it to their prominent career positions through their hard work and dedication. Occasionally, their professional competence was called into question, but for the most part they enjoyed positions in which people relied on them for their good sense of judgment and ability to get the job done. The other defining work characteristic for these women was their employment in traditionally male professional fields such as engineering, software design, Wall Street executive, and medical research. This often marginalized them from other women, and in some cases, they were the only women characters in the films (e.g. Karen of Congo and Robby of Outbreak). While working in a man's world, many of these women tended to cross gender line expectations and performed their jobs using characteristically male behavior. An example of this type of masculine behavior includes Dr. Karen Ross’s proficiency with high-powered weapons. While on a dangerous expedition in the Congo, Karen was told by the men of her camp that she should not be so “John Wayne.” They feared that her assertion might get them killed. In high pressure life or death situations, these women were calm, collected, and competent at the same time that many of the men tended to crack under pressure. In The Abyss, Congo, Gorillas in the Mist, In the Line of Fire, and Outbreak, men were portrayed as more emotional, caring, and susceptible to breaking under the strain of a life or death situation. In contrast, the childless women handled the situations with traditional male logic, steady nerves, and a lack of stereotypical female emotional outbursts.

The portrayals of the ambitious workaholic career women showed ambivalence about the role of women who broke into traditionally male fields. At the same time that
some of the women were portrayed as heroines (Alex of *Black Widow*, Lilly of *In the Line of Fire*, Karen of *Congo*, Robby of *Outbreak*, and Jo of *Twister*), other women were portrayed as evil villains that threatened the male professional world (Caroline of *Presumed Innocent* and Meredith of *Disclosure*). Still other women were shown to be a mixture of competence and incompetence in their line of work (Megan of *Absence of Malice* and Dian of *Gorillas in the Mist*).

**Professional Mothers/Supporters**

Several other films concentrated on childless women who worked in settings that differed in a number of ways from the ambitious workaholics. These women were classified as professional mothers/supporters. The professional mothers/supporters typically had jobs that were, and had always been, either female dominated or inclusive of women. Unlike the ambitious workaholics, the professional mothers/supporters worked in nurturing roles including, secretaries (*9 to 5* and *Working Girl*), nuns (*Dead Man Walking* and *Sister Act*), psychiatry (*Agnes of God*), and teachers (*Dangerous Minds* and *Sister Act 2*). These women tended to be more stereotypically feminine since they were able to give care that is similar in characteristic to mothering activities. While ambitious workaholic women most often competed with men for positions or authority in the work place, the professional mothers/supporters always competed against other women to gain footing in the work world. In *9 to 5*, female secretaries were put in direct competition with the female assistant to the manager. The assistant to the manager kept tabs on the female secretaries and reported back to the male manager about problems in the secretary pool. Most often the problems resulted in reprimanding or firing one or more of the female
secretaries. In *Agnes of God*, Dr. Martha Livingston and Mother Miriam Ruth came into constant conflict over the best interest of mentally unstable Agnes. Secretary Tess McGill of *Working Girl* had to sneak behind her female boss’s back in order to prove herself as more than a secretary. When lounge act singer Deloris Van Cartier was placed undercover in a convent in the film *Sister Act*, she constantly argued with the Mother Superior about the role of the convent for the surrounding community. In *Sister Act 2*, Deloris went back under cover as a nun in order to teach in an inner-city high school music program. Deloris came into conflict with the mother of a particularly gifted student. The other high school teacher of the sample, LouAnne Johnson of *Dangerous Minds*, also came into conflict with the mother of two of her pupils. While LouAnne felt it important to teach the inner-city students how to think and reason, the mother of two of her students felt that learning to read poetry would not help her boys get jobs. All of the professional mothers/supporters came into direct conflict or competition with another woman.

Unlike the ambitious workaholics whose portrayals showed ambivalence about women in traditionally male professional work worlds, the professional mothers/supporters were most often portrayed as the heroines of the films. It was Dr. Martha Livingston’s persistence with Agnes in the face of Mother Miriam Ruth’s opposition that eventually led to an understanding of the birth and death of Agnes’s baby. The women of the film *9 to 5* triumphed over their “sexist-egotistical-lying-hypocritical-bigot” male boss. Tess McGill was the heroine secretary turned executive of mergers and acquisitions in the
film Working Girl. The nuns of Sister Act, Sister Act 2, and Dead Man Walking changed the lives of several people through their love, care, and understanding. Finally, LouAnne Johnson of Dangerous Minds was commended by her students at the end of the school year for having made a difference in each of their lives. Each of the professional mothers/supporters were heroic in their own way and instrumental in making positive changes.

A fundamental difference in the portrayal of professional mothers/supporters from the workaholics was the way in which workaholic women were confined almost exclusively to their professional domain. The professional mothers/supporters were often shown in interactions outside of their work environments with family members and/or friends. While in a film such as Disclosure we never see workaholic Meredith Johnson outside of the office building, professional mother/supporter Sister Helen Prejean of Dead Man Walking is shown several times interacting with her large family. Professional mothers/supporters have more social roles outside of the work domain and are shown more frequently in those other social roles.

The Evolution of Childless Working Women

Women's paid employment patterns have changed throughout the twentieth century (Degler 1980; Mintz and Kellogg 1988; Van Horn 1988). From the turn of the century through the 1930s, the dominant female work pattern was for women to work before they were married to help with the family income. After marriage they usually stopped working and devoted their time to domestic responsibilities. With the country at

\[3\] A major difference between Tess and the ambitious workaholics is that Tess started from the bottom and worked her way up. Through her transformation from secretary to executive, Tess never lost her femininity.
war during World War II, women were called to perform their patriotic duty and entered the factories at unprecedented rates. After the war, they were encouraged to return to their homes and families and concentrate their energy on domestic issues. In post-World War II America, women who worked were encouraged to sequence their work and family responsibilities. Again, they worked before they were married and quit their jobs to get married and raise a family, but after World War II, they started to return to work after their children were grown. This sequencing pattern dominated women’s lives throughout the 1950s and 1960s; however, by the mid-1970s, a distinct new working pattern had emerged (Moen 1992). Women with small children were entering the work force as they had never done before. Although the movement of working mothers into the labor force was explored in the 1980 film 9 to 5, the majority of the women’s career films of the 1980s and 1990s centered on childless working women (most often single) who pursued traditionally male careers. Popular films generally ignored the plight of married mothers who worked full-time and instead focused on single childless women, divorced single parents, or dual-income-no-kids couples (DINKS). The two films in the 1980s and 1990s to focus on working mothers were the 1983 film Mr. Mom and the 1993 film Mrs. Doubtfire. In Mr. Mom, the mother returns to work while her children are still young because her husband has been laid off from his automobile manufacturing management position. The Mr. Mom family still consisted of a breadwinner and a full-time mother, but

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4 9 to 5 focused on many issues of concern to working mothers including on-site day care facilities, flexible work time, part time jobs, and job share programs.

5 There were certainly films that depicted a dual career family as part of the story line; however, none of these films centered on the trials, tribulations, joys, or issues of a dual income couple with children.
the roles had been switched with the father becoming the stay-at-home dad. Likewise, *Mrs. Doubtfire* consisted of a working mother and a stay-at-home dad who was disguised as the kind and elderly nanny. Divorced working mothers had be and continue to be the subject of many films, but few films centered on single, never married women who became mothers. The controversy surrounding the television show *Murphy Brown* spoke to the deep seated conservative cultural belief in the need for nuclear families to have both a mommy and a daddy (Walters 1995). When Murphy Brown decided as a single career woman to have her baby out of wedlock, Vice-President Dan Quale chastised the show for having made a mockery of the necessity of a father and sparked the heated family values debate (Walters 1995). For the most part, Hollywood steered clear of single never married working mothers and has focused more intently on the working single childless woman.

Over the sixteen year period from 1980 to 1996, several themes regarding childless women in the work force had been portrayed. While the 1980 film *9 to 5* dealt with male domination through sexism in the work force, the theme of the 1994 film *Disclosure* had switched to women breaking the glass ceiling at the expense of their male counterparts. The purpose of the rest of the chapter is to explore the role of childless women in the paid work force starting with the pink collar women of *9 to 5* and taking us through the danger seeking assertive women of films like *Congo* and *Twister*. You may note that the majority of the films and women discussed in this section are employed in professional positions.

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6 Again, since the majority of the women portrayed in career films were childless women, these themes do not necessarily reflect cultural beliefs about working mothers.
This reflects the demographics of this sample in which very few women are employed in blue-collar or service oriented positions.

**The Pink Collar Ghetto and Women’s Right to Equal Pay**

The first major theme of women's career movies was the ghettoization of women in pink collar jobs such as secretaries, administrators, and service personnel. The 1980 film *9 to 5* spoke to issues of concern to all women such as equal pay for equal work, but this film also focused on issues of concern to working mothers such as on-site day care centers, job share programs, and flexible working hours. The film *9 to 5* opens with recently divorced and childless Judy Bernily (Jane Fonda) heading off to paid employment for the first time in her life. The camera pans across large groups of women heading off to work in their high heels and skirts. One woman kisses her children good-bye while another woman spills her morning coffee on her suit. The background song sets the tone for the comical look at male domination in the work world:

*Working 9 to 5, it's all taken and no given, they just use your mind and they never give you credit. It's enough to drive you crazy if you let it...*

*For service and devotion you would think that I would deserve a fair promotion, want to move ahead but the boss won't seem to let me, I swear sometimes that man is out to get me....*

*They let you dream just to watch 'em shatter. You're just a step on the boss man's ladder, but you've got dreams they'll never take away. In the same boat with a lot of your friends, waiting for the day your ship will come in, tides gonna turn, and it's all gonna roll your way...*

*Yep, they got you where they want you. There's a better life and you think about it don't you. It's a rich man's game no matter what they call it. And you spend your life putting money in his wallet.*
The film focuses on three women who have entered the work force including widowed mother of three Violet Newstead (Lily Tomlin), the voluptuous, married and childless Doralee Rhoades (Dolly Parton), and the recently divorced former housewife Judy Bernily. Violet is one of the few working mothers of any of the films in this sample, but with the death of her husband 12 years ago, she has really taken on the male bread-winner role while her mother stays at home and cares for Violet’s children. Each woman had never intended to work full-time, but needs to work because of their financial situation.

The women would enjoy their job duties if not for the problems created by their “sexist-egotistical-lying-hypocritical-bigot” boss Mr. Hart (Dabney Coleman). Mr. Hart regularly gives Violet’s well deserved promotions to less qualified men, all of whom were mentored by Violet herself. When Violet complains about the unfair promotion process, Mr. Hart counters that his hands are tied because the company needs men for management positions. He tells her:

**Mr. Hart:** Clients would rather deal with men when it comes to figures.

**Violet:** Oh, now we’re getting at it. I lose a promotion because of some idiot prejudice. The boys in the club are threatened, and you’re so intimidated by a woman who won’t sit in the back of the bus.

**Mr. Hart:** Spare me the women’s lib crap, OK? Now I know how you feel, and I understand it.

**Violet:** You understand zilch.

Having been passed over for the promotion, Violet complains to Judy and Doralee that they need to face the fact that “we’re in a pink collar ghetto.” They seem resigned to this fact until Mr. Hart mistakenly believes that they tried to poison him. He threatens to call
the police, and the three women take him hostage in his own home. While he is in captivity, they take over his position at the company and initiate several new employee programs including a better office atmosphere, an alcoholic rehabilitation program, salary changes, and the ability to combine work and family responsibilities through an on-site day care center, part-time work, a job-sharing program, and flexible work hours. They are able to institute all of their policy recommendations with the exception of the equal pay for men and women. By the end of the film, Mr. Hart is sent to a remote jungle location to work on business relations, and Violet receives her promotion to Mr. Hart’s position. The three women toast their victory and decide that they will continue to work on the equal pay issues. Although the film is a commentary on sexism in the work place between male bosses and female subordinate, it leaves a fairly weak message when the women cannot get the equal pay that they had set out to achieve. As Newsweek film critic David Ansen (1980) states,

Politically and esthetically, it’s harmless - a mildly amusing romp that tends to get swallowed up by its own overly intricate plot...By making [the boss] such a caricature, however, Fonda and company have blunted their feminist point: what fanny-pinching boss is going to see himself in this comic-strip lout? In such ways has 9 to 5 been made safe for everyone to see - including every executive-suite bully in the land. (P. 72)

Perhaps a film on women’s subordination in the work place would have been more powerful if it were written for a different film genre. 9 to 5 is written as a comedy, so we know that no great harm will come to any of the characters. The subordination of women by men is set up to receive laughs. However, when men are threatened in the work place by women, as will be discussed with the 1994 film Disclosure, the film genre shifts to a
suspense drama, and there is nothing to laugh about. Despite the weak statements about women’s equal pay, the film does have several underlying feminist points. With the exception of Mr. Hart’s female assistant, the women work together to better the office policies for all women regardless of their family status. Later films specifically pit women against each other for promotions and recognition. As two of the three masterminds in the plan to better the office, childless Doralee and Judy offer suggestions to help working mothers. Unlike films that came about in the late 1980s, there is no animosity or competition between women who are mothers and women who are childless. They respect each other and work together to better all of their lives.

Liberated But Incompetent Professional Woman

The second theme of the career films between the 1980 and 1996 is the liberated but incompetent professional woman. This theme appears in two early films of the sample including the 1981 Absence of Malice and the 1985 Agnes of God. In these films women have made their way into the professional work world, but are portrayed as less than competent on the job. The theme of the liberated but incompetent professional woman does not appear after 1985. The films show ambiguity with regard to women in the professional work world.

