Chapter 20

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN AMERICAN LIFE

INTRODUCTION

The family is the most important institution upon earth. If the duties of father and mother were generally well discharged, there would be little of importance left for civil governments to take care of.

SAMUEL MAY

It is better to be a young June-bug than an old bird of paradise.

MARK TWAIN

The typewriter was the American woman's frontier.

DAVID M. POTTER

MANY OF THE CHAPTERS in this Conspectus deal with matters that, although they have a long history in American life and thought, are more or less confined to the period during which our country has been in existence, and some of them to our country's particular experience during that period. Other chapters treat matters that are not only perennial in the American experience but also in that of the human race throughout its history. The present chapter, which deals with the institution of the family, falls in the second group. It is for this reason that we put our emphasis, in the pages that follow, on the last three words in the title of the chapter. It is with the *special* role of the family in American life that we are here concerned, not with the family as an institution in all, or almost all, human societies.

In other words, we are not primarily concerned with the great, perennial, and vexing problems about the family that have engaged the attention of poets, philosophers, and social scientists for as long as men have written books and pursued controversies. We will not discuss (except, perhaps, glancingly), nor will we cite American authors on, the question regarding the fundamental nature and necessity of the family; the question of the relation between the family and the state; the basic question of the economics of the family; the question about the nature and purpose of the institution of marriage; the question, in its most general terms, of the role and position of women; and the question, once more in general terms, of the life of the family — what it is and what it should be. (The reader who

wishes to consult the leading Western authors on these great questions should turn to Ch. 26: FAMILY, in the Syntopicon of GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD.)

This chapter, instead, deals with certain special matters and questions regarding the family as they have developed during the last 200 years or so of our own history. Of particular interest, from this point of view, are four main topics: (1) the special character of the American family, with emphasis on its differences from, rather than its likenesses to, the family in other nations and cultures; (2) the special position or role of the old in America; (3) the special position or role of the young in America; and (4) the special character and role of the American woman. These are treated, in order, in what follows.

1. THE SPECIAL CHARACTER OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY

THAT THE AMERICAN FAMILY is different — often strikingly different — from the family in other contemporary Western countries has been often commented on, both by foreign visitors and by Americans themselves. This difference is far from simple, but it does not utterly defy analysis. The most obvious manifestation of the difference is this: in the United States, a person is what he is because of his own qualities, not those of his family. In other words, the norm, the ideal, is one of achievement rather than ascription or prescription.

There are other obvious differences as well, although their connections to the first one are not so obvious. The family is no longer in the United States, as it still is in other countries of the earth, an economic unit. It has almost no economic function, except in rural areas, and even there the old notion of the self-subsistent, independent family is fast disappearing. The norm today, if it is not the ideal, is for the father, either alone or with the cooperation of the mother, to gain the family's livelihood through work for a third party — usually a company or other institution — for which he is paid wages or a salary, or receives fees. The result is that it is no longer so necessary as it once was for families to live together. Perhaps it remains true that two can live more cheaply together than apart, and the need for parents to take care of their children is still there and largely unchanged, but the economic necessity of the family, as it may be called, has practically ceased to exist in our country. Not only men but women also can survive outside of a family, and, in fact, daughters now leave home almost as often, and almost as early, as sons traditionally have.

This means that the economic ties binding the family together have been significantly relaxed. Need is one of the strongest of all domestic ties, and without it the family is held together only by affection and what may be called obligation or responsibility. Affection, of course, can be a very strong tie, but it quite often is not. And the feeling of obligation — on the part of parents toward their children, and of children toward their parents — though it is admitted by most to be in some sense "natural," is often not very strong, either.

The upshot of all this is that American families seem to find it more difficult to remain together than families do, or did until very recently, in other countries. Not that family life has ever been easy for most people; centrifugal forces in families are at least as strong, in general, as centripetal ones, and the tensions of family life are hardly the discovery of twentieth-century America (witness, if nothing else, the great Greek tragedies, most of which are about family conflicts and disputes). In our country and time, however, one of the centripetal forces — economic necessity — has been removed. Our response to this is revealed, perhaps, in what Europeans some-

The Smithsonian Institution

"Saturday night, returning from labour"; lithograph by Kellogg, about 1850

times say is our excessive interest in, and concern for, love and romance. It is true enough that we celebrate romantic love, but it is also true that there is a very good reason for doing so. We make families out of love rather than need (though need, of course, also enters in), and since we want families to continue — for the sake of the children if for no other reason — we must perforce emphasize the importance of the one remaining tie that binds. However, the pressure on the marriage relation created by the emphasis on romantic love may account for, or at least be involved in, the high divorce rate in contemporary American life.

The above is a simple and rather too-rough analysis of a very complicated phenomenon. (Let us emphasize here, by the way — so that we need not repeat it on every page — that we are speaking of general trends rather than particular cases. Almost everyone knows of one or more families that break all the "rules": families that are still economic units, families that do not live together but retain strong family feeling, families that live together but have no family feeling, and so forth.)

Thus, though it is probably true that the family confers less status on its members in the United States than in any other country, there are nevertheless Families in America. The famous FFV — First Families of Virginia — are a case in point; so are the Rockefellers, the Vanderbilts, the Adamses, the Roosevelts, the Kennedys, and a fairly long list of other families with a longer or shorter history of eminence in one or another domain. This is partly because such families are known to have wealth, and wealth, in the United States as elsewhere, is a great conferrer of status. But Americans also recognize family traditions of service and achievement, and act accordingly. It is not always and in every way an advantage for a politician to bear the name Roosevelt, or Kennedy, or Stevenson, or Taft, but it is

some advantage, nevertheless; it helps him get his name in the paper, which politicians seem to want to be able to do. And everyone has had experience of the power and influence of Family — with a capital *F* — in his own life.

Of greater importance, perhaps, are two facts that seem to run parallel but that are actually opposed to one another. On the one hand, the same trend toward the dispersal of families that we see here today is to be observed in other modern industrial countries, which might seem to indicate that the change from a fundamentally rural and agricultural to a fundamentally urban and industrial economy is the heart of the matter. And there is probably something to this. At the same time, however, another fact, or set of facts, must be considered. Scholars have recently shown that the common practice on the part of American young people, which we take to be modern, of striking out on their own and forming their own "core" families (as distinguished from the more traditional European "extended" family that included three or more generations), is a very old one, and not exclusively modern at all. Thus Merle Curti, for example, in his study of Trempeleau County, in Wisconsin, was able to show that the majority of land taken up there in the middle of the nineteenth century — when the U.S. economy was still mainly agricultural — was by young men precisely twenty-one years old. Even then, the norm was, as we suppose it uniquely is today, to marry early and set up a family as soon as it was legally possible; in other words, the centrifugal forces have been dominant for at least a century and a half, not just a generation or two.

These and other facts that could be cited raise one question that cannot be ignored, not so much about the American family in particular as about the family in general. What is the "natural" or "instinctive" desire of men — and of women — with regard to families? Was the traditional "extended" family, with its congeries of internal, centripetal forces, on the one hand, and of social powers, exteriorly applied, on the other hand, an artificial institution that in some deep sense went against man's very "nature"? Something of the sort would seem to be implied if it is true, as the scholars suggest, that in America families have tended to disperse whenever they have had the opportunity.

