

Dinner with the nuclear family, 1950

Introduction

The threat of invasion and subversion in the Cold War era led Americans to seek consensus and conformity, in politics and in culture. The rise of consumer culture in the same period, driven by an economic boom, a population surge, and suburban development gave rise to a middle class with certain expectations about material culture and behavior. In popular culture many television programs focused on the ideal nuclear family and, with more and more people purchasing televisions, this ideal spread throughout society. The shows reflected accepted social patterns and emphasized the traditional roles of fathers leaving the house to go to work and mothers staying home to raise children and take care of the house.

The instructional film *A Date with Your Family*, distributed in 1950 by Encyclopedia Britannica Films, portrays such family. The film focuses on a family dinner and instructs teenagers in acceptable manners and behavior. The narrator lists “dos and don’ts” for the meal, including appropriate attire and topics of conversation:

Don’t monopolize the conversation and go on and on without stopping, nothing destroys the charm of a meal more quickly. . . .

Don’t discuss unpleasant topics such as gruesome sights or sounds or unpleasant occurrences. This is a time of pleasure, of charming and relaxation, remember?

The film served as an educational tool for teenagers to learn the proper etiquette and values of the idealized American family. It is an example of how television and films of the 1950s reinforced and promoted specific traditional roles in a world that seemed increasingly out of control as national and international tensions increased.

To view the video, go to www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/fifties/resources/dinner-with-nuclear-family-1950 or <https://archive.org/details/DateWith1950>.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and view the short film *A Date with Your Family*. Then apply your knowledge of American history and the content of the video to answer the following questions.

Note: It may be helpful to ask a fine arts teacher, or someone familiar with cinema and television shows of the period, to assist with a discussion of this film.

1. What is meant by the term “nuclear family”?
2. What developments facing Americans led to the production of this film?
3. Who was the intended audience? Explain your answer.
4. How do the script, the direction, and the actors support the message of the film?

Extra Credit:

At least three popular television shows of the 1950s frequently addressed similar themes to those in *A Date with Your Family*: *Father Knows Best*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. Locate an example from one of the shows that demonstrates similar concerns about conformity, ideal behavior, or traditional family roles.