Absence of Malice. In 1981, the first of the 1980s and 1990s professional women came on the screen with Sally Field’s portrayal of news reporter Megan Carter in Absence of Malice. Megan is a liberated woman who tries to be competent in her job, but is caught in a trap set by an FBI agent looking for a break in a kidnapping case. Agent Elliot Rosen (Bob Balaban) leaks inaccurate information to Megan about Michael Gallagher (Paul
Newman), the son of a dead mobster. Megan’s news story about Michael as a key suspect in the kidnapping case is printed without any input from Michael. Infuriated by the accusations and the loss of business that the story has brought about for Michael, he storms into the newspaper office and demands a retraction. Megan agrees to meet Michael to allow him to tell his side of the story, but she clearly believes the FBI agent’s information and never really gives Michael the full benefit of the doubt. Michael has an alibi for the night of the kidnapping, but he refuses to tell Megan his whereabouts. Michael had been out of town helping a close friend obtain an abortion. Knowing the harm that would come to his friend Teresa (Melinda Dillon) if the story was printed, Michael opts to take the heat rather than endanger Teresa’s reputation.

When Michael comes under more pressure from the press and the FBI, Teresa asks to meet with Megan. The two women meet in a park, and Teresa tells Megan that Michael is innocent because he was with her on the evening in question. Megan is somewhat belligerent to Teresa and explains that she needs to be able to print more than the story that Michael was with a girlfriend on the night of the kidnapping. Teresa confides in Megan about the abortion, but when she realizes that Megan intends to print the information, Teresa begs her not to make it public. Teresa explains to Megan that publicizing her abortion would ruin her standing in her family and surely result in the loss of her position at the local Catholic school. Megan informs Teresa that this is 1981, and people will understand. Teresa counters that the people who know her will not understand the abortion, but Megan dismisses her and pushes for more facts about the night of the abortion. As Megan is busy writing down details, the defeated Teresa silently
walks away. The following morning, Teresa finds the story in print on the front page of the newspaper. Unable to handle the situation, Teresa commits suicide. When Megan finds out about the suicide, she goes to Michael’s warehouse to talk to him. Infuriated, Michael physically attacks Megan and yells, “Couldn’t you see what it was to her? Couldn’t you stop scribbling and put down your goddamn ball-point pen and just see her? Didn’t you like her?” Consumed by guilt, Megan compensate for her mistake by breaking a rule of journalism and giving Michael the name of the FBI agent who leaked Michael’s name to her. Megan was unaware that Teresa had been mentally unstable and under the care of a therapist. Perhaps had she known this information, she might not have printed the story.

Megan’s newspaper editor Mac (Josef Sommer) tries to alleviate Megan’s guilt by telling her, “I know how to print what’s true, and I know how not to hurt people. I don’t know how to do both at the same time.” Mac then offers Megan an editing position for the newspaper:

Mac: I think you’d make a damn fine editor...You’re a good newspaper woman, Meg.

Megan: And if you delete newspaper?

Megan is obviously upset with herself for not being able to look past the story objectives and see Teresa as a woman who was in pain and distress. Through her irresponsible news reporting, Megan indirectly destroyed two lives: Teresa through her suicide, and Michael through his failed warehouse business. In the end though, Michael turns the tables on both the newspaper and the FBI agents. Michael sets up a scandal that necessitates the
involvement of the Assistant Attorney General’s office. In a final meeting of the film, Assistant Attorney General James Wells (Wilford Brimley) assembles all parties including the FBI agents, Megan, a newspaper lawyer, and Michael. Wells scolds Megan and her newspaper when he states:

**Wells:** You know and I know that we can’t tell you what to print. We hope you people in the press will act responsibly. But when you don’t, there ain’t a whole hell of a lot that we can do. But we can’t have people going around leaking things for their own reasons. It ain’t legal and worse than that, by God, it ain’t right. I can’t stop [Megan], but by God, I can stop [the FBI agents].

**Megan:** A lot of damage has been done, and I’m responsible for a lot of it. I know that.

Megan accepts responsibility for her part in the scandal and wants to apologize to Michael, but he leaves the hearing before she gets the opportunity to do so. She later meets Michael by his boat as he is preparing to leave Miami and start his life over in a new city. She explains:

**Megan:** I know you think what I do for a living is nothing. But it really isn’t nothing. I just did it badly.

**Michael:** You’re probably a hell of a reporter.

**Megan:** Not yet.

Although many men were involved in the leaking of the original story about Michael and the kidnapping, the blame and responsibility ultimately comes down on the only woman involved in the story. Even though Megan is a liberated career woman, she is not a very good career woman. Her actions led to personal damage of innocent people’s lives, and as Robert Hatch of *The Nation* states, “[she] commits in quick succession three of the
unforgivable sins of journalism: she fails to check her facts, she betrays information given in confidence, and she reveals her sources” (1982:27).

_Agnes of God_. Dr. Martha Livingston (Jane Fonda) is the second liberated career woman whose competence is called into question. Dr. Livingston is the court appointed psychiatrist assigned the duty of examining a young woman who has given birth in a convent. It appears that the young woman, Agnes, had killed the baby immediately following the birth. Dr. Livingston is assigned this case because the nuns feel a woman would be best suited to talk with Agnes; however, Dr. Livingston is reluctant to take the case because of her own ill feelings about Catholicism and nuns. After overcoming her initial reluctance, Dr. Livingston does give the case her full attention, but her character and her work are constantly called into question. We get the sense that nearly everyone in the film is worried about Martha’s ability to competently handle this case. The courts want Dr. Livingston to hurry up with the case and give them her judgment, but she tells the judge and other court psychiatrists, “I know my job. Don’t tell me my job.” The mother superior of the convent, Mother Miriam (Anne Bancroft), questions Martha from the start when she states, “Look doctor, I don’t know how to tell you this politely, but I don’t approve of you. Not you personally.” Mother Miriam has no faith in the science of psychiatry and continually questions Martha’s handling of Agnes. The Catholic priest involved in the case calls into question Martha’s objectivity. The priest is worried that Martha’s own negative feelings towards the Catholic church will interfere with her ability to be objective in this case. Even Martha’s boyfriend is afraid that Martha has become too involved in the case to make clear judgments. Despite all of the opposition and
questioning of competency, Dr. Livingston is able to get to the bottom of the case and make her recommendation to the court, a recommendation that is ultimately accepted on its professional merit. The comments of film commentator Marcia Pally (1985) speak directly to the ambiguity of women in professional roles.

_Agnes of God_ begins as a contemplation about religion but, because it's played out among women, opens up other questions of safety, authority, and self-reliance. All women, until recently, were courted with promises of care and security, and all offered obedience and fidelity in return. Marrying Jesus, as nuns do, differs only in the domestic arrangements...The dilemma Livingston faces stands in, somewhat elaborately, for the choices of all women, and eventually for choices itself. _Agnes of God_ could not have been done in a monastery, even modifying the plot conceit. Not that men don’t come to crises and wretch over their alternatives. But the particular position of women, floundering between acquiescence and assertion, makes them for better or worse sharper metaphors for this sort of crunch. (P. 14)

The development of characters such as Megan Carter and Dr. Martha Livingston show that during the early 1980s, America was beginning its struggle with women's role in the traditionally male work force. Although there was some acceptance of women into the professional work world, the competency of liberated women in those positions was being seriously questioned.

Competent Career Woman, but Incomplete Woman

By the late 1980s, the competency of the career women in films was becoming more established. "Tiger Lady" J.C. Wiatt (Diane Keaton) came onto the scene in the 1987 film _Baby Boom_ and showed that women can be just as successful in high powered executive positions as men. J.C. was a prominent account executive who made six figures a year and was being considered for a promotion to partner. While being considered for the partnership, J.C.'s boss reminds her that being a woman is different from being a man.
A man is able to have it all in life including spouse, children, and career. He cautions J.C. that she cannot have it all, and that by taking a partnership with the firm, she would have to give up any ideas about spouse and children. J.C. reminds her boss that she does not want to have it all. She, like Megan Carter and Dr. Martha Livingston, is committed completely and totally to her career. Of course, this career commitment is put the test when J.C. inherits a baby girl from a deceased relative. As was discussed in Chapter 5, this film helps to strengthen the dichotomy between work and family. Not only do we learn through *Baby Boom* that women who think they do not want it all are just dormant mothers waiting to be hatched, but once they become mothers, it is a practical impossibility for them to combine the responsibilities of work outside of the home and the responsibilities of motherhood. Perhaps this is why other women’s career films such as *Working Girl*, completely side-steps the issue of domesticity and children.

In seeking their self-identity solely from their careers, many of the childless women ended up having to chose between their career aspirations and their potential or current love relationships. Women who chose work over relationships included Megan of *Absence of Malice*, Dian of *Gorillas in the Mist*, Tess of *Working Girl*, Lindsey of *The Abyss*, Rae of *Medicine Man*, Lilly of *In the Line of Fire*, Jo of *Twister*, and Robby of *Outbreak*. In several of these cases, the women were able to find later relationships in which they could combine their careers with the men they loved (*In the Line of Fire*, *Medicine Man*, and *Working Girl*). In other cases the married women in estranged marriages were brought back together with their husbands through life or death situations (*The Abyss*, *Twister*, and *Outbreak*). Finally, some women such as Megan of *Absence of*
Malice and Dian of Gorillas in the Mist were unable to reconcile their commitment to their careers and the responsibilities of a relationship.

**Working Her Way to the Top Over the Back of Her Fellow Woman**

Up until the 1988 film Working Girl, the career women of this sample worked their way into the man's world without having to compete with other women for a precious few positions. The women seemed to make it to the top based on their professional merits, and women like J.C. Wiatt of Baby Boom and Violet Newstead of 9 to 5 had to compete with their male protégés for the promotions. While working in a man's world, these career women also tended to have repressed sexuality while on the job. Even their sexual encounters apart from the office were eluded to rather than caught on film. Tess McGill (Melanie Griffith) of Working Girl turns both of these trends upside down. Tess is a working class secretary who has worked her way through night school to earn her college degree with honors. She wants to move into management, but like the women of 9 to 5, Tess seems caught in the pink collar ghetto. At first she is ghettoized by her male superiors, but when she is transferred to Katherine Parker's (Sigourney Weaver) office, Tess is even oppressed by her new Harvard-bred female MBA boss.

From the moment that Tess meets her new boss, the two women are placed in direct competition with each other. Katherine is smooth, refined, and painfully aware of the office hierarchy while Tess wears over-exaggerated make-up, teased hair, and costume jewelry. At the same time that Katherine professes to be a much needed mentor for Tess, she often cuts Tess down with back-handed compliments that are meant to demean Tess and keep her in her place. Katherine's first order to Tess is, "Why don't you pour us both
a cup of coffee and come on in? I'm light, no sugar.” During their first meeting Katherine sets up her expectations for Tess:

**Katherine:** A few ground rules. The way I look at it, you are my link to the outside world. People’s impression of me starts with you. You’re tough when it’s warranted, accommodating when you can be. You’re accurate. You’re punctual, and you never make a promise you can’t keep. I’m never on another line, I’m in a meeting. I consider us a team Tess, and as such we have a uniform. Simple, elegant, impeccable. Dress shabbily, they notice the dress. Dress impeccably, they notice the woman.

**Tess:** Uhm, how do I look?

**Katherine:** You look terrific. You might want to rethink the jewelry. I want your input Tess. I welcome your ideas, and I like to see hard work rewarded. It’s a two-way street on my team. Am I making myself clear?

**Tess:** Yes Katherine.

**Katherine:** [She stands up to shake Tess’s hand.] And call me Katherine. Let’s get to work, shall we?

Tess naively takes Katherine at face value and tells her boyfriend that she really thinks Katherine will help her get into management. Within a few days, Tess asks Katherine for advice on a business idea that she has been developing. Tess believes that a local New York firm, Trask Industries, might be convinced to purchase a Memphis radio station that has recently been put up for sale. Katherine laughs off Tess’s idea and accuses her of having overheard the idea from a group of business people. She reminds Tess to keep bringing her ideas because Katherine wants their working relationship to be a “two-way street.”

Katherine’s true colors show through after she injures herself on a skiing trip in Europe and is confined to a hospital bed. Katherine instructs Tess to take care of several personal items such as watering her plants and letting in the cleaning lady and the florist.
While at Katherine’s apartment, Tess starts playing around with Katherine’s tape recorder and discovers that Katherine has stolen the business idea that Tess had taken to her earlier in the week. Angered by having been taken advantage of, Tess decides to assume Katherine’s business position and put together the business deal between Trask Industries and the radio station while Katherine is laid-up in Europe. When questioned about her behavior by her fellow secretary and friend, Tess replies, “I’m not going to spend the rest of my life working my ass off and getting nowhere just because I followed rules that I had nothing to do with setting up.”

Tess enlists the help of Jack Trainer (Harrison Ford), a business executive from a different firm, and sets up a meeting with Jack for the following day to discuss her plan. That evening she attends a business cocktail party and chooses the wrong attire for the occasion. Rather than wearing a business suit, Tess wears one of Katherine’s cocktail dresses. Tess tries to meet Jack Trainer at this meeting, but Jack refuses to let Tess know who he is. He would rather get to know Tess on a personal level before they have their business meeting in the morning. Jack and Tess meet at the bar and Jack tells Tess:

Jack: I’ve been looking for you.

Tess: Why, do you know me?

Jack: No, nop, I promised myself that when I saw you I would get to know you. You’re the first woman I’ve seen at one of these damn things that dresses like a woman, not what a woman thinks a man would dress like if he was a woman.

Tess: Thank you, I guess.

[Jack begs Tess to have one drink to which she agree only if she can pay. He says fine, but reminds her that it is an open bar. Her tequila mixes with a depressant that her girlfriend had given her earlier, and Tess becomes inebriated.]
Jack: I didn’t know they let bad girls into these things.

Tess: Do I look like I don’t belong here?

Jack: No. I’m sure you’re a real ace at whatever it is that you do do.

Tess: Damn straight.

Jack: But how you look.

Tess: I have a head for business and a bod for sin. Is there anything wrong with that?

Jack: No, no.

Tess is set up in the film not only as a promising business executive, but also as a sexually desirable woman. Unbeknownst to Tess, Jack is also the boyfriend of Katherine, so the film sets up both a business competition between Tess and Katherine and a competition for the love of this perfect man. However, just as Tess does not know that Jack is involved with Katherine, Jack does not know that Tess is pretending to be a business executive and is actually Katherine’s secretary.