In earlier times, that opportunity was given by the West — the vast reaches of open land that could solve family problems just as they solved so many social, economic, and political ones. The son who did not "get along with" his father or mother had a place to go, and, by and large, he went as long as there was land to go to. When the land ran out, however, he still did not have to stay home, for now the city beckoned, with its numerous opportunities for independence. The city, like the frontier, was, and perhaps still is, an effective solver of family problems. And the very size of our modern cities provides a bulwark against frustration. A change of job and a removal of only a few blocks can have the same beneficial effect as traveling halfway across the country in a Conestoga wagon.

Modern communications also have had their effect on the special character of American family life. It is normal enough nowadays for grandparents to live apart from their sons and daughters and their children, which seems to indicate that the centrifugal forces have triumphed. However, the telephone is usually at hand, and in many families it is often used, with the result that in some cases more words are actually passed between the generations than when they were living in the same house. Ease of travel has had similar effects. Grandparents who live a thousand or more miles away may make periodic and quite frequent visits that are often marked by a cheerfulness lacking in families that are per-

The Smithsonian Institution
"Married"; 1848 lithograph by Sarony and Major

manently contiguous. In other words, the definition of the "extended" family may have changed, not the thing itself. On the whole, modern families may communicate more often and more directly, and "live" together more happily, than they used to do in the crowded quarters that were the traditional norm.

We would not want to give the impression, however, by the recitation of such facts, that the modern American family is not any different, after all, from what it used to be, or from the family in other countries both today and yesterday. The most important social difference has already been mentioned and can be made clear by an example that is often mentioned by foreign visitors. In Europe and in more traditional cultures, one customarily asks a person, when he meets him, *who he is* — which means that one wants to find out what kind of family he comes from. In the United States one is inclined to ask a newcomer *what he does.* This difference in social usage is sometimes considered to be vulgar or otherwise undesirable by foreigners, and maybe it is, but it nevertheless seems to be of the essence of American life. What one has done, and is able to do, is after all of first importance in a wilderness. We cleared the wilderness long ago, but in some sense it is still here, in our hearts.

Many of the points touched on in the foregoing remarks are intimated, if not explicitly stated, by the authors gathered together in The Annals of America. Raoul de Roussy de Sales, for example, was particularly biting in his comments on love in America in 1938. "America appears to be the only country in the world," he declared, "where love is a national problem." Nowhere else "can one find a people devoting so much time and so much study to the question of the relationship between men and women. Nowhere else is there such concern about the fact that this relationship does not always make for perfect happiness." He observed that Hollywood movies give foreigners the inescapable impression that "the popular [American] mind likes to be entertained by the idea: (1) that love is the only reason why a man and a woman should get married; (2) that love is always wholesome, genuine, uplifting, and fresh, like a glass of Grade A milk; (3) that when, for some reason or other, it fails to keep you uplifted, wholesome, and fresh, the only thing to do is to begin all over again with another partner." American love songs give the same impression, he noted, adding that "whenever I go back to France and listen to the radio, I am always surprised to find that so many songs can be written on other subjects." He suggested, furthermore, that the American emphasis on romance is a little naïve. Men and women want to be happy everywhere, not only in America, "and, if possible, with the help of one another; but they learn very young [outside of America] that compromise is not synonymous with defeat."

A different aspect of the same problem — if problem it is — was pointed out by another visitor, Karl T. Griesinger, in 1858. "A man who marries in Germany knows not his bride alone," he wrote; he knows her whole family, "her whole life of descent unto the third or fourth generation. He knows how the girl was brought up, the nature of her environment and relations, and the circumstances under which she lives. He knows the condition of her father; all the intricacies of inheritance and reversion are arranged in advance. . . . How far different in America!" Griesinger went on to say. "The American is abrupt; he has no time to beat around the bush. He meets a girl in a shop, in the theater, at a ball, or in her parents' home. He needs a wife, thinks this one will do. He asks the question, she answers. The next day they are married and then proceed to inform the parents. The couple do not need to learn to know each other; that comes later."

This exaggerated description has nevertheless some truth in it; one is only surprised to find that this was happening more than a century ago. In the circumstances, it is clear enough why love is so important to Americans, and has been for a long time. Griesinger does not mention love, but, in default of more traditional arrangements, that must have been the reason for the linking of his imaginary couple. Only in America, according to this view, do a man and a woman decide to spend a lifetime together simply on the basis of those hot, sharp, sudden feelings that come to all of us "in a shop, in the theater, at a ball."

One may go backward or forward in American history and find people, particularly foreigners, saying similar things. W. L. George declared in 1921 that in America, love, particularly for women, is a "sacrament." Francis L. K. Hsu observed in 1953 that "in China the term 'love,' as it is used by Americans, has never been respectable. . . . This is not to say that Chinese culture denied or glossed over the existence of sexual attraction; quite the contrary, but the American way of love would seem to the Chinese to be almost indistinct from what they term licentiousness." And "boy meets girl" remains the best formula for American theatrical success.

Latterly, it must be admitted, Europe seems to have taken over our notion of romantic love — along with our love for cars, jazz, and Coca Cola. Many modern European movies are based on the boy-meets-girl formula, and European conservatives — not excluding the Russians — complain about their own youth as they used to complain about ours. At the same time, love is, of course, still a powerful force in this country. Romance remains the be-all and end-all; love, rather than marriage, is a sacrament; and that precious moment when one sees, "across a crowded room," the one and only "fated" mate seems to be, for many of us, the highest and richest moment of life.

That the American family has been changed — for the worse — by industrialism is another notion that often has been expressed both by visitors and by Americans themselves. "The little homogeneous community with its limited outlook and its clannish spirit is fast being displaced by semi-urban conditions, a much more cosmopolitan population, and a much freer and an easier life," Ellwood P. Cubberley could write as long ago as 1909. But desirable as these changes might have been from some points of view, they did not make family life easier or more pleasant. Sociologist Florence Kluckhohn was making similar charges in 1952. She pointed especially to the effect on wives and mothers of "the rapid industrialization of the country. . . . For the first time in history, a large number of women attempted to combine their domestic role with an occupational one for which money wages were paid. The imme-

Tamiment Institute Library

New York City tenement-house with children working as tobacco strippers; from "Leslie's Illustrated," 1888

diate effects of the employment of women, chiefly in factories, were sorry ones. Family life was disrupted." And it may be that the recent emphasis on "togetherness" in families is a reaction to the general breakdown of family life that is said to have occurred in our time.

According to many writers, things were once much better. William Byrd described a pioneer family in 1728. "We perceived the happy effects of industry in this family," he wrote, "in which everyone looked tidy and clean and carried in their countenances the cheerful marks of plenty." The advantages of rural life were recounted by Aloisius Muench two centuries later. "The family as a social institution is stronger in rural areas than in urban centers," wrote Father Muench in 1937. "The farmstead is not like a shop, office, or factory to which men and women go in the morning and leave again at night, but it is also a homestead. Where farm ownership is rendered secure, the homestead is held in honor by generation after generation as it passes on from father to son. The farmstead is for all members an economic unit. Young and old, father, mother, and children have a common stake in it. . . . Once formed, the family group is less easily broken in rural areas. Divorce is less frequent among rural married people."

