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Interrogating Marriage

December 11, 2007

Postmodern Love and Traditional Marriage in Todd Solondz's *Happiness*

A woman in her mid-thirties dressed conservative yet casual clothing stands in her immaculate kitchen giving her younger sister, who has just ended a relationship with 'the wrong guy,' a pep-talk. Well, not so much a pep-talk as smug "I am better than you" faux-sympathy. The woman with the showroom kitchen is clearly married to a 'good man'; a breadwinner who has afforded her the luxury to stay home, minding the 2.5 children and sipping midday tea with her emotionally ailing sister. No, this is not *Leave it to Beaver* or any of the other fine programming from the morally uplifting period of television that lasted from the late 1950s to the early 60s. This scene is not from the period before bra burning or *Roe v. Wade*. Rather, this idealized image of married and familial life is from independent filmmaker Todd Solondz's 1998 film *Happiness*.

Solondz's sardonic portrayal of the intimate and familial relations of three New Jersey sisters and their retired parents asks the viewer to question how marriage and the traditional family model maintain a stronghold on American life in the face of changing gender roles, the prevalence of divorce, and an increasing number of unconventional family types. Through his use of characters that can easily be read as 'types' of people, Solondz presents a realistic narrative of contemporary relations between individuals. Yet, he is also able to employ this mode

of type casting to make a satirical comment on life in which some of his characters become over inflated caricatures as they fight to keep up their polished public façades in the face of emotional trauma. In this struggle to appear composed, the characters are forced to keep secrets from each other, neglecting honest kinship ties in order to conform to the cultural ideologies of independence and success. As American familial life is ideologically based on the nuclear family and not extended kinship, the women central to the narrative find it necessary to handle their crises independently, and thus only turn to each other to gossip about the problems and shortcomings of others, or when they personally experience the destruction of their ideal selves. No matter how dire the situation, Solondz never allows his characters to completely forgo hope. Even when their romantic relationships fail, Solondz gives his characters the ability to continue their searches for love and ultimately the perfect marriage.

Beginning his film by eliciting nostalgia in the viewer, Solondz paints a picture of the traditional ‘perfect’ family with his presentation of the Maplewoods: Trish (Cynthia Stevenson) is the perky mom, who has nothing but sincere concern about what her children learn from TV and classmates, Bill (Dylan Baker) is the family’s provider, a respected psychiatrist who always makes time for his preadolescent son, whether this be to attend his baseball games or have chats about “guy’s stuff,” Billy (Rufus Read) is a chubby eleven year old questioning his changing body, little Timmy (Justin Elvin) is a precocious elementary-schooler who loves his toys and playing with his food, and Chloe is the adorable baby sister. However sentimental, this version of family life has become increasingly uncommon in the 1990s and may strike the viewer as suspect as they wait for the skeletons to fall from the closet. Yet, Trish fails to see the impossibility of true perfection behind the pleasing façade of the ‘All-American’ family that she has created, as she banishes the thought that anything in her life could be amiss. According to

Trish, she one of the lucky ones; she has been blessed with the perfect life in which she “has it all.”

Of the three Jordan sisters, Trish is the only one who is married and has children. Trish’s sister Helen (Lara Flynn Boyle), a successful poet, is seemingly satisfied with her lifestyle, though her constant ennui suggests her real displeasure with her weekend cocktail parties and array of boy toys. However, it is the youngest sister Joy (Jane Adams) who is the real concern for both Trish and Helen. To them, Joy, who has neither a career nor a husband, has nothing. The mousey thirty year-old Joy is depicted living alone in her parents’ home, which they left behind after moving to Boca Raton, playing folk songs of love lost on her acoustic guitar to an audience of stuffed animals. Joy’s lifestyle is not surprising to the Jordans; as Trish confesses, they “never thought [Joy] would amount to much” and that she had always “seemed doomed to failure.” Thus, while it is Trish who is allowed to feel the most successful in her ability to build a family, both she and Helen contribute to Solondz’s portrayal of the vision of female success that has been naturalized into American culture. A woman’s greatest achievement can be *either* family or career oriented; both can be attempted, but one must always suffer for the benefit of the other. As such, if a woman is not able to ‘catch a man’ in order to build and maintain a family, or become educated and independently provide for herself, she is rendered as an unsuccessful spinster who will most likely end up living in a house full of cats and talking to herself. The older sisters’ dilemma as Joy has hit thirty is how to save her from the implicit failure of “having a good heart” but no real “ambition.”