To become a better business woman and move out of the ranks of the secretary pool, Tess realizes that she needs to make a few changes. She has her friend Cynthia cut her long teased out hair into a shorter, more professional style. Tess also gives up her own secretary’s wardrobe and wears Katherine’s conservative business attire and classic jewelry. Finally, Tess tries to lose her baby voice and takes on a deeper and sexier voice during telephone calls and meetings with Jack. When Jack decides to take her up on her business deal, he even supplies her with a brand new briefcase to complete her look. Although it seems as if Jack and Tess will be able to pull off their business deal, they are
interrupted in both a business sense and a romantic sense when Katherine returns home early from Europe. Katherine arrives home at about the same time that Jack and Tess are to meet with the final executives to secure their business deal. Katherine finds out about Tess's charade and becomes infuriated with her, referring to Tess as, "That little slut! Goddamn little bitch secretary!" As Tess and Jack are trying to seal the business deal with the executives of Trask Industries and the radio station, Katherine barges into the meeting and reveals Tess’s identity. Katherine explains to the all male executive board that while she was laid up in a hospital in Europe, Tess rifled through her desk and stole Katherine's ideas about Trask and radio. Tess is unable to defend herself and leaves the meeting with her head hung low. Katherine orders the men to pass her a set of papers and "let's get on with it." Jack tries to recover by telling them, "Well gentlemen, the players may have changed, but the game remains the same, and the name of the game is let's make a deal." The only players to have changed is Katherine for Tess. It seems that there is only one available seat for a woman in this business meeting, and in order to get the seat, Katherine and Tess are placed in direct competition for that available seat.

While it may seem that Tess has lost her opportunity as an executive and even her job as a secretary, the fight between these two women is not over just yet. While trying to collect her personal belongings and leave Katherine's company, Tess meets up with Jack, Katherine, and Warren, the owner of Trask Industries, in the building lobby. Jack pulls Tess aside and wants to know if her loving him was all part of the charade as well. Tess counters that she still loves him, but she had to lie about her position because he would not have taken their initial meeting if he knew that she was only a secretary. Katherine
interrupts them and insinuates that Tess is leaving the office with more stolen files, but
Tess lashes out at Katherine and tells her that they both know what went on. Tess angrily
instructs Katherine that she never wants to see her “bony ass again.” At this point, Jack
begins to support Tess over Katherine. With Jack on her side again, Tess asks Warren an
important question about the business deal. Katherine mocks Tess and does not see the
relevance of her question. Intrigued by Tess’s question, Warren takes Tess and Jack into
a separate elevator and has Tess explain to them how she got the idea to put Trask
Industries and radio together. When they meet up with Katherine again, Warren asks
Katherine to explain how she got the idea to put Trask Industries together with radio.
Katherine flounders for an answer and even looks to Jack who provides no support.
Warren tells Katherine that if he were her, “I’d go to your office and take one long last
look around it, because in about five minutes, I’m going to see to it that you get the boot.”
He then tells her to get her “bony ass” out of here. With Katherine out of the picture,
Warren asks Tess why she did not explain all of this during the board meeting. Tess
informs Warren and Jack that she did not think they would understand:

I mean you can bend the rules plenty once you get upstairs, but not while
you’re trying to get there. And if you’re someone like me, you can’t get
there without bending the rules.

Warren asks Tess if she would come to work for his company, and she gladly accepts.
When she arrives at Trask Industries, she mistakenly thinks that she is starting out as a
secretary, but finds out that she is a new manager with a large office and her own
secretary. As a kinder, gentler, more feminine manager than Katherine, Tess tells her new
secretary that, “I expect you to call me Tess. I don’t expect you to fetch me coffee unless you’re getting some for yourself, and the rest we’ll make up as we go along.”

In this film, the sexual and feminine woman who works her way up the corporate ladder from the bottom is able to overcome the opposition of the more masculine, Harvard MBA woman. There was no other way for Tess to move out of the secretary ghetto unless she overcame the opposition of another business woman. The moral of the story is that it is fine for a woman to break into a man’s business world as long as she does it at the expense of another woman. As Walters (1995) states, “the Pyrrhic feminist victory is reduced to Tess’s commitment to get her own coffee when she is rewarded with a management position and a female secretary” (p. 125-126).

**The Masculinized Career Bitch**

In addition to creating the theme of two women competing for precious few positions in a male professional world, the 1988 film *Working Girl* also introduced the masculinized career bitch through the portrayal of Katherine Parker. Susan Faludi describes Katherine as a, “cutthroat Harvard MBA with a Filofax where her heart should be” (p. 129). Katherine Parker is set up as the “bad woman ...who has lost her ‘true’ womanly ways in her climb up the corporate ladder” (Walters 1995:126). Katherine is assertive, sneaky, forward, and “lives so far on the other side of the tracks that she hardly knows the tracks exist” (Boyum 1987:140). The heroine of this film, Tess, is anything but masculinized. She is shown with “misty eyes and soft-focus smiles [that] are supposed to turn our brains to jelly” (Kael 1987:81). Tess is objectified through shots of her vacuuming Katherine’s apartment in her garter, push-up bra, and bikini panties. In
contrast, Katherine is unable to be feminine even when she is asking Jack to marry her. Instead of waiting for Jack to propose marriage to her, she uses business lingo and practically insists that they “merge.”

Katherine Parker was only one of several masculinized career bitches to come onto the screen between 1988 and 1994. The masculinized career bitches were not necessarily masculine in appearance, but were masculine in behavior. In fact, the women were often quite beautiful, but their business actions were anything but kind, caring, and nurturing. These were cutthroat business women who let nothing stand in their way of success.

*Big Business* and *The Abyss*. Both of these films were discussed in previous chapters, but I raise some of the character issues again because of the importance to this theme of the career bitch. In *Big Business* the career bitch is actually the only mother of this particular film, but she fails miserably at motherhood and gives her child over to her long lost identical twin sister. Chief executive officer Sadie Shelton (Bette Midler) is a heartless business woman who runs her company with an iron fist. Sadie’s employees jump at her every command, and she scolds them with no remorse. While entering the office one morning, Sadie disapproved of the attire of a secretary and asked her, “Is that how we dress for the office? You look like a blood clot.” Although Sadie is less masculinized in the bedroom than Katherine Parker, she is just as cutthroat and forward in the boardroom.

The character Lindsey Brigman’s (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) of the 1989 film *The Abyss* was the oil rig engineer described as the “Queen Bitch of the Universe” by her male co-workers. Lindsey rarely showed emotion and was able to handle situations that
brought some male co-workers to tears. Lindsey was an assertive, arrogant, and ambitious career woman who would let nothing stand in her way of success, even her marriage. David Ansen of *Newsweek* (1989) described Lindsey as having been as determined and macho as her estranged husband, however, I would suggest that Lindsey was often portrayed as more masculine than her husband. Lindsey's husband was the one who was unable to part with his wedding ring and was often emotionally disturbed by the crisis situations that had developed.

*Disclosure.* By 1994, Hollywood had created the ultimate in the masculinized career bitch. Meredith Johnson (Demi Moore) was every bit as ruthless and abusive in her powerful position as a man had ever been and would prove to be a threat to any man who stood in her way. The target of Meredith's mistreatment is Tom Sanders (Michael Douglas), an innocent middle-aged, upper middle class white male. In *Disclosure* Hollywood showed that not only could a woman compete in a man's world, but she wanted to control a man's world at the expense of the middle-aged, middle-management white male. Just as *9 to 5* 's oppressive boss would use sexism and sexual harassment to control the workplace, so too would the career woman of the 1990s. As *Premiere* film critic Libby Gelman-Waxner states, “it's like *9 to 5* with Michael Douglas in the Dolly Parton role” (1995:48). Meredith used her sexuality as a point of power to control Tom and even brought him close to financial and family ruins. *Disclosure* also brings back the idea that single childless working women are a threat to the nuclear family. The new twist this time is that the single working woman is not interested in taking the position of the mother/wife role, but is instead interested in destroying the nuclear family through the
professional destruction of the male bread-winner. "Once again, [Michael Douglas] is the beleaguered object of desire - the poster boy for male fear of aggressive female sexuality... and gender warfare in the workplace" (Rafferty 1995:107).

*Disclosure* opens with panning camera shots of the upper-middle class Seattle home of Tom Sanders, the Director of Manufacturing for a high-tech computer firm named DIGICOM. Tom’s home life is complemented by his wife Susan (Caroline Goodall) and their two adorable children. Tom is a contemporary father who provides financially for his children, but also wants to be there in the morning to help them brush their teeth and prepare for school. His commitment to his family keeps him from being a one-dimensional workaholic like Meredith. The film begins on the morning that Tom is expecting to receive a big promotion at work. The promotion hinges on a merger deal he has been developing. He tells his wife as she is dropping him off for the ferry:

**Tom:** If this merger with Conely goes through, we’re going to be rich.

**Susan:** We’re already rich if you ask me.

**Tom:** No, I mean really rich.

This scene sets up the fact that Tom has had a prosperous career and has provided financial security for his family. Susan also contributes to the family income through her part-time work as a lawyer, but Tom is the main breadwinner of the family.

On the ferry boat ride to the office, a social problem that the film addresses is brought into play. Tom talks uncomfortably to a downsized middle-aged middle manager who has been looking for a job for months. Tom gives the guy his secretary’s card and tells him to get in touch with her. The unemployed middle manager states, “Cindy, pretty
name. Used to have fun with the girls. Nowadays, she probably wants your job.” This scene sets the tone for the male-female warfare in the professional work force and also sets up the viewers for the blow to Tom’s career that will happen when he arrives at work. Instead of receiving his expected promotion to the position of Vice President for Advanced Operations and Planning, Tom finds out that the promotion has been given to a former girlfriend of his, Meredith Johnson. The company CEO Bob Garvin announces to the company that he is promoting Meredith Johnson to the position and thus breaking the glass ceiling of high-tech management for women. Not only has Meredith received Tom’s promotion, but he also finds out that she may decide to release him and bring in new division heads. Frustrated by the news of Meredith’s promotion, Tom discusses with co-worker Marc Lewyn (Dennis Miller) Meredith’s technical shortcomings:

**Tom:** This is a technical division. She doesn’t know the difference between software and a cashmere sweater.

**Marc:** Let me guess. Attractive, great wrack, nipples like pencil erasers.

**Tom:** Is she attractive? Yes, she’s very attractive.

**Marc:** You think she’s sleeping with Garvin?

In fact, Meredith is a beautiful woman who is described as “unbelievable” by Tom’s co-workers, but there is no reason for her to have slept her way to her position as she seems more than able to handle herself in the male-dominated computer industry. Instead, this conversation is meant to allude to the differences between men and women in the work place. The film hints that men are promoted as a result of their hard work while women are promoted based on sexual favors and affirmative action policies.
After the promotion announcement, Meredith asks Tom to come to her office around 7:00 p.m. to go over some files. Co-workers Marc and Don tease Tom about having a late evening meeting with Meredith:

Marc: Ah she doesn’t give you a boner? Because I definitely have lift off. What about you Frisky [Don], got a little wood in your life?

Don: She’s very nice.

Tom: [Does not verbally respond to their comments, but laughs knowingly.]

Meredith’s subordinates objectify her behind her back, but it is Meredith who directly sexually harasses Tom during their 7:00 p.m. meeting. Meredith seduces Tom and tries to have sex with him during their meeting. Her master plan is to have sex with Tom and then have him fired for sexual harassment. As it turns out, Tom cannot go through with the entire sexual activity and runs from Meredith’s office. Meredith is infuriated and yells for him to “come back here and finish what you started.” The next morning, Tom is informed that Meredith wants to handle the sexual harassment charges internally and quietly. Tom counters that Meredith harassed him, but he is not believed. What Tom does not know is that the sexual harassment charge is a plot by Meredith to get Tom to take a demotion within the company and transfer out of the Seattle office. Not only has Meredith set Tom up for a sexual harassment suit, but she also sabotaged much of his work in the office, making him look like an incompetent manager.

For his legal defense, Tom hires Catherine Alverez (Roma Maffia), a local lawyer who has won several multi-million dollar sexual harassment suites and takes a zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment. Tom hires Catherine to handle his mediation
with Meredith and DIGICOM. When Tom’s wife finds out about the mediation process and sexual harassment charges, she publicly stands behind Tom 100 percent, but privately questions Tom about his behavior:

**Tom:** I’d love to hear what you’d say if it happened to you.

**Susan:** Do you know how many times this has happened to me?

**Tom:** Wait a minute. You never said this happened to you.

**Susan:** You’re so goddamn narcissistic. Nothing ever happens until it happens to you.

**Tom:** Well if somebody did this to you, you should have said something about it.

**Susan:** I do what women have always done. I deal with it. I do not make a federal case out of it. Now go in there tomorrow and work it out.

**Tom:** I guess you’re right. I should just shut up and fuck her. I mean what the hell.

**Susan:** Just apologize. Apologize and get your job back.

**Tom:** Apologize! Wait, wait, wait a minute. I’ve got a better idea. Why don’t I just admit it. Why don’t I be that guy, that evil white male you’re all complaining about. I like it. Then I can fuck everybody. Hey Chau Minh [housekeeper] come down here, will yah? I want to exercise my dominance. I’m getting a patriarchal urge.

**Susan:** Tom, the children.

**Tom:** Yeah, my children, all right! That I work and provide for and protect. That they can come in here between me and my wife and move my family out, take my job and take the family and house that we have made. And I apologize to them?...Sexual harassment is about power. When did I have the power? When?

Several themes of the film come out in this conversation. First of all the film is a statement about the gender wars in the work world between men and women, questioning
which gender is actually oppressed. Secondly, it is clear that Tom is terrified that Meredith can cause him to lose everything that he has worked so hard to obtain including his job, his wife, his children, and his house. Again, the single childless white working female is a threat not only to the sanctity of the white working male’s nuclear family, but she is now also a threat to his professional career.