Jane Addams made the charge more explicit. "Industrialism has gathered together multitudes of eager young creatures from all quarters of the earth as a labor supply for the countless factories and workshops," she wrote in 1909. "Never before in civilization have such numbers of young girls been suddenly released from the protection of the home. . . . For the first time they are being prized more for their labor power than for their innocence, their tender beauty, their ephemeral gaiety. . . . Never before have such numbers of young boys earned money independently of the family life, and felt themselves free to spend it as they

choose in the midst of vice deliberately disguised as pleasure." The problem, in Miss Addams' view, was one that civic organizations could solve, or help to solve, but it was nonetheless serious for that.

The damage of factory work to women, and therefore to family life, was described in no uncertain terms as early as 1836 by the Committee on Female Labor of the National Trades' Union. "The system of female labor, as practised in our cities and manufacturing towns, is surely the most disgraceful escutcheon [*sic*] on the character of American freemen," the Committee's report declared. And it pointed to specific deleterious effects. "The health of the young female, in the majority of cases, is injured by unnatural restraint and confinement. . . . Their morals frequently depart before their health, in consequence of being often crowded in such large numbers, with all characters and all sexes. . . . These evils themselves are great, and call loudly for a speedy cure; but still another objection to the system arises . . . because, when the employer finds, as he surely will, that female assistance will compress his ends, of course the workman is discharged, or reduced to a corresponding rate of wages with the female operative." Aside from its direct effects in depriving men of opportunities for labor, the report added, the practice also led to undermining the "natural" authority of the father, who must henceforth be supported by his wife.

There is another side to the picture. We will have occasion to discuss the movement for women's independence below, but we should not leave the abovementioned report without noting that, in the opinion of many nineteenth-century feminists, the role of women in the traditional American family was far from happy, gay, and carefree — was the reverse of idyllic, in fact. Thus Susan B. Anthony, for example, observed in 1897 that "in those days the women of the family were kept closely at home, carding, spinning, and weaving, making the butter and cheese, knitting and sewing, working by day and night, planning and economizing, to educate the boys of the family. Thus the girls toiled so long as they remained under the home roof. . . . When the boy was twenty-one, the father agreed to pay him a fixed sum per annum, thenceforth, for his services, or, in default of this, he was free to carry his labor where it would receive a financial reward. No such agreement ever was made with the girls of the family. They continued to work without wages after they were twenty-one, exactly as they did before. When they married, their services were transferred to the husband."

There is perhaps no reason to wonder, then, at the reply of a New Hampshire factory manager when he was asked by a Senate committee in 1883: "If you gave the girls, as a rule, a chance to work in the mill or to be employed as domestics in respectable private families, which would they select?" "My experience and observation as a housekeeper," the manager replied, "is that they would take the mills." When he was asked why, he admitted that he could only guess at an answer; but he added: "I suppose the reason is a compound of two prejudices, if I may call them so; one is, she likes the independence which is the accompaniment of having fixed hours of labor, outside of which she is her own mistress, and the other is the disinclination to take upon herself what she looks upon as occupation of a menial character."

The factory manager's last statement is interesting inasmuch as it throws light on the question of whether it was industrialism per se that brought about the breakdown of families and led to the contemporary norm of numerous small families rather than fewer large ones. The girls, in his view, were "prejudiced" in favor of independence. But that is precisely the prejudice that most Americans — men as well as women, boys as well as girls — have always had. That

prejudice is just as operative today as it was in 1883, or indeed in 1776. Negro women in the 1960s who could easily find jobs as domestics would rather find industrial or clerical work; and if they do work in private homes, they prefer not to "live in," believing that in such circumstances they would have less "freedom." Individual freedom, indeed, is a preeminent desire of human beings; this is a fact that the institution of the family has had to reckon with, in America and elsewhere, and with which it has had to learn to cope.

In the above remarks we have emphasized the apparent loosening of family ties, the fragmentation of families, the perhaps increasing power of the centrifugal forces that pull on all human domestic arrangements at all times. However, there is a sense in which the family, instead of having been fragmented, has almost been created by certain developments in modern life. In this sense and from this point of view, family ties have been immensely strengthened rather than relaxed.

It is true enough that the more or less formal institution of "Family" with a capital *F* is undoubtedly weaker than it used to be. This may be partly or even largely because Family in this aspect — that congeries of relations extending backward several or even many generations, and extending outward to cousins, and second cousins, and third cousins twice removed — was mainly a social device of the so-called upper classes, and the upper classes have lost much of their power and influence in our day (even in the South, where they persisted longer than anywhere else). The lower one went down the social scale, the less likely was Family to have meaning and importance; the modern triumph of the middle class, and the establishment thereby of what is almost a classless society, may be the reason why Family has almost disappeared. In short, the loosening of family ties that is remarked on so often and that is so evident a phenomenon of the last century or so may be a manifestation of a social change of even greater importance — the rise of the middle class to social and economic dominance and, in the United States at least, to a position in which it comprises almost all of society.

At the same time, it seems to be arguable, and indeed several modern researchers have found much to support the thesis, that the family in another, a narrower, sense has been strengthened rather than weakened during the past 100 years or so. According to this theory, the main innovations in the twentieth century have been in the extrusion of the grandparents and of the more-or-less distant cousins, and in the greater availability and acceptance of divorce. Again according to the theory, the extrusion of the distant branches — distant both in time and in relationship — has occurred because the members of the *core* family, the mother and father and their children, have come closer together rather than drifted apart. And this modern closeness — of the core family only, because the larger Family has certainly been dispersed — involving as it does in many cases unprecedented intimacy, may have increased the psychic burdens on the family to an extent where divorce is more often needed to avoid domestic explosions.

What is the evidence for this rather surprising view, which seems directly to contradict the analysis that we have presented so far? One important change is in the character and status of children within the family. Look at any family portrait painted before 1800, or even 1850. The striking fact is that the children in the portrait do not look like children; they look like adults, only they are smaller. They wear the same clothes, they stand or sit in the same way, the proportions of their bodies are similar. They are not different, in the way that we now think children are different.

Nor was there, before about 1850, a spe-

cial culture of children such as has grown up in modern times. For example — it is perhaps a small fact, but a highly significant one — there was no special children's literature until the 1860s. (In that decade there appeared, on this side of the Atlantic, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and, on the other side, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland.*) Before that, almost all books for children had been wholly or largely didactic. Children, on the whole, read the same books as adults; if their parents read nothing but the Bible, that is all the children read; and if the parents read other books, the children also read them. It goes without saying that there were no children's programs on radio and television; there were also no children's concerts, and no children's art exhibits, and no graded programs in the schools, with adult books rewritten using a limited vocabulary that children could be expected to understand.

More important, there was no child or teen-age industry in the United States, or anywhere else. Most toys were made either by children themselves or by their parents — there were few if any toy stores or toy departments. There were no children's magazines containing page after page of advertisements for things that children are supposed to want. (The first children's magazine in the United States was *St. Nicholas,* which dates from 1873; children's advertising is a phenomenon of our century.) There were few or no children's foods and, beyond the infant state, no children's clothes (diapers, of course, go back a long time, but once out of diapers a boy dressed like his father, a girl like her mother). And there was no children's furniture industry based on the idea that children should have a certain portion of the home set off for their exclusive use.