Joy’s dissatisfaction seems to be a result of this split emphasis on the importance of creating a ‘traditional’ family and having a career in the postfeminist era. As Helen and Trish represent opposing poles in this spectrum, anything that falls between them, i.e. Joy, represents

not a balance or a desire to have balance, but a failure to be either a 'Trish' or a 'Helen.' Clearly, this model neglects the fact that most women do not choose one over the other, but make an attempt to successfully balance both. *Happiness* calls attention to the great disparity between the image of the homemaker and the working woman, a dichotomy that became extremely present during the Reagan era. During the nineteen-eighties, women came to find "feminism [was] unfashionable, *passé*, and therefore not worthy of serious consideration [...] not that women have arrived at equal justice and moved beyond it, but simply that they themselves are beyond even pretending to care."¹ Postfeminism creates a vast divide between middle class white women. A woman has a choice; either she can be a feminist like Helen or a non-feminist like Trish.

Helen, who is read as the attractive and successful career woman, is able to embrace her sexuality through a new reading of feminism. In her essay, "The Postfeminist Context," Sarah Projansky, writes of the 'antifeminist feminist,' a woman who defines herself as feminist while expressing antifeminist sentiments. These women "call for the 'death' of (another version of) feminism in the process of articulating their own version of feminism. Specifically, while claiming to stand for women's 'equality' with men, [they] reject a 'victim' feminism that they assert has great cultural ethos,"² women like Helen destabilize feminism by "neglect[ing] and thus negat[ing] many other versions of feminism, [as] 'exaggerated feminist propaganda... responsible for the oppression of women in contemporary society'."³ With antifeminist feminism a woman can be both feminine and career-oriented, without being frail or a man hater. This type of feminism need not speak of feminism, because the old forms of 'propagandist' feminism are

¹ Sarah Gamble, "Postfeminism," *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 45. Paraphrasing Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*.

² Sarah Projansky, "The Postfeminist Context: Popular Redefinitions of Feminism, 1980-Present," *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 71.

³ Projansky, 71. Text in single quotes, Patrice McDermitt.

what led to the weakening of the female in the first place. Thus, Helen exhibits her strength through her poise and aloofness, especially in the company of her menagerie of hard-bodied young lovers. For Helen, men are beautiful and seductive, perhaps even intelligent and artistic, but in the long-run mean no more than a new Gucci handbag, and can be replaced just as easily.

Of course, the disconcerting part of attempting to read Helen as a strong feminist is her sadistic desire to be raped in order to make her writing 'real.' As the author of such poems as "Rape at Eleven" and "Rape at Twelve," Helen confesses that she is "a fraud" saying, "What do I know about rape? I've never been raped. If only I were raped as a child, then I would know authenticity!" The conflicting powerful image of Helen and her desire for objectification create a tension between what feminism has already accomplished and what it has yet to achieve. Helen as one person, even when read as a 'type,' cannot be taken as a reduction of the general feminist condition, and it would be completely inaccurate to say that all feminists want to be raped. Yet, in Solondz's depiction of Helen as an excessively self-centered career woman who also has a strong desire to be sexually dominated there is an implication that the traditional gendered power dynamic continues to rear its ugly head even in the hearts of the most 'empowered' women.

While Helen is seen dealing with her own inner conflict, Trish comes to be seen as incapable of fulfilling her own perfect image. According to the postfeminist model, Trish is best described as a 'new traditionalist': rejecting the ideas of feminism altogether and "harken[ing] back to a time when traditional values were (supposedly) popular."⁴ Trish embodies the modern family model in which the female's role was in the domestic sphere as the caregiver for her husband and children. Unlike Helen, who is able to use feminism in some form to assert her power as a writer and single woman, Trish seems to view female empowerment as destructive to

⁴ Projansky, 72.

family life, and as such female employment is in complete opposition to raising healthy and happy children.

Trish projects to others, including her kin, that she is living the ideal life and could not be happier. Yet, it becomes clear that Bill and Trish have marital problems that she attempts to keep under covers. Trish is seen constantly seeking Bill's affection, inquiring, "Do you still [love me]?" And while his affirmative answer appears to satiate her need, it is made clear that the couple is no longer intimate and probably has not been since the conception of their youngest child. As the 'happy' wife and mother who 'has it all,' Trish never tells her sisters, who appear to be her only confidants, about this dysfunctional sexual relationship. Trish may feel that having, let alone speaking, of sex for pleasure is taboo, thus illustrating her internalization of the traditional ideals of marriage for reproductive purposes. While Trish may not be as satisfied with her life as she projects, she tries to create happiness through her cheerful disposition and maintenance of the exterior perfection of her domain: the home and the family. Solondz explains Trish's character, stating:

She's not in fact cheerful; that's the surface she projects. There is scene in the movie in which she is in bed with her husband and isn't sure if she'd had sex with him. It's very ambiguous because she really wants to know that he loves her and him to know that she really desires him, and to me the cheerfulness is a coping mechanism. One has to live in denial about certain pain. It's as if she's trying to will a kind of happiness into the home through the mechanisms of smiling and cheerfulness.⁵

Taking Solondz's words into account, Trish can be seen as an embodiment of the façade of the happy housewife. Her reality is constructed from the ideal model of suburban middle-class life and it becomes clear to the viewer that Trish's illusion is coming to an end long before she is able to admit it to herself. Trish's commitment to the 'perfect' life has, if not blinded her to her

husband's dissatisfaction, at least made her able to cope with it to the extent that she can pretend that they are a happy couple.