DIGICOM agrees to go through with the sexual harassment mediation which involves Tom accusing Meredith and Meredith accusing Tom of sexual harassment. It seems as though Meredith, through her convincing lies during her testimony, will win the mediation process, but Tom and his lawyer come up with a tape recording of what really happened in Meredith’s office. The tape reveals that Tom had repeatedly told Meredith no while she made her sexual advances. Meredith seems unimpressed with their evidence, but Catherine Alverez tells her, “Miss Johnson, the only thing that you have proven is that a woman in power can be every bit as abusive as a man.” It is at this point that the message of zero tolerance of sexual harassment becomes a bit muddled. On the one hand, Meredith is being reprimanded by the company for direct sexual harassment of a subordinate, but on the other hand, Tom and his co-workers are not reprimanded for their objectification of Meredith. Tom and his lawyer dismiss his remarks with Don and Marc about Meredith as “harmless” conversation between men. Additionally Catherine tells the mediation group that when Tom did respond to Meredith’s sexual advances, it was done out of weakness while Meredith’s actions were motivated purely by power.

By the end of the mediation process, Tom has made his case and has won his job back. While it looks like Tom has won the battle of the sexes with Meredith, the games
are not actually over yet. Meredith has set Tom up once again, and her plan is to have him fired for incompetence. Fortunately for Tom though, he finds out about her plan and turns her master scheme upside down. While Meredith tries to humiliate Tom during a presentation to the entire company, Tom turns the tables and ends up humiliating Meredith. The evil Meredith is fired from the position, leaving Tom and his family safe from any further threats. In their final meeting, Tom mocks Meredith and raises the question of who was setting up the other for failure:

Tom: I’ve never seen you play the victim before. It’s probably the only good quality you have.

Meredith: Only playing the game the way you guys set it up, and I’m being fired for it. It’s fine. I’ve had calls from ten headhunters with job offers in the last hour. Don’t be surprised if I’m back in ten years to buy this place.

Tom: Did it ever occur to you Meredith, that I set you up?

Even in the face of defeat, Meredith is a picture of assertion and confidence. There is no remorse for her being fired from the man’s world since she was so ruthless in her plot to destroy Tom. With Meredith out of the company, the CEO must name a replacement for Meredith’s vice president position. Once again, we are hopeful that Tom will receive the promotion, but it goes to the only other woman in top management. This time, the woman is a fair player and even Tom can admit that she deserves the promotion more than he. Just as Working Girl showed that there is only room for one woman at the top of the corporate ladder, so too does Disclosure illustrate this idea. Meredith broke the glass ceiling of the high tech industry, but was apparently going to be the only woman of the firm to do so. It is not until Meredith is fired from her position that another woman
(Stephanie) breaks through the same glass ceiling. Although the film seemed to have been setting up a direct confrontation in the work place between a Tom and Meredith, Stephanie had been feeding Tom valuable information that helped him turn the tables on Meredith throughout his ordeal. In this way, a more subtle battle is still taking place between two professional women.

**The Proven Career Woman in a Dangerous Man's World**

In the 1989 film *The Abyss* Lindsey Brigman began the film as a "caste iron bitch" trying to make it in a male dominated work environment. Lindsey faced life and death situations with courage, but eventually softened in character. By the end of the film this masculine liberated woman became a more feminine wife and co-worker. In 1993 women were showing that they could face life or death situations with male courage and not have to succumb to traditional femininity. In films such as *Congo*, *In the Line of Fire*, *Outbreak*, and *Twister*, transformative childless women were placing their lives on the line and proving themselves as virologists, secret service agents, ex-CIA agents, and tornado chasers. The competence of these women was becoming a stated fact. Unlike the women professionals of the early 1980s, these women and their work were beginning to be taken at face value.

*In the Line of Fire.* In 1993 Rene Russo played Lilly Raines, a secret service agent assigned directly to the protection of the president. Lilly is a very competent agent, but is the only danger seeking assertive woman who had her competency called into question by a male colleague. Lilly's regular partners had no problem with the performance of her job, and like all of her male counterparts, she was willing to put her life on the line for the
president. It is not until aging secret service agent Frank Horrigan (Clint Eastwood) asks to be placed on the president’s protection team that Lilly’s position is questioned. Frank thinks that the women assigned to the secret service are simply window dressing for the president and are there to appease the feminist vote. Despite Frank’s initial doubts about Lilly’s abilities as an agent, Lilly proves herself proficient over and over again. Lilly is the person who has the clout to keep Frank on the president’s direct team, even though the president thinks he is a risk. Frank’s full confidence in Lilly is shown when his life is in the hands of a would-be presidential assassin, and Lilly is placed in charge of saving his life.

_Congo._ Dr. Karen Ross (Laura Linney) places her life in even greater danger than Lilly Rains when she leads a team of men to the Congo jungle in search of her ex-fiancé and a much needed blue diamond for her communication company. As a former CIA agent, Karen handles most any type of weaponry with ease and precision. She is far more calm in life or death situations than her male counterparts and through her skills is also one of the few people to survive the trip to the Congo. Karen leads the fight against rebel assaults and has all of the equipment and knowledge to save the group against attacks from killer gorillas. Karen’s competence as a communication and weaponry expert are never called into question. Karen and her male associates encounter several life or death situations, but the only time that she needs any male comforting is when she finally finds the body of her ex-fiancé. She had really hoped to find him alive and is emotionally shaken when they discover his dead body. This is the only time in the film that we see a weaker side of Karen. Otherwise, she is generally as tough or tougher than the men on the expedition.
Outbreak and Twister. The films Outbreak and Twister provide similar situations in which couples in failed marriages are brought back together by a life or death situations. The marital relationships were discussed in Chapter 7, so I will stick to their professional behavior. In Outbreak, Dr. Robby Kaough (Rene Russo) is a virologist who is trying to help save the nation from a 100 percent fatal virus. In order to more fully understand the virus and its affects, an autopsy must be performed on two teenagers who had been infected and died a horrible death. Several of the male doctors at the hospital refuse to perform the autopsy, so Robby volunteers to assist an experienced male doctor. When the male doctor’s hand is too shaky to cut open the body, Robby gently takes the scalpel from her colleague and performs the autopsy herself. Robby proves her competence as a skilled surgeon as well as a medical researcher. Even when she mistakenly jabs herself with a needle containing the virus, Robby’s proficiency as a virologist is never questioned.

Likewise, the profession competency of Jo Harding (Helen Hunt) of Twister is also never questioned. Jo is a tornado researcher who repeatedly risks her life to launch measurement devises into tornadoes. If anything, Jo is criticized for being overly committed to the project because of the tragedy she experienced as a child when her father was swept away by a tornado. Both Jo and Robby are proficient professional women who run research centers without posing a threat to their male counterparts.

The women of the films Congo, In the Line of Fire, Outbreak, and Twister were tough women performing typically male jobs. In the performance of their work, they often assumed traditionally masculine personality characteristics with scant traces of femininity. Their work in male oriented work environments with mostly male colleagues kept them
separated from female companionship. They were seldom treated differently by their male colleagues based on their gender. Unlike the masculinized career bitches who were portrayed as villainous threats to their male or female colleagues, these women were all characterized as heroines rather than villains. The portrayal of some masculinized women as bitches while the other women were accepted heroines points to cultural ambivalence about women's work roles. Is masculinity a positive trait for women in the work force? Some films say yes, while other films serve as cautionary tales about the dangers of career women losing their femininity.

**Conclusion**

Women's professional career films released between 1980 and 1996 focused almost exclusively on single childless working women. Although the greatest change in the female work force was the entrance of women with children under five into the paid labor force (Moen 1992), Hollywood chose to focus films on childless working women. Although there is no over-riding characteristic to describe all working women in these career films, the majority of the women were the ambitious workaholics who were most often over-committed to their careers at the expense of personal relationships. Many of the working women were portrayed almost exclusively in the role of professional career woman. Very little information was given about their personal lives. When they interacted with men on a personal relationship basis, they were often placed in the position of having to chose between love and their work. They were also excluded from scenes that centered on family life and were rarely shown in interaction with their own parents or siblings. With the exception of the professional mothers/supporters who worked as
teachers or nuns, the working women did not have other social roles that involved children. These women were seldom shown in scenes that included children and were never shown as an aunt, mentor, or close friend to a woman with children. The career films kept childless working women separated from domestic roles and children. While the dichotomization of women as either professionals or mothers is inconsistent with contemporary women's actual lives (Hays 1996), this dichotomization is consistent with Walters's (1995) assessment of the cultural simplification of women into either the category of domestic and nondomestic. Although Walsh suggested that domestic women are typically constructed as good women and nondomestic women are bad, the representations of the women in the films in this sample convey a more complex ambivalence about women's role in the professional world. The early films of the sample depicted women who were incompetent in their professional positions, but by the early 1990s, professional women's competency and their right to a place in traditionally male oriented work fields was being taken for granted. However, at the same time that professional women had gained respect as competent employees, there was also ambivalence about their relationships with men and other women in the work force. Did women have to compete directly with other women for a few precious positions available through affirmative action policies? Was their entrance into male dominated professions a direct threat to established male colleagues? Some professional childless women were portrayed as heroines, while other professional women were specifically depicted as villainous threats to either male or female colleagues. Finally, some women were able to climb the corporate ladder while maintaining their femininity, but the majority of the
women had lost their femininity (but not their sexuality) when they broke into male professional worlds. The professional ambitious workaholics could be classified in the sexual category of women, but in terms of their gender, they had lost much of the traditional feminine qualities associated with the gender category of woman.
CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the contemporary cultural meaning of female childlessness and come to understand this meaning in relation to historical changes in the meaning of childlessness. A significant discovery of this study is that rather than discussing "the univocal meaning" of childlessness, there seems to be a field of meanings of childlessness in contemporary American culture which represents our society's ideological struggle to place women without children in appropriate social roles.

Historically women have been tied to the domestic sphere and have been identified first and foremost as mothers. However, with changes in technology that have brought reproductive freedom to the point where women can chose not to have any children at all, what social roles are nonmothers to assume? There are a number of roles that childless women are repeatedly assigned in the films of this sample. A few women became surrogate mothers for children who had lost their parents, but these were either women who had always identified themselves as future mothers or childless women who had to significantly restructure their personalities and lives to accommodate their new surrogate mother role. More importantly, childless women were implicitly defined as nonmothers with personality traits and goals diametrically opposed to the personality traits and goals of women who were mothers. Other roles available to childless women included career woman, lover, sex goddess, murderess, victim, divorcée, estranged wife, deranged barren
woman, and fiancé. The diversity in roles points to the fact that there are a number of meanings associated with childlessness. Before discussing the contemporary meanings of childlessness, it is important to review the changes in the historical meaning of childlessness. After recapping the historical changes outlined in Chapter 3, I cover some social and demographic shifts of the late twentieth century that pertain to the changing meaning of childlessness and also discuss some research limitations of this project. I conclude this chapter with a summary of my findings regarding the contemporary meanings of childlessness.

The Meanings of Childlessness in Historical Review

Chapter 3 outlined the shifts in the meaning of childlessness in American culture since the Colonial Era. Before discussing the current cultural meanings of childlessness, it might be instructive to review the major shifts in how Americans’ framed the issues and meanings of childlessness throughout our history. In colonial America the term barren was used to describe women who were unable to produce children, and since the colonial period was marked by high marriage rates, most childless women were married rather than single (Tyler May 1995). The single women that did live in American from the colonial days and throughout the 1700s were derogatorily termed old maids or spinsters (Chambers-Schiller 1984). Since the family was the primary economic unit of productivity, marital barrenness was considered a serious problem. Without the much needed large families to help with the numerous agricultural and household manufacturing tasks, a childless couple might have fallen into economic ruin and risked personal survival.

1 Childless women were also often denied several positive social roles such as aunt, sister, daughter, mentor, or friend.
However, the community nature of families during colonial days, in contrast to the modern isolated nuclear family, provided outlets for childless couples through informal adoption and apprenticeship of young children. In this way, childless marriages were able to maintain integration and acceptance within their communities.

During the first two thirds of the nineteenth century, the negative connotation of the old maid and spinster gave way to a social movement of voluntary single women termed the Cult of Single Blessedness (Chambers-Schiller 1984). The Cult of Single Blessedness maintained that as long as single childless women of the early part of the nineteenth century devoted their lives to the care and nurturance of family members or committed themselves to community charity, they were attributed positive social roles such as “Maiden Aunt” or “Sister of Charity.” The Cult of Single Blessedness maintained that single women should devote their lives spiritually, emotionally, and sexually to God. In completing God’s work here on earth, these women, much like nuns, were committing their lives to a higher calling in life than marriage. The Cult of Single Blessedness provided protection for single women against past stigmatizing views of spinsters and old maids. However, when the growing number of single women of the last third of the nineteenth century moved toward goals of gender equality, personal freedom, and female careerism, the Cult of Single Blessedness was met with a cultural backlash. Negative views about spinsterhood resurfaced, and singleness was associated with three dangerous ‘isms’ including, careerism, feminism, and lesbianism. Having threatened the tradition of separate gender roles and gender spheres, the single women of the late 1800s and early 1900s were challenged by the dominant ideology of Victorian America, an ideology which...
maintained that women's sole purpose in life was to follow her maternal instinct (Gordon 1990). To do otherwise in life than bear and rear children was to tamper with the natural order of God's will.