All of this and more has come about in the last two centuries at the most (at the very earliest, from the time of the French philosopher Rousseau, who laid down many of the principles in his quixotic study of education, *Émile*); it is one of the most remarkable changes ever to occur in human social arrangements, and it has hardly been noticed. The reason, of course, is partly the relative affluence that modern man enjoys, but there is more to it than that.

It is connected with the fact that many American children, even if they go away to college at an early age, even if they move to another city, marry, and follow new and different professions, remain emotionally and financially dependent on their parents considerably longer than they used to. When a boy or girl leaves home at eighteen or nineteen or twenty-one, his parents feel, nowadays, as if a little child is leaving them, and the boy or girl, physically quite mature, is likely to feel the same for many years. Some modern parents, indeed, help to support their married sons and daughters well into their thirties or even forties. In such cases, the ties that bind together the core family, instead of being relaxed, are close to being permanent (until, that is, the death of the parents severs them).

Another manifestation of this modern strengthening of core-family bonds is the concept of family togetherness. In most families, for example, the father is no longer the austere, distant figure of authority that he once was; he gets down on his knees and plays with his son's Christmas trains, and the children in "democratic" families help make decisions affecting the life of the whole. Children, indeed, have found, or have been given, a new role — that of cementers of the marriage bond. Divorce was rare in previous centuries, but it did occur; what never occurred was that friends of the husband and wife urged a reconciliation "for the sake of the children."

This new role seems to be one that is hard for many children to bear. Perhaps, however, that is not the main point; perhaps the main point is that children are conceived of as having *any* kind of separate

role, *any* role apart from economic aids to their parents. In short, children in the past were potential adults, and they helped out as much as they could. Children now are somehow persons in their own right. They are thought of as having responsibilities and also pleasures of their own, and as having quite separate and distinct lives.

If this theory is correct, how does it explain the modern emphasis on family togetherness, and how does family togetherness, in turn, square with the contention that the American family has recently been subjected to overwhelming centrifugal forces that have tended to fragment and disintegrate it? The first, obvious answer is perhaps too simple: that the so-called extended family has tended to disintegrate, and that the core family has tended to cohere more strongly than ever. The answer must lie in the very change in the character and role of children themselves. And here we can do no more than ask further questions. Does the fact that modern children are conceived of as having lives of their own mean that parents have to devote more thought and energy to them than formerly, so that they — the parents — have little time left over for their own parents and their more distant relatives? Are modern children, owing to this concentration on their interests, being subjected to pressures that sometimes have the effect of tying them inextricably to their parents, and sometimes of forcing them to revolt with unprecedented violence? Is the apparent lack of modern "dialogue" between the generations somehow a result of this? And is the family at the beginning, instead of at the end, of a process of evolution that will produce unforeseen, and essentially unpredictable, changes in the years to come?

Whether the changes in the American family so far observable are for the better or for the worse is not the question. The question is whether they have occurred, and here there is little doubt about the answer. The average American family today, with its peculiar amalgam of intimacy, on the one hand, and of dispersion, on the other hand, is very different from anything that ever obtained in the past.

The average never includes everybody, and in the United States there is one fairly large group that departs very far from the norm. These are the families of the poor or disadvantaged, the families one or both parents of which are on relief. There are many such people, several million at least, and their family life is so different as almost to constitute a separate culture within the larger society.

Such at least is the view of writers like Oscar Lewis, whose *La Vida* (1966) made mention, in its subtitle and throughout the text, of the "Culture of Poverty." This culture, on the domestic side, is characterized by matriarchal organization and an almost universal absence of fathers. Marriages are informal affairs, and even when there is a father somewhere in the picture, he stays in the background, especially if the family is on relief (most U.S. welfare laws require that the father be absent if the family is to receive more than token assistance). Usually, however, the father has almost no role in the family's life; he flits from one "wife" to another, and the mother is forced to bring up the children alone, sometimes resorting to prostitution or other illegal activities in order to do so.

One hesitates to say it, but in fact the family life of the culture of poverty finds its analogue — it may be only a coincidence — in the extremely informal domestic arrangements of the "hippies" or "flower children" who came so forcibly to the nation's attention during the later 1960s. Here too "marriages" are usually temporary affairs, love is said to be "free," and children are perforce the responsibility of the women who bear them. At this writing, not many children have been born to the flower children, who espouse voluntary poverty and

Drawing by James Thurber; © The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

are "dropouts," as they claim, from contemporary society, partly because most of them are young and partly because they have not been around very long. In another ten years, however, it may be possible to judge whether their way of domestic life constitutes a real and significant departure from the American norm. [For further discussion from different points of view of some of the topics touched on in this section, see Chs. 1: NATIONAL CHARACTER, 5: GENERAL WELFARE, and 9: EQUALITY.]

2. THE OLD IN AMERICA

THERE ARE A LOT OF OLD PEOPLE, relative to the total population, in America, and by and large they are taken better care of, and live more comfortably, than old people do in most of the rest of the world. Nevertheless, from one point of view it is harder to be old in America than in any country on earth.

The reason, of course, is that the attitude of most Americans toward the aged is one of sufferance rather than respect. We have never been much for ancestor worship in our country; our dislike of it is related to our feeling that the role of the family should not be prescriptive in a democratic, equalitarian society. Lately, however, our devotion to youth and our avoidance of age have seemed to be more violent than ever before.

For example, it has become commonplace for young people to declare that no one over thirty has anything worthwhile to say. It should be recognized that this view is not a new one. "I have lived some thirty years on this planet," Thoreau wrote in *Walden,* in 1854, "and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors." Perhaps Thoreau's friend Emerson concurred. "Nature abhors the old," he declared in "Circles," in 1841 (he was thirty-eight at the time), "and old age seems the only disease; all others run into this one." But never before in history, perhaps, has a nation institutionalized its disrespect — or perhaps, more properly, lack of respect — for the old. That is what America seems to have done.

There appear to have grown up two quite separate cultures in our country, the one of the old, the other of the young. And it is almost as if we had said: "Let there be no commerce between them!" Clubs and associations are formed by young people, to which old people are not allowed to belong — and vice versa. The old are segregated more radically than even Negroes are, in almost every domain of life. The attempt is made by advertisers, for example, to assess what are assumed to be the totally different desires and needs of the old and the young; and the mass-circulation magazines are edited with a specific age group — usually young people — in mind. If old people appear in television programs at all, they are hardly ever represented as having the wisdom that, it used to be supposed, was the special virtue of age. Instead, they are usually pictured as desiring to be, and acting, young; if they are successful in this they are applauded, and if unsuccessful they are considered foolish and a laughingstock. And in general, a man over forty or forty-five who

loses his job finds great difficulty in finding another, and an older woman is a truly pathetic figure, especially if she is divorced or a widow.

The desperation — it is truly that — of lonely aged Americans is the reverse side of the coin of independence. It is a wonderful thing, we think — or at least we act as if we think so — that people can strike off on their own and establish their families at an early age. But we forget, perhaps, that this means someone must be left behind. Those who are left behind are the old, feeling they have no purpose in life once their children have gone, fearing no one will care for them except the impersonal government, having no resources within themselves for the pursuit of security and happiness. The constant emphasis on youth in American life can be said, from this point of view, to be cruel; and the fact that we have numerous economic programs for the support of the aged is perhaps no more than an implicit concession of our cruelty.