The late 1800s and early 1900s also saw the first major increase in the number of childless marriages (Morgan 1991). This increase was most pronounced among the middle and upper classes of white Americans. The early part of the twentieth century showed an ambivalence with respect to childless marriages. On the one hand, popular culture seemed to support and encourage the freedom of childless marriages, but on the other hand, political leaders and academicians were becoming increasing uneasy about the changing population of America (Tyler May 1995). The shrinking white native born American class was being met with large increases in the immigration rates. Political leaders identified the shrinking white ruling class as a social problem and dubbed this issue the "race suicide." Blame was quickly placed on the middle and upper class married childless women. The meaning of childlessness was once again restructured, and this time the personal characteristics of childless women were called into question as they were deemed to be cold, selfish, and shallow-hearted. It was not until the baby boom years that these fears of race suicide were finally put to rest, and political leaders felt they could breath easier about the racial make-up of America. During the baby boom years researchers had proclaimed that voluntarily childlessness was close to extinction (Whelpton, Campbell, and Patterson 1966). Anyone who did not want to have children was deemed to be physiologically or psychologically deviant. This deviant label stuck to childless people for the next couple of decades, and childless women who were
interviewed as recently as 1994 still felt the need to fend off comments about their social deviancy (Bartlett 1994; Morell 1994). The late 1960s and the 1970s were characterized by technological changes that ensured greater reproductive choice for women (Greil 1991b). In addition to the technological changes in birth control, the 1970s also had several political and social campaigns such as feminism, zero-population growth, gay and lesbian rights movements, and environmentalism that were consistent with personal choice in reducing family size or rejecting the parenthood role altogether (Burgwyn 1981). Although new books on reproductive choice and a national non-parenthood association marked advances in the acceptance of childlessness, childless Americans in the 1970s were still very aware of the fact that they lived in a pronatalist society. Children and families were the norm and non-parenthood was still looked upon with cautious suspicion. As America entered into the 1980s, the beginning time frame for this study, the mandate of parenthood was weakening a bit, but voluntary childlessness was still not completely socially acceptable.

**Understanding the Shifts in Social Meanings of Childlessness in the Context of Structural Changes**

The changing meanings of childlessness or spinsterhood in American history have generally happened in conjunction with social or economic shifts. The colonial women were tied to large families because of the economic primacy of the family unit. The Cult of Single Blessedness was allowed, in part, because it helped to sustain a nation in the birthing stages of the industrial revolution. Factory and mill towns needed young single women to work away from their families of origin, and the privatization of the nuclear family during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries pushed the need for the
single daughters/sisters/aunts to care for sick parents, ailing siblings, sisters in labor, or orphaned children. By the early 1900s, the falling fertility rates among white, native born American women and the tremendous growth in the immigrant population gave way to the race suicide panic. The Great Depression and World War II brought about economic justifications for couples in their prime childbearing years to delay childbirth. For some of these couples the delay in childbirth led to permanent childlessness; however, the trend of rising childlessness was reversed with the onset of the baby boom. Economic prosperity, the flight to the suburbs, and a strong pronatalist cold war culture helped lead this country to this century’s lowest rates in voluntary childlessness.

Just as history has shown that the meaning of childlessness shifts with changes in social and economic conditions, the current field of meanings of childlessness has not developed in a vacuum. A number of social changes occurring since the mid-1960s have helped to create a cultural ambivalence about childlessness. The nostalgic decade of the 1950s with its strong ties to large isolated nuclear families has often been used as a baseline for examining the social changes that have taken place since the mid-1960s (Mintz and Kellogg 1988). Instead of viewing the 1950s as a statistical anomaly, often times researchers and lay people alike look to this decade as the hey-day of the American family. Unfortunately, what many people fail to realize is that the 1950s were an interruption to the demographic trends of the decades both prior to and following the

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2 This is not to say that social change or economic shifts cause cultural changes in the meaning of childlessness, but the views about childlessness are shaped and readjusted in light of social structure. An underlying theoretical assumption of this work is that social structure and social action, which includes the social construction of social meaning, are an interactive process (see Abrams 1982 and Berger and Luckmann 1966).
them (Tyler May 1988). The century long trends that were interrupted by the 1950s include: growing rates of marital childlessness; increasing rates of singlehood; delayed childbirth; rising median age at first marriage; and changes in women's work force participation. Despite the fact that so many of the social trends taking place after the mid-1960s were similar to the trends prior to the 1950s, the new field of meanings of childlessness developing in contemporary American culture seems to draw on the nostalgic view of the 1950s family life. The cultural creation of new meanings of childlessness make sense in light of the notion that many Americans believe that the 1950s were the golden years of family life.

**Social and Demographic Changes of the Late Twentieth Century**

As stated above, many of the social changes that have taken place since the mid-1960s are returns to patterns that were taking place prior to the 1950s. However, some of the patterns, particularly regarding women’s work involvement, did not simply return to the patterns of the first part of the twentieth century, but also quickened in pace (Gerson 1985). In order to understand the field of meanings associated with contemporary childlessness, it is important to review a number of social changes that have taken place over the past thirty years. These social changes include:

1. changes in the rates of childless marriages;
2. increases in the total number of people choosing singlehood;
3. rising median age at first marriage;
4. decreasing birth rate;
5. increasing educational attainment;
6. changing women’s labor force participation patterns; and
7. qualitative differences in women’s occupations.
The following section reviews each of these demographic and social changes. Appendix B provides graphs and tables to accompany this section.

**Changing Rates of Childlessness Among Married Individuals**

Appendix Table B.1 shows the percent of ever-married childless women from 1950 through 1994. The table represents women of all races and social class groups and is broken down by age. For women between the ages of 20 and 24, the percent of childlessness decreases sharply between the years of 1950 and 1960 falling from 33.3 percent in 1950 to 24.2 percent in 1960. The percent of childlessness then increases steadily between 1960 and 1986, moving from 24.2 percent in 1960 to 41.5 percent in 1986. Between 1986 and 1994 there is a slight reversal in this trend as only 37.4 percent of the married women between the ages of 20 and 24 are childless by 1994. Appendix Figure B.1 also shows these trends in graph form. From Appendix Figure B.1 and Appendix Table B.1 we can see that the 20 to 24 age group seems to be the only group with the down turning trend after 1986. Every other age group of women (between 25 and 44 years of age) continues the steady incline in the percent of childlessness after hitting a low somewhere between 1965 and 1975.

**Singlehood and Delayed Marriage**

Appendix Table B.2 presents data on the percent of single (never-married) persons as a percent of the total population between the years 1970 and 1995. The table shows an overall increase in the number of men and women living single, particularly between the ages of 20 and 44. Much of this represents the rising median age of first marriage (see Appendix Figure B.2), but the simple statistic of median age at first marriage does not
begin to speak for the dramatic changes in singlehood between the ages of 20 and 39. In 1970, 35.8 percent of all women between the ages of 20 and 24 had not yet married, but by 1995 the number had almost doubled to 66.8 percent. The number of women living single between the ages of 25 and 29 had more than tripled between 1970 and 1995 with 10.5 percent in 1970 living single and 35.3 percent in 1995. Whereas only six out of 100 women between the ages of 30 and 34 were living single in 1970, 1995 saw almost one fifth of the female population between the ages of 30 and 34 never married. The steady increase in singlehood among women continued for ages 35 through 44 and eventually stabilized and declined slightly between the ages of 45 and 64.

The male patterns of singlehood are similar to the female patterns, however, they generally start with higher percentages of men than women living in singlehood across all age groups in 1970. Slightly over one half of the male population between the ages of 20 and 24 had never been married in 1970, but by 1995 this figure had risen to 80.7 percent. The rise in singlehood from 1970 to 1995 is similar for all age groups between 20 to 44 and does not begin to fluctuate or decline until ages 45 to 64. In 1995 one half of all men between the ages of 25 and 29 had not yet married, and over one quarter of the men between 30 and 34 were never married. Additionally, one fifth of the male population between the ages of 35 and 39 were living single in 1995. Of course, by thinking of these men and women as single, never-married, as the U.S. Bureau of Census does, heterosexuality is assumed as the norm, and homosexual individuals are lumped into this broad category of single, never-married persons.
American Birthrate Decline

The fertility rate among American women had undergone a significant and steady decline between 1800 and 1900 dropping from 7.04 children per white woman in 1800 to 3.56 in 1900 (Degler 1980). The black fertility rate drop lagged behind the drop in the white fertility rate, but eventually did fall from 7.5 children per woman in 1875 to 2.8 in 1940 (Tolnay 1985). At the start of the twentieth century, the female birthrate (live births per 1,000 population) was at a century high of about 32 births per 1,000 people (see Gerson 1985:6). The birthrate declined sharply over the first three and a half decades of the twentieth century, dropping to just under 19 in 1935. By 1940, the birthrate had rebounded and was beginning the upward trend of the baby boom years, reaching a peak birthrate of about 25 in 1955. Appendix Figure B.3 shows the steady decline in the birthrate between the years of 1960 and 1975, dropping from about 23.5 in 1960 to a century low of just under 15 in 1975. Since 1975, the birthrate has fluctuated a bit, but has not risen above 17 births per 1,000 people.

Educational Attainment

Completion of a high school education has become the norm for both men and women in contemporary America. Appendix Table B.3 shows that the percentage of men and women who have completed at least a high school education has doubled between the years of 1960 and 1996, with about equal numbers of men and women completing their high school education by 1996. The percent of men and women who have completed four years of college or more has also increased since 1960. In 1960 only 9.7 percent of men and 5.8 percent of women completed at least a college education, and by 1996, the
numbers increased to 26 percent of men and 21.4 percent of women. Appendix Table B.3 shows that while women have achieved educational equality at the high school level, they still lag behind men slightly in terms of higher education levels. Nevertheless, the gap between men and women's college education attainment has decreased since 1980.

**Women's Work Patterns**

Perhaps the most significant change for women of the latter part of the twentieth century has been the changes in employment patterns. While certainly women have worked throughout the twentieth century, Gerson (1985) noted that America is in the midst of a "subtle revolution" regarding women's work patterns. Changes have taken place, particularly since the 1960s, regarding class issues and employment, motherhood and employment, and commitment to career versus work (Gerson 1985; Moen 1992; Van Horn 1988).

**Class Issues and Employment.** For certain classes of women and racial minority groups (which are often over-represented in the lower and working classes), the "new" social issues concerning women trying to combine work and motherhood are nothing "new" at all. Lower and working class women have historically had to combine low paying, low prestige work and family responsibilities prior to and throughout the twentieth century (Degler 1980; Van Horn 1988). Economic necessity led many lower and working class women into the paid labor force. The luxury associated with contemporary white middle and upper class women "choosing to work" is historically a foreign idea to lower and working class women who had to combine work and family responsibilities. For many women of color, work had not been a question of choice, but a question of family

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survival (Collins 1994). The fact that since about 1960 women have entered into the paid labor force in unprecedented numbers has typically been a trend change for middle and upper class women. The issues and problems facing women trying to juggle work and family obligations are not necessarily new issues but are now issues being faced by middle and upper class women.

Maternal Employment and the Choice of Work Versus Career. During the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, most women who chose to work, particularly of the middle and upper classes, sequenced their work and family experiences (Moen 1992). In other words, women would work prior to getting married, take time off from work to raise their families, and then possibly return to work after their children had grown and domestic responsibilities had decreased. A new phenomenon that has taken place since about 1965 is the rapid rate in which women with small children in the home have returned to work. Instead of sequencing family responsibilities and paid employment, women of the last third of the twentieth century are combining these two roles in historically unprecedented numbers. Appendix Table B.4 shows the change in the percentage of married mothers with children under the age of six who have entered the work force. In 1960 only 18.6 percent of mothers with children under six worked outside of the home, but by 1995, 63.5 percent of the married mothers with small children were combining their domestic responsibilities and their paid employment. A similar trend is found among mothers of school aged children, with 39 percent working outside of the home in 1960 and over 76 percent in 1995. Appendix Table B.4 also shows that single mothers have
lower rates of paid employment than married mothers, due in part perhaps to the difficulty of combining all family responsibilities and paid employment.

Phyllis Moen (1992) noted that working mothers are not a homogenous group and fall into four broad categories including: (1) *captives* - women who unwillingly or reluctantly work outside of the home because of financial reasons; (2) *conflicted* - employed mothers that are ambivalent about having dual roles of mother/employee and feel that working is harmful to children; (3) *copers* - women who typically have a bit more choice in the type of work that they perform outside of the home so as to allow enough flexibility for family responsibilities; and (4) *committed* - women, typically younger cohort women, who want to have careers in high responsibility fields such as lawyers, doctors, and executives and are willing to pay for full-time in-house child care. Indeed, if you look at Appendix Table B.5, the committed career women do seem to be making some headway in traditionally male professional fields such as accountants, lawyer/judges, physicians, dentists, professors, and executives. Since more women are working in full-time, year-round employment and are pursuing careers rather than jobs, many women have found the demands of motherhood and careers to be incompatible or strenuous at best (Gerson 1985). As women of the late twentieth century have become more committed to career paths and enjoyed a wider opportunity of choices, some women have turned away from the domestic sphere as their source of personal identity and have opted instead for careers without motherhood (Gerson 1985; Luker 1984).
Increasing Tensions Between Traditionally Domestic Women and Women Seeking Nondomestic Pathways

The problem that women consistently face when trying to combine career and motherhood is that the two separate roles are ideologically opposed from one another (Garey 1995; Hays 1996; Oakley 1974). Oakley (1974) argued that a defining feature of women in modern society is the “structural ambivalence” between the institution of motherhood and the economic institution. Oakley claimed that it is structurally impossible to fulfill the roles of one institution without threatening the role of the other institution.3 The movement of women, and particularly mothers, into the full-time work force has been complicated by what Hays (1995) terms the contemporary ideology of intensive mothering. The dominant ideology facing all mothers and non-mothers is that children are pure and innocent, economically worthless, and morally and emotionally priceless (Zelizer 1985). In caring for these sacred children, mothers are to follow the ideology of intensive mothering which includes: (1) the assumption that children require the nurturance of a single primary caregiver, and the biological mother of the child is best suited for that position; (2) the appropriate methods of child rearing are child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive; and (3) since children are pure and innocent, they deserve to be valued differently than other people and deserve special treatment (Hays 1996:8). The dual and conflicting demands of the work sphere and the domestic sphere are often referred to for women as role conflict (Lopata 1995) and is a duality that does not challenge men in the same way. While there has historically

3 Coser (1975) makes a similar argument.
been a negative connotation to the term “career woman,” there is no similar negativity
associated with career men (Coser 1974).