Only in two domains, in fact, do the old retain their power and influence in America — but they are important ones. The young do not vote, but the aged do. This is important because it means that politicians must continue to take account of the feelings of the old, whether or not they really care about them. And the old, to an extent not usually recognized, also continue to direct the nation's economic life. A recent study showed that even with business's emphasis on youth, persons of sixty and older control the fortunes of most of the larger corporations, and it is said that older women own, if they do not control, a very large portion of the nation's wealth, through inheritance, bequests, and gifts they may have received in their youth. We have not, in short — or we have not yet — sequestered the old to the point where we totally deprive them of their civil rights or of their property.

These things, though admittedly important, are not enough, in the view of many old people. They would concede that, in a society that changes as fast as ours, the young are likely to produce the new ideas — or at least some of them — that are necessary for further growth; but there are many domains where new ideas are not so valuable as old ones, and old ideas are the more easily forgotten when age is not respected. It is questionable whether young people know everything, or even much, that is essential to human happiness, but the old have few opportunities of telling the young, in America, what *they* know. Ours is a vital, youthful civilization, but even those who are young now will someday be old, and they may be making less provision for the eventuality than they should. Above all, we waste the wisdom of the old by not regarding those who possess it. Such, at least, is the opinion of American "senior citizens" — as they have come, euphemistically, to be called.

All of this adds up to a rather melancholy story, but the story is not so melancholy as it might be; for some, if not very much, of the fantastic and unparalleled wealth of the country is devoted to the care of the old. America, though it does not make proper use of its old people — and thereby give them self-respect — can claim at least that it keeps most of them from starving.

Much legislation has been passed to deal with, and much concern has been voiced about, the special problems — economic and social — of the aged. President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared in 1935 that "in the important field of security for our old people, it seems necessary to adopt three principles — first, noncontributory old-age pensions for those who are now too old to build up their own insurance; it is, of course, clear that for perhaps thirty years to come funds will have to be provided by the states and the federal government to meet these pensions. Second, compulsory contributory annuities, which in time will establish

The Smithsonian Institution
"Increase in the family"; lithograph by Kellogg

a self-supporting system for those now young and for future generations. Third, voluntary contributory annuities by which individual initiative can increase the annual amounts received in old age." All or most of this has come to pass, under the administrations of Roosevelt and his successors, both Democratic and Republican, and it is not very likely that America will turn its back in the future on its old people — in this simple and rudimentary economic sense.

But the old need more than that, and what they need is easy enough to see. The probability is that, as one grows older, the body begins to weaken but the mind does not. It is true that senility is a disease of old age, but it is not, it seems, inevitable; persons who continue to use their minds actively retain their intellectual faculties long beyond the time when they have lost most of their physical ones. Only those who cease to use their minds when they are young grow old in spirit as they do in body.

The lesson, then, may be clear. The old do not have to be artificially respected, as one might say; nor should they be respected if they do not deserve respect. But perhaps every effort should be made, in a good society, to keep the minds of aging citizens active and occupied. If that is done, probably through greatly expanded programs of continuing adult education, the old might regain the regard, and perhaps even the veneration, that they once enjoyed, and still enjoy in more traditional societies.

The problem is not a small or insignificant one, and it is not without its relevance to the very young as well as to the old. We can already look forward, thanks to modern technology, to a time when almost all Americans will be in the same situation that the old now are: without socially necessary productive occupations, with much time on their hands, with nothing or very little that they *have* to do. More than one of the authors cited in the reference section of this chapter predicts social disaster if the problem is not recognized now and if steps to solve it are not undertaken soon. But little enough is being done at the present time. [For further discussion of some of the matters treated here, see Ch. 5: GENERAL WELFARE.]

3. THE YOUNG IN AMERICA

HARDLY ANYONE can be found to disagree with the statement that ours is a youth-oriented, or even a child-oriented, civilization. However, the statement, in order to be fully understood, requires some comment.

In the first place, it should be recognized that all civilizations, everywhere, have in one sense been youth-oriented. The youth of any society that desires to perpetuate itself — and it would be hard to think of any society that did not — is its most precious possession. This is one reason, of course, why education has always been a

leading concern of civilized peoples. It is also true that the love of one's offspring is a natural emotion that is hardly unique to Americans.

In the second place, it should be recognized that America, being a highly progressive civilization — one, that is, that is marked by rapid change, and change that, on the whole, is considered by most of us to be for the better — must necessarily pay attention to its youth. For our young people are not only our guarantee of perpetuation, they are also our hope for the future. Americans, as is pointed out in Ch. 25: AMERICAN DESTINY, have always been, and still are, oriented toward the future rather than the past. Children *are* the future; and a nation like ours, with its eye on tomorrow rather than on yesterday, would be likely to care for its children, to consider them important, and perhaps to overemphasize their contribution to its life.

In the third place, America's historical experience is a special one. It may be correct, as Oscar Wilde quipped, that "the youth of America is their oldest tradition," but it is nevertheless undeniable that America was once the youngest nation in the West, and that it started out, in 1492, or 1620, or 1776 — whichever date one chooses — with little or no actual past behind it, and with all its life before it. In one sense this is no longer true, for we now have a past; but the habit of looking forward rather than backward has persisted.

There are good reasons, then, for America's being a youth-oriented civilization. But even when they have been examined, one is still left with the impression that our nation puts even more emphasis on youth than the reasons, however good they are, should make us do. Even conceding that America, like all nations, wants to perpetuate itself through its children; that America, as a progressive nation, must pay special attention to the young, as the hope for the future; and that America's history is unique in the West, if not in the whole world — is there

Library of Congress

"Golden hours"; lithograph by Charles Lubrecht, 1875

not something more, even, than one would expect? Why do all Americans want to be young? Is there not something desperate about this desire — a desperation that is the other side of the desperation of the old? Why do we pay so much public attention to our youth, and why do we write about them endlessly? Why do we make so many speeches about them and hold so many convocations on them? Why do we initiate so many projects and programs in their behalf?

It is hard to answer these questions, which in fact may have no good answers at all. Perhaps the reasons cited — and there may be others, equally cogent — are sufficient to explain what has been called our perennial obsession with youth. Perhaps obsessions can never be adequately explained — else they would not be called obsessions. In any event, the cult of youthfulness seems to be our obsession.

Our youth, our newness, even our childishness have been noted and remarked on by many writers during two centuries.

"What then is the American, this new man?" asked St. John de Crèvecoeur in 1782, and went on to say that "the American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions." The great American writers of the following century — Emerson, Melville, Whitman (but not, interestingly enough, Hawthorne) — echoed those sentiments and gave them life and flesh. America's newness and youthfulness were still being discussed a century later. "The American is wonderfully alive," wrote George Santayana in "Materialism and Idealism in American Life" (1920). "He seems to bear lightly the sorrowful burden of human knowledge. In a word, he is young." In the view of numerous critics, Americans, like children, are hopeful, optimistic, open, and free, believing in miracles (and making them happen), impatient. "The American people never carry an umbrella," as Al Smith put it in 1931. "They prepare to walk in eternal sunshine." America, according to Thomas Wolfe, is "the fabulous country — the place where miracles not only happen, but where they happen all the time." America, in Archibald MacLeish's striking words, "is never accomplished, America is always still to build."

But, while most writers have admitted that America is youthful, not all have applauded the fact. "American life," wrote Henry James, "is more innocent than that of any other," and he observed in a letter to his brother William that "the Englishmen I have met not only kill but bury in unfathomable depths the Americans I have met." James's friend Edith Wharton was of the same mind. She quoted a remark of William Dean Howells', to the effect that "what the American public wants [in the theater] is a tragedy with a happy ending," and went on to declare that "what Mr. Howells said of the American theater is true of the whole American attitude toward life." She observed that " 'a tragedy with a happy ending' is exactly what the child wants before he goes to sleep: the reassurance that 'all's well with the world' as he lies in his cozy nursery. It is [a] good thing that the child should receive this reassurance," she added; "but as long as he needs it he remains a child, and the world he lives in is a nursery-world. Things are not always and everywhere well with the world, and each man has to find it out as he grows up. It is the finding out that makes him grow, and until he has faced the fact and digested the lesson he is not grown up — he is still in the nursery."

The same complaint had been made many times before Mrs. Wharton made it thus, in 1919, and it has been made many times since.

A somewhat different charge has been made by those who have decried our lack of parental authority over our children. G. A. Grassi complained of this in 1819; "The observers of American customs have always deplored the fact," he could write even then, "that the fathers . . . yield sadly and foolishly to their children whom they seem unable to contradict and whose capricious wishes they do not restrain." How many times have we heard that in the last century and a half! Thoreau, with his characteristic misanthropy, declared in 1854 that "practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young, their own experience so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures." Jane Addams put it still another way in 1897, when she pointed to the fact that immigrant parents in Chicago "count upon the fact that their children learn the English language and American customs before they themselves do, and act not only as interpreters of the language about them but as buffers between them and Chicago; and this results in a certain, almost pathetic dependence of the family upon the child."

These remarks of Miss Addams are illuminating. Many American parents, not only those who have recently arrived and do not yet know the language, count on their chil-

dren to give them such information as they can grasp of a world — that of the present — with which they seem to have lost touch. American children are somehow expected to know what is "going on"; and if the young do not have much interest in their parents' world, perhaps it is because of this, that the flow of information often goes from the young to the old, and not from the old to the young. The quickness and brightness of American youngsters have often been remarked; it may be only that they are better fed than most children, but it may be, too, that much is demanded of them.

On the whole, these demands have probably been a good thing. As Michael Harrington put it in 1962, it was long the norm in American society for a child to reject the life of his parents, and to put forth new goals for himself. "In the case of the immigrant young some generations ago," he added, "this experience of breaking with the Old Country tradition and identifying with the great society of America was a decisive moment in moving upward." But, he also pointed out, in many cases the advantages do not accrue as they are supposed to — particularly in that of the Negro in modern America, who "does not find society as open as the immigrant did. He has the hope and the desire, but not the possibility. The consequence is heartbreaking frustration."

That frustration — by no means confined to Negroes — has manifested itself in recent years in an increase in juvenile delinquency that is the source of much national distress. (It should be said that some sociologists hold that delinquency has not increased so much as our anxiety about it.) The modern high school dropout, Negro or not, has nowhere to go and nothing to do. He stands on the corner and whistles at the girls who pass by, but that is not even the beginning of a career, and in fact there are almost no opportunities for him to move upward or forward in his life. Once there was a frontier, a vast reach of free and open country that he could dream of filling. Now the frontier has gone, and he is in danger of becoming the burden rather than the hope of the future.

There are other problems as well. Delinquents are not the only young people who drive cars, and even non-delinquents drive them, on the whole, badly, so that the automobile has become the leading cause of death of Americans between the ages of sixteen and thirty. Drugs may not yet be the national problem that some think they are, but there is a possibility that within a decade they will be. Since the new breed of drug addicts are mostly young people, this, of course, would be utterly to defeat our dedication to the future through our children. The young person who, in the argot, is "with it" is really without it or outside of it — outside the world in which the rest of us live and with which we must come to grips if we are to live at all. There is the problem, too, of the commercial exploitation of children, not by child labor, which is a social problem that we appear to have solved, but by considering young people as a prime market for goods and services. The result of this may be to convince teen-agers of what they might have believed anyway, that America is nothing but a commercial civilization, and that idealism, dedication, responsibility are things talked about only in textbooks — if there.

That some of America's youth *are* convinced of this description of the United States is beyond doubt. To take only one — but an exceedingly notorious — example, the thousands of young people who gathered in Chicago at the end of August 1968, some of them to support the candidacy of Senator Eugene J. McCarthy, some of them to cause all the trouble they could, and some of them just to watch, agreed at least in their dislike of America's traditional political, economic, and social ways. The response of the older generation, represented by the Chicago police, was to hit the young

The Smithsonian Institution

"A happy party"; lithograph by Kellogg, about 1850

protestors on the head with billy clubs, a response that may not have convinced many of the young people that they were wrong in their estimation.

The turmoil led playwright Arthur Miller, a delegate from Connecticut and hardly a member of the younger generation, to conclude that Americans "hate" their children. If so, this may call in question the thesis being proposed in this section: namely, that Americans on the whole are prejudiced in favor of youth. But it can support the thesis, too, for it could be further evidence of the obsession to which we have referred. That obsession, if it exists, may be made up of almost equal parts of hatred, envy, and love.

Children in the United States are not only a problem, although a glance at most of the modern sociological literature gives that impression. Americans, like other peoples, take quiet joy in their children, and their children are probably no less happy in the bosom of the family than are youngsters in Japan, or Brazil, or England. We have produced a rich body of literature both for children and about children — much of it sentimental, no doubt, but nevertheless capable of evoking lovely memories in the old, and vibrant dreams in the young. Books like those of Mark Twain are examples of the latter, and a pair of sentimental productions by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and a contemporary publicist, Alan Beck, might serve as examples of the former.

Longfellow's "The Children's Hour" is so famous and familiar as to have almost fallen into contempt in recent years, but it should not be condemned, and it is not by fathers who have daughters. The poem describes that richest hour in the poet's day, the hour "between the dark and the daylight," when the children are at last free to interrupt their father's labors, when, as he knows, "They are plotting and planning together / To take me by surprise."

A sudden rush from the stairway,
A sudden raid from the hall!
By three doors left unguarded
They enter my castle wall!

They climb up into my turret
  O'er the arms and back of my chair;
If I try to escape, they surround me;
  They seem to be everywhere.

They almost devour me with kisses,
  Their arms about me entwine,
Till I think of the Bishop of Bingen
  In his Mouse-Tower on the Rhine!

Do you think, O blue-eyed banditti,
  Because you have scaled the wall,
Such an old mustache as I am
  Is not a match for you all!

I have you fast in my fortress,
  And will not let you depart,
But put you down into the dungeon
  In the round-tower of my heart.

And there will I keep you forever,
  Yes, forever and a day,
Till the walls shall crumble to ruin,
  And moulder in dust away!