With the movement of more women into career paths, tensions have built up over the past two decades between traditionally domestic full-time housekeepers and nontraditional nondomestic career women. Luker (1984) and Gerson (1985) both argue that traditionally domestic women understandably want to keep the status quo since they gain their greatest sense of worth and identity through their full-time attention on their children and household responsibilities. Gerson (1985) contented that nondomestic women, in contrast to traditionally domestic women push for changes in both their personal lives and the existing social structure:

Whether they opted for childlessness or attempted to combine work and motherhood, women committed to nondomestic paths made choices that promote social change far beyond the scope of their private lives. Those who decided to forgo childbearing altogether represent more than a challenge to the essential rationale for the traditional family and women’s traditional place in the social order, although this in itself would be enough. Their choice for career over motherhood also contributes to the growing pressure to achieve sexual equality at the workplace. Those who planned to combine motherhood with career also promoted the forces of social change. To make this option viable, they pushed for structural and ideological changes both in the workplace and at home that would ease their parenting responsibilities and reduce work penalties that motherhood threatened to entail. They thus joined their childless counterparts in forging new, if fragile and only dimly perceived, pathways for adult women. As long as the social forces that led these women away from domesticity persist, this group will also persist in its efforts to remove the obstacles that continue to block nontraditional paths. (P. 125-126)

Threatened by the structural changes that call into question the ideological primacy of family life, domestically oriented women hold tight to their ideals about gender role separation and the importance of full-time motherhood (Gerson 1985; Luker 1984).
Whereas nondomestically oriented women tend to push for equal rights and feminist issues, traditional domestically oriented women have resisted feminist initiatives such as the Equal Rights Amendment and reproductive freedoms such as abortion and birth control.

The demographic and structural changes that have been taking place over the past couple of decades are important to keep in mind as the contextual backdrop to understanding the shifts in the meaning of childlessness in our contemporary culture. However, before I summarize the contemporary meaning of childlessness based on my research findings, I need to step back a moment from my line of argument and acknowledge the methodological limitations of this study.

A Note on the Research Limitations

Two main research questions guided this project. First, I was interested in knowing what social roles are attributed to women who do not assume the role of mother. Secondly, I wanted to learn more about the cultural meaning of childlessness in contemporary American society. In order to begin to answer these research questions, I have completed a thematic analysis of 67 popular films released by Hollywood between the years of 1980 and 1996. I need to stress that my thematic analysis of popular films should be taken as a first step in answering these questions. This research project was undertaken with the knowledge that the findings would be considered preliminary and exploratory in nature. While I believe that the analysis of popular films worked well to begin understanding the complexity of the cultural meaning of childlessness, there are a few concerns or limitations that should be stated. The first limitation of the study is that
little can be stated about class and racial differences among childless women. The majority of the films focused on the lives of white women and only a few of the films gave representations of black childless women. None of the films touched on any other racial minority group. Therefore the conclusions drawn throughout this study need to be viewed in light of the fact that the study is primarily about representations of white childlessness. Additionally, since the films also concentrated on middle and upper class women, I am reluctant to draw conclusions about differences among childless women based on their social class standing. Women’s reasons for their childlessness status cut across social class lines. Since traditional, transitional, transformative, and traditional life-course women were found among all of the social classes of the films, the only tentative conclusion I am willing to make based on social class is that the issues and concerns about childlessness and motherhood were shown to affect women of all social classes represented in the films. 

A joint limitation and strength of this research is that I am presenting my reading and my interpretation of the films. This is a limitation because I am unable to talk about how the messages are an interactive process with childless women. I cannot make statements about how these films are received by childless women in general. While I myself am a childless woman, my reading and the ways in which I have interacted with these films during previous casual viewings is not enough to make any statements about the reception of the films. How I viewed these films as a childless lay person differed substantially from how I viewed and read them while working as a social researcher. In

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4 Poverty stricken childless women were not found in any of the films, so lower and under class women cannot be included in this tentative conclusion.
other words, I cannot guarantee that what I have identified as important in these films during the research process is what childless women viewing these films on a casual basis would see. The single reading of the films is also a methodological limitation because it filters out potentially important information. My reading of the films was guided by my theoretical orientation and my research questions. I placed childlessness and motherhood at the center of my focus. In doing so, I had to filter out other possible readings of the films. There are many issues raised in these films that simply were not relevant to my questions about childlessness.

At the same time that a single reading of the films is a methodological limitation, I also see this as a strength of the study. This study represents the first time that any researcher has systematically analyzed a specific sample of cultural artifacts to look at the assumptions of the meaning of childlessness. By bringing to the forefront of films what are unquestioned and even unconscious social roles and personality traits of the childless characters, I believe that I have been able to point to some underlying tensions and ideas about childless women. I specifically chose to work with films because they are not designed to prescribe social behavior but instead reflect common understandings or stereotypes of social groups. In other words, the films helped me build a role-image of childless women. Through this role image, I have been able to show the ambiguity with which people view childless women. Childless characters are constructed as fundamentally different in personality and gender traits than mothers, and they are believed to have a limited social role in the lives of children. Of course, these conclusions are based on 67 films released by Hollywood between the years of 1980 and 1996. My hope is that
this research will spark other studies of alternative cultural artifacts. Much work needs to be completed to study childless women in cultural mediums such as television dramas, sitcoms, and soap-operas. Newspaper articles, popular periodicals, social policy initiatives, art, musical lyrics, novels, and guidebooks for childless women/couples are only a few of the cultural mediums that might be appropriate for future research project. While my research project is limited to popular Hollywood films, there are a number of interesting findings regarding the social roles available to childless women and the contemporary meanings of childlessness. Having covered the methodological limitations, I conclude this research project with an overview of my research findings and the implications for these findings.

The Contemporary Field of Meanings of Childlessness

The significance of the changes in women's fertility, marriage, and work patterns over the past few decades, particularly as they relate to the meanings of childlessness, is that perhaps for the first time in American history, the primacy of domestic roles as central to women's lives has been seriously challenged to the point where women, as a social category, may never return to the confines of the family institution as their sole source of identification. Women are a more diverse social category than ever before and can choose in the late twentieth century from at least four different life-style patterns including full-time homemaking, interrupted or part-time work, combining work and motherhood, or childlessness and career (Gerson 1985; Luker 1984). While many women still develop their self-identity with motherhood as the central role (McMahon 1995), other women

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5 Interestingly though, Gerson and Luker do not allow for the classification of childless women who work as full-time homemakers without children.
have moved away from the domestic sphere and entered a new realm of nondomestic pathways (Gerson 1985).

I remarked at the start of this book that this is certainly not the first time that many of the films of my study have been analyzed by film critics or social scientists. One question I raised is whether there was an over-riding negative image of the childless woman, particularly the single woman, as Faludi (1991) suggests in her book Backlash. An alternative possibility is that there are competing and contradictory ideologies that construct both good and bad childlessness.6 Certainly in this sample there are a number of very negative images of childless women. Suzanna Danuta Walters (1991 and 1995) has suggested that these images are so damaging to women’s sense of identity that they represent a turn from the feminist era to a postfeminist era in which women are once again subtly and not so subtly being drawn back into the domestic sphere and chastised for any assertion of independence.7 I would agree that there are postfeminist images, particularly in the films mentioned by Walters (i.e. Fatal Attraction, Presumed Innocent, and The Hand that Rocks the Cradle). However, as I have been suggesting throughout this study, the postfeminist cultural backlash against feminist views has also been met with positive portrayals of childless women and at times are reflected within the same individual character. Alex Forrest of Fatal Attraction, for example, embodies on the one hand the ideal of personal freedom and uninhibited sexual expression, but on the other hand, is one

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6 Douglas (1995) suggested that all media constructs of women are a source of contradictory images that serve as a source of confusion for women who look to cultural objects for cues about femininity and self-identification.

7 See also Dow (1996) for a discussion of postfeminism in television images and Budgeon and Currie (1995) for a discussion of postfeminism in fashion magazines.
of the most damaging and damning cultural icons that defines the single career woman. The themes presented throughout this study show the complexity of the issues associated with contemporary women, their fertility intentions, and their positions on work/career.

Keeping in mind the structural and demographic changes and coupling them with the ideological struggles regarding ideal mothering techniques and women's right to careerism, the ambiguous field of meanings of childlessness played out in contemporary cultural objects such as the films of this study is understandable. What we have seen in the analysis presented in the past four chapters is a combination of feminist messages, postfeminist messages, pronatalism, and antinatalism. Unlike past historical time periods that could be characterized by one overriding dominant theme regarding the meaning of childlessness (May 1995), contemporary America seems to be struggling with the meaning of women without children. In a time of environmental concerns, population over-growth, economic strain associated with raising children, and a cultural emphasis on personal choice and individualism, it would seem only natural that childlessness be met with less hostility than previous historic epochs. But at the same time that there seems to be a weakening of the stigma associated with childlessness, "neo-family-values campaigns" of political figures (such as Pat Buchanan, Jerry Falwell, and Dan Quayle) and political groups (such as Right-wing Republicans, fundamentalist Christian groups, anti-feminist groups, anti-homosexual groups, and right to life advocates) implicitly, if not explicitly, attack any individual who does not adhere to the traditional framework of the nuclear

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8 I am not suggesting that the images and messages in films prescribe personal behavior as a women's magazines are intended, but instead suggest that films show the complexity of the dimensions of women's lives in American culture.
family (Stacey 1996). The contradictory and competing themes found in these films point to the many dimensions of women’s lives in late twentieth century America. Women are by no means a homogenous group: they differ in terms of their family intention and degree of domesticity; they differ in their degree of commitment to either work or a career; and they differ in their interpersonal relationships. Molly Haskell (1987) spoke of the changing images of women from specific and recognizable type casts to the more modern field of choices available to women:

Twenty years ago, a woman was either married or she wasn’t; if she was, she had children; if she wasn’t, she was a “spinsters.” Now the spectrum of choices and gradations is endless and woman is in a bewildering world of constantly shifting alliances: she may be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, repressed, or undetermined; she may be married with children and a job, but does she see herself as a working mother or as a career woman with a family? There’s at least a 50 percent chance she’s without a mate, but is it temporary and how does she feel about her state of aloneness? Weak or strong? She may be living with a Significant Other or with an Insignificant Other. Where do her loyalties lie? (P. 393)

To summarize the field of meanings of childlessness in contemporary American culture, I suggest that childlessness is in an ambiguous state and has both positive meanings and negative meanings. Through the examination of the themes of the sixty-seven films viewed in this study, I propose that there is no one meaning of childlessness, but a field of meanings of childlessness emerging as our culture struggles with social and demographic

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9 Additionally, women differ in terms of their social class and race, however, the films that receive the greatest amount of attention in our culture (have the largest box office sales) are films, for the most part, about white middle to upper class women. So while these films are playing out the tensions that meet modern white middle and upper class women on a daily basis as they develop and redefine their self-identity, these films do little to tease out the tensions that women of color and lower or working class women face. The films have provided us with a way to understand the field of meanings associated with white middle and upper class childlessness.
changes. Within this field of meanings, several issues are key in understanding the cultural ambivalence about childless women. The following five issues are elaborated upon below:

1. The possible disappearance or weakening of the spinster and old maid image that defined unmarried childless women particularly over the age of thirty.

2. An ambivalence about single childless women and their role in social life.

3. The dichotomization of women into two distinct social groupings, mothers or future mothers and nonmothers.

4. Ambivalence about career women with the distinction that career women are childless women without domestic responsibilities.

5. Married childless women are incapable of properly performing the role of wife.

Beyond Spinsterhood

Perhaps the greatest triumph in trying to overcome the stigma of childlessness and reshape more positive images for a contemporary understanding of living without one’s own children is the disappearance of the terms spinster and old maid in modern film and the challenge to the negative spinster images. Throughout the history of twentieth century films, the spinster image has appeared time and again (Haskell 1987). The spinster has been a specific role type of women just as women have performed the roles of mother, virgin, vamp, she-devil, and sex kitten in films. There was no mistaking the spinsters of earlier films because they were specifically referred to as a spinster or old maid. Examples of the derogatory use of old maid and spinster are found in numerous films including Alfred Hitchcock’s 1941 film Suspicion. In this film, actress Joan Fontaine was constructed as an independent but socially awkward woman who was sexually repressed and unsure of her potential beauty. Fontaine’s family worried about the possibility of her
becoming a spinster because of her total lack of social engagements with men.

Fortunately for Fontaine, playboy bachelor Cary Grant proposed marriage to Fontaine and rescued her from the perils of spinsterhood. An interesting point of this film is that it constructed the spinster woman as eternally bound to the self-identification of spinster. Fontaine was unable to believe that a dashing man such as Grant could possibly love her, and she grew suspicious that he was planning to kill her for her money. Katharine Hepburn's father in the 1940 film The Philadelphia Story was also concerned about his daughter's potential spinsterhood. Despite Hepburn's impending marriage ceremony scheduled for the following day, her father warned her that her icy personality would eventually condemn her to a life of spinsterhood. The fear of the spinsterhood was put to rest when Hepburn re-married Cary Grant in the final scene of the film.