Beck's subject was boys, not girls, but his point was not really dissimilar. "A boy is a magical creature," he wrote, "— you can lock him out of your workshop, but you can't lock him out of your heart. You can get him out of your study, but you can't get him out of your mind. Might as well give up — he is your captor, your jailer, your boss, and your master — a freckle-face, pint-sized, cat-chasing bundle of noise. But when you come home at night with only the shattered pieces of your hopes and dreams, he can mend them like new with the two magic words — 'Hi Dad!' "

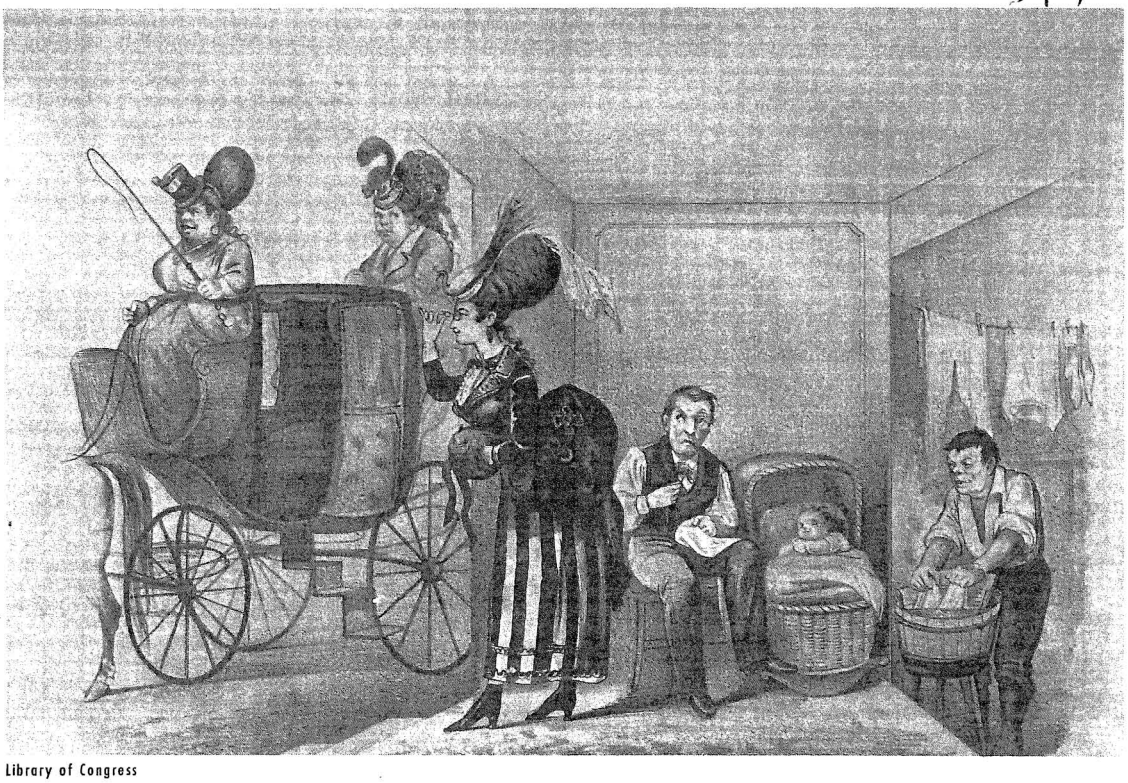
Bert Wheeler read Mr. Beck's little sketch on the television program *This Is Show Business* on February 25, 1951, and 60,000 requests for copies came in from the East Coast alone. There is no question that the piece is pure "corn" — but there is hardly a father who will care. [For further discussion of one or two of the points touched on in the above, see Ch. 6: DOMESTIC TRANQUILLITY.]

4. THE AMERICAN WOMAN

THE MODERN AMERICAN WOMAN is supposed to have been put on a pedestal by the modern American man, but, as a matter of fact, she has been standing on the pedestal for a long time. In recent times, it might be more correct to say that she has been trying to step down.

As early as 1789, James Wilson was deploring the suggestion that women might engage in politics. "I doubt much," he said — addressing the female portion of his audience — "whether it would be proper that you should undertake the management of public affairs. You have, indeed, heard much of public government and public law; but these things were not made for themselves: they were made for something better; and of that something better, you form the better part — I mean society — I mean particularly domestic society; there the lovely and accomplished woman shines with superior luster."

Florence Kluckhohn described some of the absurd consequences of the nineteenth-century idealization of women. "To the standards of gentility and piety held up to these women," she wrote in 1952, "that of physical frailty was added." For a time, the most exalted ideal of woman included her having tuberculosis — and if she was not so fortunate as to contract the disease, she was likely to sink into a graceful decline for no medical reason at all. "These gentle women," she pointed out, "were deemed too delicate to have contact of any sort with the world of business and industry. Their purity was of an order that must also prevent them from having much knowledge of, or pleasure in, anything bodily, most especially sexual relations." Her remarks are borne out by *Godey's Lady's Book,* the "Bible of



Library of Congress

"The Age of Iron — man as he expects to be"; an 1869 Currier and Ives lithograph

the American woman," the sixty volumes of which did not contain, according to an advertisement for it in the 1860s, "an impure thought or a profane word." This remarkable periodical never once, in any of its issues, failed to drum into its numerous female readers their innate superiority on the side of delicacy and charm. And this form of idealization was not confined to *Godey's;* it is one of the keys to our understanding of several of our greatest writers, notably Henry James, many of whose heroines — for example, Daisy Miller — are ennobled by their innocence.

The effect of such idealization of women has often been held to be undesirable, by both men and women. A character in Charles Brockden Brown's dialogue novel, *Alcuin* (1798), may speak for the earlier objections on the part of females. "Nothing has been more injurious than the separation of the sexes [said the lady]. They associate in childhood without restraint; but the period quickly arrives when they are obliged to take different paths. . . . On one side, all is reserve and artifice. On the other, adulation and affected humility. The same end must be compassed by opposite means. The man must affect a disproportionable ardor; while the woman must counterfeit indifference and aversion. Her tongue has no office but to belie the sentiments of her heart and the dictates of her understanding." In marriage, the indignant feminist went on to say, "she will be most applauded when she smiles with most perseverance on her oppressor, and when, with the undistinguishing attachment of a dog, no caprice or cruelty shall be able to estrange her affection."

Many others — not only feminists — also objected. George W. Steevens had an especially bitter complaint to make in 1896. "In one virtue [American] men furnish a shining example to all the world," he wrote "— in their devoted chivalry toward their women. They toil and slave, they kill themselves at forty, that their women may live in luxury and become socially and intellectually superior to themselves. They do it without even an idea that there is any self-sacrifice in it. Whether it is good for the women might be doubted," Steevens

added, "but it is unspeakably noble and honoring to the men. The age of chivalry is not gone; until America it never came."

In recent times, it is a rare issue of a mass-circulation magazine (read mainly by women) and a Sunday supplement (read by both men and women) that does not contain some discussion of the problem of woman's role in modern society. One survey is said to show one thing, and another is said to show something else; we may miss the truth of the matter, but we are not allowed to forget about it. And at least one American author — Philip Wylie — has come close to making a career of attacking the empedestaled woman. "I give you mom," he wrote in his slashing attack on what he called "Momism," in *Generation of Vipers* (1942). "I give you the destroying mother. . . . I give you the angel — and point to the sword in her hand. . . . Our society is too much an institution built to appease the rapacity of loving mothers."