Spinsters continued on the screen with perhaps the most famous of all, Katharine Hepburn's character Rosie in the 1951 film The African Queen. Rosie's brother committed himself to missionary work and decided to take his spinster sister along with him. He felt that a “woman of her sorts” could be made most useful through God's work. Rosie dutifully accompanied her brother and committed the next ten years of her life to his missionary work in Central Africa. Viewers of this film had no trouble identifying Rosie as an aging spinster, particularly when Charlie (Humphrey Bogart) called her a, “crazy song singing skitty old maid.” Each time someone referred to Rosie as an old maid, her reaction was deep emotional pain and disappointment. The film does end on a positive note when this sexually repressed woman was finally able to find love and happiness in the arms of her new husband Charlie.
Haskell (1987) noted that the 1960s saw a number of spinsters in films such as *Rachel, Rachel, A Cold Day in the Park, Faces, and The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. These women were all sexually repressed and physically unglamorous. Molly Haskell questions why Hollywood’s leading bachelors such as Jimmy Stewart, Cary Grant, and Fred Astaire could age throughout several decades and still be presented as handsome or dashing men to women half their age. Aging spinsters, “on the other hand, must look as pinched and bloodless as a prune, the objective correlative of her unlubricated vagina. It is rare that a frigid woman is permitted...to be beautiful and vital” (1987:339). The films of the 1980s and 1990s showed a qualitative difference in the representation of childless women. In contrast to the blatant use of the terms spinster and old maid in Hollywood films from the 1920s through the 1970s to describe single women who were reaching thirty and beyond, the films in this sample dropped the use of the terms spinster and old maid altogether. In addition to the disappearance of the terms spinster and old maid, new vibrant and sexually free women have begun to challenge the historical notion of the repressed and frigid old maid. Characters played by women such as Sophia Loren, Ann-Margret, Goldie Hawn, and to a lesser extent Olympia Dukakis, embraced their post-fifty years with nothing short of youthful vitality, sexual freedom, and a determination to continue to live a productive life.

Films that might once have described their aging single female characters negatively as spinsters turned away from this image and focus on independence, personal choice, and self-identification from career. In the 1996 film *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, we are shown a character that twenty or thirty years ago would have been referred to as...
the spinster sister. In fact, Barbara Streisand's character Rose embodied many of the qualities that typified the historical spinster. Rose lived with her aging mother, and despite the fact that her mother was in perfectly fine health, Rose felt a need to cook and care for her. Although Rose was the ugly duckling sister, she was not portrayed as desperate for love and affection. When given the opportunity to date a less than desirable man, Rose turned him down repeatedly choosing instead to wait for handsome true love to walk through the door. At no time in the film was Rose referred to as a spinster, but instead she told her Columbia University students that she represented the literary character of the handmaiden - always the bridesmaid, never the bride. While she might have chosen the term spinster, she clearly identifies herself as a handmaiden.

The films *Crimes of the Heart* and *Frankie and Johnny* hint at spinsterhood for single infertile women, but again the films never come out and call either woman a spinster or old maid. While the infertile single women were defined by loneliness and unhappiness, transformative women who chose their childlessness most often embraced their singlehood and looked to nondomestic alternatives for their positive self-identification. Instead of wallowing in self pity and doubt, Savannah Jackson (Whitney Houston) of *Waiting to Exhale* forcefully told her mother that despite her lack of domestic roles in life, she was a good woman with a good life. Savannah built her self-identity through her friendships, her career, and her interests that were outside of the domestic sphere. The possibility of women's economic independence gained through the feminist movement is shown in many of these films, and single over-thirty women were no longer portrayed as dependent upon family members for home, finances, or self-identification.
Ambivalence about Singlehood

The films of the 1980s and 1990s show ambivalence about single woman's position in society. Single women were no longer depicted as economically dependent spinsters keeping house for aging parents, ailing siblings, or a community of orphans, indigents, and sinners. The single childless women of the late twentieth century were typified by economic independence, individualism, career ambition, and intelligence. For the most part, single women were working women. While some films depicted women with independence, intelligence, and ambition as desirable traits (e.g. American President, Congo, In the Line of Fire, Eraser) other films chastised single women for maintaining their commitment to independence and career (e.g. Absence of Malice, Black Widow, and Disclosure). To some extent, the modern single woman's emphasis on independence and career is similar to the nineteenth century predecessor, the feared hermaphrodites.¹⁰

However, the hermaphrodite spinsters were characterized by their love of women and were often feared to be lesbians because of their close association with female friends. A difference between the portrays of modern single women and their predecessors of one hundred years ago is that modern single childless women are often found in competition with other women. Modern women compete for the love of the same man or fight for a few precious positions of power within the corporate world. However, at the same time that some single women are determined to strike down their female enemies, other single women are shown to be involved in deeply committed and caring female friendships.

¹⁰ Hermaphrodites were discussed in Chapter 3. This was a classification used to describe women who were biologically female, but held masculine personality traits such as independence, intelligence, ambition, and love of women.

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Another source of ambivalence with single childless women was their open sexuality and personal freedom. While some sexual single childless women represented a second chance in life for washed up men, other single childless women and their sexuality represented a threat to the modern nuclear family. The only unifying feature of single women was that their lives were almost always devoid of social roles that involved children. Not only are these women childless in term of their own biological offspring, but they led lives without involvement in anyone else’s children’s lives. This distinct break from children’s lives leads us to the next section on the dichotomization of women.

The Dichotomization of Women: Mother and Nonmothers

One thing is for certain in these films, women are either mothers or they are nonmothers. There is little cross-over between the two categories. A woman is either a mother (or future mother) or she is a nonmother with no maternal characteristics. Not only are the women dichotomized in terms of personal characteristics, but women who are childless and women who are mothers are not shown associating with each other in close personal friendships. With the exception of the women in *Waiting to Exhale* who were united in female camaraderie against irresponsible male suitors and the two friends of *Beaches* who were brought back together by a pregnancy, childless women and mothers lived in separate worlds. Additionally, childless women and mothers were often portrayed in direct competition with one another with the childless woman most often the threat to the mother of the film.

The dichotomization of women in friendship groupings as either mothers or nonmothers was only one of the many ways in which the films of this sample made clear
distinctions between diametrically opposed mother and nonmothers. Mothers were
typically portrayed as selfless, caring, committed women who placed family at the center
of their lives. Mothers were also sexually repressive women who had long since moved
out of the realm of feminine sexuality and replaced that sexuality with a sort of maternal a-
sexuality. In contrast, childless women were often portrayed as motivated career women
who sought personal identification through their career accomplishments. These
nondomestic women were specifically set apart from the world of mothers through
behavioral characteristics and personality traits that made them less than ideal candidates
for motherhood. Instead of being selfless caring women, the images of childless women
were often centered around selfishness, cold-heartedness, mental instability, uninhibited
sexual expression, and the film typification of the femme fatale. Again, however, we are
faced with a contradiction in representation. Single childless women are meant in many of
the films, to be selfish and cold-hearted, but these images are only part of the picture. In
other films, a single childless woman’s sense of warmth, freedom, and sexuality were
positive influences on the lives of washed-up men. For some men, the childless women
represented an awakening or rebirth. Again, we are presented with a point of ambivalence
about childless women. Is their uninhibited sexuality some to be valued or feared?

Career Women: Sometimes Good, Sometimes Bad, But Always Childless

In her book Women’s Film and Female Experience: 1940-1950, Andrea Walsh
(1984) wrote about the contradictory images of career women in the comedies of the
1940s. During the 1940s, Hollywood had produced some of the most progressive feminist
career films of all times including His Girl Friday, Adam’s Rib, and Woman of the Year.
Each of these films portrayed independent, professionally competent women who excelled in male professional work environments. Walsh raised the question of why Hollywood had given us these career heroines at the same time that it also produced films such as *Lady in the Dark* in which the career woman eventually came to realize she had given up her desired femininity in pursuit of her executive position. With the war in Europe, more women entered the work force and were enjoying their new found positions that had historically been dominated by men. American women’s participation in the wartime labor force was met with both hopes and fears, and Walsh reasoned that the career comedy films of the 1940s reflected the tensions that prevailed in American society. The films played out the tensions between women’s traditional domesticity, housekeeping, and submission, and their new found economic independence and personal achievement. In similar fashion, the career films of the 1980s and 1990s represent the complexity of the situation of America’s struggle with similar questions about women’s labor force participation. Career women were shown as both competent and incompetent as well as masculinized and feminine. The successful career women could be either single or married, but those who were married had to achieve professional success at the expense of their marital relationships. More importantly, career women were almost always childless women. Hollywood has continued to reinforce the dichotomization of mothers and nonmothers through the portrayal of nonmothers as career women and mothers as homemakers. Mothers who did seek professional positions such as lawyers participated in the labor force at most on a part-time basis and placed family responsibilities above professional

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11 Hollywood has historically made women chose between career and marriage and most often women have chosen marriage (Haskell 1987).
obligations. Mothers who failed to place their family responsibilities above all else could push their children to psychological dependency upon alcohol or drugs (*Postcards from the Edge*). In contrast to motherhood, childlessness is strongly associated with professional ambition and career advancement. The irony of this theme is that real life childless women (and men for that matter) talk about the freedom to pursue economic and professional downward mobility in pursuit of personal happiness over financial success (Burgwyn 1981; Veevers 1980). At no time in any of these films is this theme developed in childless characters. Every professional childless woman portrayed in these Hollywood films was caught up in the race for professional and financial success.

**Incompatibility Between Wife and Childlessness**

So far I discussed how the themes identified in these films represent an ambivalence about many aspects of the meaning of childlessness. Childless single women represent both a threat to the family and a desired personal freedom. Childless women's sexuality is both revered and feared. The spinster image of the past has given way to characters that represent middle and late age singlehood as a desirable state. However at the same time that women living in singlehood embraced their freedom, they also sought marital relationships. The one social role in which there seems to be consensus in the thematic representation of childless women is when they are portrayed as wives. Childless women are unmistakably bad wives. Childless wives hold their career ambitions above their marital relationships and therefore place these marriages in jeopardy. Their marriages often fail miserably and can be characterized by hatred, conflict, and even murder. Within the Hollywood film industry, there is a lack of stories about long-standing
happy childless marriages, and instead, films present childless wives in the roles such as the black widow who seeks to kill her husband. In the past Hollywood did have a number of films which dealt with divorced childless couples (Cavell 1981); however, these couples were often younger than the more recent Hollywood match-ups, and more importantly, they were characterized by marital reconciliation at the end of the film (see for example *The Awful Truth*, *His Girl Friday*, and *The Philadelphia Story*). Whereas childless marriages of earlier Hollywood films may have gone through rocky roads and even divorce, the relationships were typically given a second chance to pursue happiness (Cavell 1981; Tyler May 1980). The idea of the second chance gave the marriages a sense of romance and excitement that is missing in the portrayals of childless marriages of this sample. Taken as a whole, the films in this sample were quite clear in stating that childless women are incapable of properly performing the role of wife.

Some Implications for the Meanings of Childlessness

The conflicting themes of the films in this sample play out America’s struggle with changing population demographics and women’s place in the paid labor force. A characteristic of the demographic shifts of the late twentieth century has been women’s ability to more confidently control their reproduction than in past historical epochs. As stated throughout this study, childless women are not a homogenous social category. Some women are childless by choice and consider themselves child-free while other women are childless due to infertility problems. Still other childless women are in a state of fertility ambivalence and continually push off the decision to have or not have children until a future date. It seems that as a society we are struggling with the meaning of
childlessness/childfree living. The assumption that a woman without children is an unfortunate soul whose barren womb can produce no offspring has been seriously challenged by the growing number of women who consciously choose a life without children. Now more than ever before in history, women and their partners can choose to live a life free from child bearing and rearing responsibilities. America’s struggle with the duality of childlessness and childfree living has played out in the themes identified in this study. On the one hand, there are many freedoms that come with rejecting the responsibilities of domestic life. These freedoms are often expressed by childless individuals during in-depth qualitative interviews. Childfree living means the freedom to live one’s life as personally seen fit. It means strong, uninterrupted intimacy between loving partners. Childfree living makes education attainment and career aspirations easier to accomplish. To many people these personal freedoms have become more important than the rocky road of child bearing and rearing. On the other hand, since marriage and parenthood are also valued in this society, there are competing representations of childfree living. Many people believe that children, even more so than religion, bring true meaning to an individual’s existence (McMahon 1995). Believing that children provide a spiritual side of life, it is only natural that these people conclude that childless people, and childfree people in particular, will have nothing to show for themselves at the end of their life. The freedoms associated with childlessness are reconstructed as selfishness. Childfree people are assumed to be self-centered people in pursuit of personal gain and financial freedom.

12 Though the fact that as a society we still talk of nonmothers as childless women points to the fact that motherhood is still the assumed role of women. There has been no formal word to describe women who have chosen a life of childfree living.
Even though they compete with some positive representations of childless women, negative representations of childless women and the distinct dichotomization of women as mothers and nonmothers supports the cultural belief that childless women cannot and do not want to be responsible for children. The privatization of the nuclear family, coupled with the modern intensive parenting ideology have helped to keep childless women and the meaning of childlessness, in part, marginalized in our society. The reluctance to view childless women as positive influences to children further dichotomizes women into categories of mothers and nonmothers, distinct types of women with distinct and opposite roles in the lives of children.
<table>
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<th>Year</th>
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<th>Childless Character(s)</th>
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<td>1980</td>
<td>Nine to Five</td>
<td>Judy Bernily and Doralee Rhoades</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Absence of Malice</td>
<td>Megan Carter</td>
</tr>
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<td>1981</td>
<td>Arthur</td>
<td>Linda Morilla</td>
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<td>1982</td>
<td>Best Friends</td>
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<td>1982</td>
<td>Best Little Whore House in Texas</td>
<td>Miss Mona Stangely</td>
</tr>
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<td>1983</td>
<td>Sudden Impact</td>
<td>Jennifer Spencer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>All of Me</td>
<td>Edwina Cutwater</td>
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<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Romancing the Stone</td>
<td>Joan Wilder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Agnes of God</td>
<td>Dr. Martha Livingston</td>
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<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Prizzi's Honor</td>
<td>Irene Walker</td>
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<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Black Widow</td>
<td>Catharine and Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Crimes of the Heart</td>
<td>Lenny and Meg MaGrath</td>
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<td>1986</td>
<td>Ruthless People</td>
<td>Barbara Stone</td>
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<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Baby Boom</td>
<td>J.C. Wiatt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Blind Date</td>
<td>Nadia Gates</td>
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<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Fatal Attraction</td>
<td>Alex Forrest</td>
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<td>1987</td>
<td>Moonstruck</td>
<td>Loretta Castorini</td>
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<td>1987</td>
<td>Outrageous Fortune</td>
<td>Lauren Ames and Sandy Brozinski</td>
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<td>1987</td>
<td>Overboard</td>
<td>Joanna Stayton/Annie Proffitt</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>Beaches</td>
<td>CC Bloom</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>Big Business</td>
<td>Sadie and Rose Radliff and Rose Shelton</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>Bull Durham</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>A Fish Called Wanda</td>
<td>Wanda Gershwitz</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>Gorillas in the Mist</td>
<td>Dian Fossey</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>Working Girl</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>The Abyss</td>
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<td>1989</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>Bird on a Wire</td>
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<td>Green Card</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>Misery</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>Postcards from the Edge</td>
<td>Suzanne Vale</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>Presumed Innocent</td>
<td>Caroline Polhemus</td>
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### Appendix Table A.1: Listing of the 75 Childless Women Characters (Continued)

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<td>Thelma and Louise</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Basic Instinct</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Batman Returns</td>
<td>Selina Kyle/Catwoman</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Death Becomes Her</td>
<td>Madeline Ashton and Helen Sharp</td>
</tr>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>The Hand that Rocks the Cradle</td>
<td>Peyton Flanders</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Housesitter</td>
<td>Gwen</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Medicine Man</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Sister Act</td>
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<td>Karen Carr</td>
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<td>Dave</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>Grumpy Old Men</td>
<td>Ariel Truax</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>In the Line of Fire</td>
<td>Lilly Raines</td>
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<td>Malice</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>Sliver</td>
<td>Carly Norris</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>Disclosure</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>Wolf</td>
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<td>American President</td>
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<td>Congo</td>
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<td>Up Close and Personal</td>
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## Appendix Table B.1: Percent of Ever-Married Childless Women by Age, 1950 - 1994

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<td>13.4</td>
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<td>1980</td>
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Appendix Figure B.1: Percent of Ever-Married Childless Women by Year for Selected Age Groups, 1950 - 1994


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<td>26.4</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>35.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34 years</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>19.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>35-39 years</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>12.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>40-44 years</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54 years</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64 years</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20-24 years</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>80.7</td>
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<td>25-29 years</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>38.7</td>
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<td>51.0</td>
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<td>30-34 years</td>
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<td>11.1</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>20.8</td>
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<td>28.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>35-39 years</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>20.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>40-44 years</td>
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<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>14.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>45-54 years</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
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<td>7.8</td>
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<td>5.3</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Appendix Figure B.2: Median Age at First Marriage by Year, 1950 - 1990

Appendix Figure B.3: Live Births Per 1,000 Population, 1950 - 1994

Births Per 1,000 Population by Year

Appendix Table B.3: Educational Attainment by Sex, 1960 - 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>7.1</td>
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<td>1970</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>8.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>67.3</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>74.4</td>
<td>73.5</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>26.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>81.9</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>21.4</td>
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Appendix Table B.4: Employment Status of Married and Single Mothers, 1960 - 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Children Under 6</th>
<th>Children 6 to 17</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>53.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>48.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>63.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Appendix Table B.5: Women in the Labor Force - Female Percentages of Total Number in Specific Occupations, 1972 - 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountants</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>52.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyers/Judges</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicians/Dentists</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered Nurse</td>
<td>97.6</td>
<td>96.8</td>
<td>95.8</td>
<td>94.3</td>
<td>93.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>College/University Professors</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, Except College/University</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>70.9</td>
<td>73.4</td>
<td>74.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management and Executives</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>42.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>49.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clerical and Administrative</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>79.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled Craft</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile Operator</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>73.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farming Management/Administrative</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The Abyss (1989, Twentieth Century Fox). Directed and written by James Cameron; photographed by Mikael Salomon; music by Alan Silvestri; with Ed Harris, Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio, and Michael Biehn.


All of Me (1984, King Road Productions). Directed by Carl Reiner; written by Phil Robinson; photographed by Richard Kline; music by Patrick Williams; with Steve Martin, Lily Tomlin, Victoria Tennant, Richard Libertini, Jason Bernard, and Madolyn Smith.


Arthur (1981, Orion). Directed and written by Steve Gordon; photographed by Fred Schuller; music by Burt Bacharach; with Dudley Moore, Liza Minnelli, and John Gielgud.


Batman Returns (1992, Warner Brothers Co.). Directed by Tim Burton; written by Daniel Walters and Sam Hamm; photographed by Stefan Czapsky; music by Danny Elfman; with Michael Keaton, Danny DeVito, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Christopher Walken.

Beaches (1988, Touchstone Pictures). Directed by Garry Marshall; screenplay by Mary Agnes Donoghue; based on the novel by Iris Rainer Dart; photographed by Dante Spinotti; music by Georges Delerue; with Bette Midler, Barbara Hershey, John Heard, Spalding Gray, James Read, and Lainie Kazan.

Best Friends (1982, Warner Home Video). Directed by Norman Jewison; written by Valerie Curtin and Barry Levinson; photographed by Jordan Cronenweth; music by
Michel Legrand and Alan and Marilyn Bergman; with Burt Reynolds, Goldie Hawn, Jessica Tandy, Barnard Hughes, Audra Lindley, Keenan Wynn, and Ron Silver.


*Bird on a Wire* (1990, Universal Pictures). Directed by John Badham; written by David Seltzer, Louis Venosta, and Eric Lerner; photographed by Robert Primes; music by Hans Zimmer; with Mel Gibson, Goldie Hawn, David Carradine, and Joan Severance.


*Bull Durham* (1988, Orion). Directed and written by Ron Shelton; photographed by Bobby Byrne; music by Michael Convertino; with Kevin Costner, Susan Sarandon, Tim Robbins, Trey Wilson, and Robert Wuhl.


*Crimes of the Heart* (1986, Lorimar). Directed by Bruce Beresford; written by Beth Henley; photographed by Dante Spinotti; music by Georges Delerue; with Diane Keaton, Jessica Lange, Sissy Spacek, Tess Harper, David Carpenter, Hurd Hatfield, and Sam Shepard.


Death Becomes Her (1992, Universal Pictures). Directed by Robert Zemeckis; written by Martin Donovan and David Koepp; photographed by Dean Cundey, A.S.C.; music by Alan Silvestri; with Meryl Streep, Bruce Willis, Goldie Hawn, and Isabella Rossellini.


Fatal Attraction (1987, Paramount Pictures). Directed by Adrian Lyne; written by James Dearden; photographed by Howard Atherton; music by Maurice Jarre; with Michael Douglas, Glenn Close, and Anne Archer.

The First Wives Club (1996, Paramount Pictures). Directed by Hugh Wilson; screenplay by Robert Harling; based on the novel by Olivia Goldsmith; photographed by Donald Thorin; music by Marc Shaiman; with Goldie Hawn, Diane Keaton, and Bette Midler.

A Fish Called Wanda (1988, MGM). Directed by Charles Crichton; written by John Cleese and Charles Crichton; photographed by Alan Hume, B.S.C.; music by John Du Prez; with John Cleese, Jamie Lee Curtis, Kevin Kline, and Michael Palin.

Forget Paris (1995, Columbia Pictures). Directed by Billy Crystal; written by Billy Crystal, Lowell Ganz, and Babaloo Mandel; photographed by Don Burgess; music by Marc Shaiman; with Billy Crystal and Debra Winger.

Frankie and Johnny (1991, Paramount Pictures). Directed by Garry Marshall; written by Terrence McNally; photographed by Dante Spinotti; music by Marvin Hamlisch; with Al Pacino, Michelle Pfeiffer, Hector Elizondo, and Kate Nelligan.

French Kiss (1995, Twentieth Century Fox). Director Lawrence Kasdan; written by Adam Brooks; photographed by Owen Roizman; music James Newton Howard; with Meg Ryan, Kevin Kline, and Timothy Hutton.
*Gorillas in the Mist* (1988, Universal Pictures). Directed by Michael Apted; written by Anna Hamilton Phelan and Tab Murphy; photographed by John Seale, A.C.S.; music by Maurice Jarre; with Sigourney Weaver, Bryan Brown, and Julie Harris.


*The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992, Hollywood Pictures). Directed by Curtis Hanson; written by Amanda Silver; photographed by Robert Elswit; music by Graeme Revell; with Annabella Sciorra, Rebecca De Mornay, Matt McCoy, and Ernie Hudson.

*Housesitter* (1992, Image Films Entertainment). Directed by Frank Oz; written by Mark Stein and Brian Grazer; photographed by John A. Alonzo, A.S.C.; music by Miles Goodman; with Steve Martin, Goldie Hawn, Dana Delany, Julie Harris, Donald Moffat, and Peter MacNicol.


*The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1996, TriStar Pictures). Directed by Barbra Streisand; written by Richard LaGravenese; photographed by Dante Spinotti, A.S.C. and Andrzej Bartkowiak; music by Marvin Hamlisch; with Barbra Streisand and Jeff Bridges.
Misery (1990, Castle Rock Entertainment). Directed by Rob Reiner; based on the novel by
Stephen King; screenplay by William Goldman; photographed by Barry Sonnenfeld;
music by Marc Shaiman; with James Caan, Kathy Bates, Frances Sternhagen, and
Richard Farnsworth.

Moonstruck (1987, MGM). Directed by Norman Jewison; written by John Patrick
Shanley; photographed by David Watkin; music by Dick Hyman; with Cher, Nicolas
Cage, Vincent Gardenia, Olympia Dukakis, and Danny Aiello.

Nine to Five (1980, Twentieth Century Fox). Directed by Collin Higgins; screenplay by
Collin Higgins and Patricia Resnick based on the story by Patricia Resnick;
photographed by Reynaldo Villalobos; music by Dolly Parton and Charles Fox; with
Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin, Dolly Parton and Dabney Coleman.

101 Dalmatians (1996, Walt Disney Pictures). Directed by Stephen Herek; screenplay by
John Hughes; photographed by Adrian Biddle, B.S.C.; music by Michael Kamen; with
Glenn Close, Jeff Daniels, Joely Richardson, and Joan Plowright.

Outbreak (1995, Warner Brothers). Directed by Wolfgang Petersen; written by Laurence
Dworet and Robert Roy Pool; photographed by Neil Travis, A.C.E.; music by James
Newton Howard; with Dustin Hoffman, Rene Russo, Morgan Freeman, Cuba Gooding,
Jr., Patrick Dempsey, Donald Sutherland, and Kevin Spacey.

Outrageous Fortune (1987, Touchstone Pictures). Directed by Arthur Hiller; written by
Leslie Dixon; photographed by David M. Walsh; music by Alan Silvestri; with Bette
Midler, Shelley Long, and Peter Coyote.

Overboard (1987, MGM). Directed by Garry Marshall; written by Leslie Dixon;
photographed by John A Alonzo, A.S.C.; music by Alan Silvestri; with Goldie Hawn
and Kurt Russell.

Postcards from the Edge (1990, Columbia Pictures). Directed by Mike Nichols; written by
Carrie Fisher; photographed by Michael Ballhaus, A.S.C.; music by Carly Simon; with
Meryl Streep, Shirley MacLaine, and Dennis Quaid.

Presumed Innocent (1990, Warner Brothers). Directed by Alan J. Pakula; based on the
novel by Scott Turow; screenplay by Frank Pierson and Alan J. Pakula; photographed
by Gordon Willis, A.S.C., music by John Williams; with Harrison Ford, Brian Dennehy,
Raul Julia, Bonnie Bedelia, Paul Winfield, and Greta Scacchi.

Prizzi's Honor (1985, Vestron Video). Directed by John Huston; written by Richard
Condon and Janet Roach; photographed by Andrzej Bartkowiak; music by Alex North;
with Jack Nicholson and Kathleen Turner.
Romancing the Stone (1984, Twentieth Century Fox). Directed by Robert Zemeckis; written by Diane Thomas; photographed by Dean Cundey; music by Alan Silvestri; with Michael Douglas, Kathleen Turner, and Danny DeVito.


Sister Act (1992, Touchstone Pictures). Directed by Emile Ardolino; written by Joseph Howard; photographed by Adam Greenberg, A.S.C.; music by Marc Shaiman; with Whoopi Goldberg, Maggie Smith, and Harvey Keitel.

Sister Act 2 (1993, Touchstone Pictures). Directed by Bill Duke; written by James Orr, Jim Cruickshank, and Judi Ann Mason; photographed by Oliver Wood; music by Marc Shaiman and Miles Goodman; with Whoopie Goldberg, Kathy Najimy, James Coburn, and Maggie Smith.


Steel Magnolias (1989, TriStar Pictures). Directed by Herbert Ross; written by Robert Harling; photographed by John A. Alonzo; music by Georges Delerue; with Sally Field, Dolly Parton, Shirley MacLaine, Daryl Hannah, Olympia Dukakis, and Julia Roberts.

Sudden Impact (1983, Warner Brothers). Directed by Clint Eastwood; screenplay by Joseph C. Stinson; story by Earl E. Smith and Charles B. Pierce; photographed by Bruce Surtees; music by Lalo Schifrin, with Clint Eastwood, and Sondra Locke.

Thelma and Louise (1991, MGM). Directed by Ridley Scott; written by Callie Khouri; photographed by Adrian Biddle, A.S.C.; music by Hans Zimmer; with Susan Sarandon, Geena Davis, and Harvey Keitel.


Unlawful Entry (1992, Fox Video). Directed by Jonathan Kaplan; written by Lewis Colick; photographed by Jamie Anderson; music by James Horner; with Kurt Russell, Ray Liotta, and Madeleine Stowe.


Waiting to Exhale (1995, Twentieth Century Fox). Directed by Forest Whitaker; written by Terry McMillan and Ronald Bass; photographed by Toyomichi Kurita; music by Kenneth “Babyface” Edmonds; with Whitney Houston, Angela Bassett, Lela Rochon, and Loretta Devine.

Wolf (1994, Columbia Pictures). Directed by Mike Nichols; written by Jim Harrison and Wesley Strick; photographed by Giuseppe Rotunno; music by Ennio Morricone; with Jack Nicholson, Michelle Pfeiffer, James Spader, Kate Nelligan, and Christopher Plummer.

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