From other points of view, as well, the notion of the American woman as fragile and delicate is quite absurd. The condition, almost akin to domestic slavery, of colonial and frontier women was described by many nineteenth-century authors, among them Susan B. Anthony, whose remarks on the subject were quoted above. Indeed, the woman suffrage movement would probably not have occurred had not the condition of women been odious in the extreme.

"Contemporary with the genteel lady, and with the factory worker as well," Florence Kluckhohn reminded us in 1952, "was the feminist who was busy making history in a remarkably different way." The origins of the movement lie far back in time, as she observed — indeed, they go back to Plato — but "the movement as a movement is usually considered to be both American and nineteenth-century."

The heroes — or rather heroines — of this great movement included, besides Miss Anthony, Emma Willard, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Matilda Joslyn Gage. Some of the first salvoes were shot off by Mrs. Willard in the early part of the century. "Nations calling themselves polite have made [women] the fancied idols of a ridiculous worship," she declared in 1819, "and we have repaid them with ruin for their folly." Such remarks were already a commonplace in her time; but Mrs. Willard went on to raise questions that were just beginning to be widely asked. "Where is that wise and heroic country," she asked, "which has considered that our rights are sacred, though we cannot defend them? that, though a weaker, we are an essential part of the body politic, whose corruption or improvement must affect the whole? and which, having thus considered, has sought to give us by education that rank in the scale of being to which our importance entitles us?"

Margaret Fuller, not content with asking questions, laid down demands. "We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down," she declared in 1845. "We would have every path laid open to Woman as freely as to Man." True human success and happiness would only be found, she asserted, "when inward and outward freedom for Woman as much as for Man shall be acknowledged as a *right,* not yielded as a concession. As the friend of the Negro assumes that one man cannot by right hold another in bondage, so should the friend of Woman assume that Man cannot by right lay even well-meant restrictions. . . . There is but one law for souls, and, if there is to be an interpreter of it, he must come not as man, or son of man, but as son of God."

Such demands were incorporated in the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions (July 19, 1848), by Mrs. Stanton, Miss Anthony, and Mrs. Gage. Taking their inspiration from the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in 1840, and their words as well as their ideas from the Declaration of Independence, its authors laid the foundations of their call for

equality and freedom in the basic American political principles.

> When, in the course of human events [they wrote], it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to such a course.
>
> We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it. . . .
>
> The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.

The Declaration proceeded to enumerate a long list of grievances, after which it insisted that women should "have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States. In entering upon the great work before us," its authors conceded, "we anticipate no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation, and ridicule; but we shall use every instrumentality within our power to effect our object." And they closed with the statement that "any custom or authority adverse" to the equality of woman, "whether modern or wearing the hoary sanction of antiquity, is to be regarded as a self-evident falsehood, and at war with mankind."

The Seneca Falls Declaration is a remarkable document, not only for its eloquence but also for its implicit concessions. To compare it with its original, the Declaration of Independence, is to learn much about the difference between men and women, and about the special problems that faced women in 1848, and that face them today. Nor is the document lacking in prescience. Its authors and their followers *were* met with misrepresentation and ridicule; and although many of the political demands of the Declaration were satisfied in the ensuing century, there is still grave doubt, in the 1960s, whether women have attained the equality that some of them desired. Indeed, the question of whether women really want to be equal, or rather to be treated equally, is a serious and important one — the answer to which, however, should not be sought here. (The reader desiring a more detailed history of the women's rights movement in America should turn to Vol. 17, Selection 36, where Florence Kluckhohn tells the story at some length.)

The women's rights movement is dead, in spirit if not in fact. Recently, the question has not so much been whether women are equal as whether they are happy. The emphasis in much of the discussion of the question has been on sex, and feminine anxieties about sexual fulfillment have become a keynote of our time. James Fenimore Cooper declared in 1828 that American girls "are decidedly handsome: a union of beauty in feature and form, being, I think, more common than in any part of Europe north of the Adriatic. . . . Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any creature more attractive than an American beauty between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. There is something in the bloom, delicacy, and innocence of one of these young things that reminds you of the conceptions which poets and painters have taken of the angels." The healthy, active, long-legged American girl of today does not suffer in comparison with Cooper's angelic ideal. She is, in fact, the envy of the world.

Library of Congress

Victoria Woodhull appearing before the judiciary committee of the House of Representatives to petition for voting rights for women in 1871

But is she content to be what she is? Many have thought not, among them the English novelist D. H. Lawrence, who asserted in 1922 that the American girl or woman was a kind of time bomb of repressed desires and instincts, ready to explode. He quoted Hawthorne's description of Hester Prynne, in the *Scarlet Letter:* "She had in her nature a rich, voluptuous, oriental characteristic — a taste for the gorgeously beautiful." "This is Hester," wrote Lawrence. "This is American. But she repressed her nature. . . . She would not even allow herself the luxury of laboring at fine, delicate stitching. Only she dressed her little sin-child Pearl vividly, and the scarlet letter was gorgeously embroidered. Her Hecate and Astarte insignia. 'A voluptuous, oriental characteristic' — that lies waiting in American women," said Lawrence. "The gray nurse, Hester. The Hecate, the hellcat. The slowly evolving, voluptuous female of the new era, with a whole new submissiveness to the dark, phallic principle."

The words were written nearly a half-century ago, but they still may evoke images. Screen stars epitomize the new, emancipated women. The heroines of a hundred novels proclaim their dissatisfaction with their men and with the world their men have made. Thousands of advertisements promise women that they can achieve what they do not yet have, and at the same time make them evermore conscious of what they lack. And the chorus of commentators and sociologists — most of them male — repeats the old charges and echoes the old regrets. [For another treatment of the history of the woman suffrage movement in America, see Ch. 4: GOVERNMENT BY THE PEOPLE.]

Mention of the heroines of modern novels brings us to make one final remark about the family in America. Sociologists and commentators speak, and can speak, only of the external or social aspect of the family. The discussion of these externals cannot give any impression of the inwardness and depth of the problems that love, marriage, youth, and age are for individual persons. Only the great poems, the songs, stories, and plays, the books of history and biography can adequately express the psychological and emotional meaning of family life. Heightened in narration, they give more eloquent testimony than any number of case histories and topical writings to the difficulties and complexities, as well as the richness, of family life.

The relations between men and women

in and out of marriage, the relations between husband and wife before and after marriage, the relations of parents and children — these create crises and tensions, conflicts of love and duty, of reason and passion, from which no individual can entirely escape. The family is not only a typically human problem but it is the one problem that, both psychologically and morally, touches every man, woman, and child. Sometimes the outcome is tragic, sometimes it is almost blessed; but whether a human life is built on this foundation or shattered on these rocks, it is violently shaken in the process and forever shaped.

The poets and storytellers know this better than anyone else. By and large, their productions are not as widely represented in the ANNALS as are other kinds of writings. The reader who wishes further to pursue the questions discussed here would therefore do well to consult the Bibliography of Additional Source Materials at the end of Vol. II of the Conspectus.