Trish remains aloof to Bill's emotional and physical distance as he replies to inquiry regarding his love for her with a scripted, "Yes, very, very much," and then responds to her question as to whether or not they had sex stating "it doesn't matter." This is a small fissure in his performance as the 'perfect' husband compared to his revelations to his psychiatrist in which he details his dreams of committing mass-murder in a public park. This is compounded by the therapist's inquiry into Bill's lack of desire to have sex with his wife, to which Bill replies, "But she's not too interested really, so there's no problem, on a certain level." The fact that Bill is willing to overlook his marital problems to maintain a façade of normalcy is troubling because he not only makes himself miserable, he is deceiving his wife into believing that everything is fine in the process.

The gender inequality of the Maplewood marriage is clear from its presentation as the traditional family model, which relies on the 1950s image of family life. According to this model, the husband's role is to "'provide' for his family. He is *responsible* for the support of his wife and children. His primary area of performance is the occupational role, in which his status fundamentally inheres."⁶ Therefore, Bill as husband/father begins to see himself in the role that has been presented to him by, what Michael Kimmel refers to as, the "romanticized notion of family" that renders the father as an emotionally distant "Sunday institution." As such, the "devoted dads" of the 1950s, and their contemporary replacements, men like Bill, are unveiled as

⁵ Kitty Bowe Harty, "Suburban Shocker- Writer-Director Todd Solondz- Interview," *Interview*, Nov. 1998, accessed via *bnet.com*.

⁶ Michael S. Kimmel, *The Gendered Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 117. Quoting Morris Zelditch, "Role Differentiation in the Nuclear Family: A Comparative Study," *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, eds. T. Parsons and R.F. Bales (New York: The Free Press, 1955), 339.

“much better fathers in theory than in practice.”⁷ Viewers see Bill’s attempt to connect with Billy during their ‘man to man’ talks, but they are also given the impression that Bill is frequently absent from the home, and when he is among his family he seems like an outsider looking in.

Yet, if lack of sexual drive towards his wife and emotional absence were Bill’s only problems he would probably be considered a pretty normal married man. Bill’s need to remove himself from his family is largely due to his secret lifestyle in which he lusts after his son’s preteen classmates and masturbates to the fictional equivalent of the magazine *Tiger Beat*. Bill does not even confess this secret to his own psychiatrist; this is just *too* sick to share with even a professional, yet alone his wife. When Bill sees an opportunity to act upon his lust, he does so in the most discreet, tactful manner he can imagine. After allowing Billy to invite his friend Johnny Grasso (Evan Silverberg), a sleight, effeminate boy with cute freckles, over to spend the night, Bill prepares sedative laced hot fudge sundaes to feed to his family and his special guest. When Johnny refuses the sundae, Bill has no choice but to offer to prepare Johnny another (drug-laced) snack, enabling Bill to act out his lust in the least objectionable fashion.

The morning after Bill violates Johnny, Bill is seen blissfully laying in bed next to his wife, who says, “I don’t think I’ve slept so well in so long.” She does not recall if they had sex but Bill assures her that “it doesn’t matter.” His happiness is not related to her being aware of the sexual act, nor her being involved in anyway. Bill does not desire Trish as a sexual partner; he needs her as a pleasing exterior to his interior perversion. Moreover, because Trish is able to ‘cope’ with her pain by putting on her ‘cheerful’ face, Bill is allowed to keep his true self from her, as she has no desire to pry into his real feelings. The combination of Bill’s cunning plan and

⁷ Ibid, 112; 115.

Trish's ability to neglect his obvious sexual dissatisfaction with her, allows him to believe that he is in the clear; his victim is unaware of the violation and his family's respectability is preserved. Seemingly, this plan would have worked if Johnny had not become ill from a nondescript stomach ailment the following morning, leading to his hospitalization. But Trish's resolve is not broken simply by notification of Johnny's sickness after a night at her home; she simply notes that she hopes that Billy does not "catch whatever it is that Johnny Grasso has."

There is a moment in the bedroom scene that takes place later this evening in which Bill looks towards Trish in an effort to confess his inner demons. At this point Bill knows that it will not be long before he is confronted with charges for the molestation. Yet, his timing is off as Trish is half asleep. The exchange plays out as follows:

Bill: Do you really love me no matter what?
 Trish (sleepily): Bill, you have me and you always will.
 Bill (tearfully): I'm sick.
 Trish: Take some Tylenol. You'll feel better tomorrow.

Bill, as a psychiatrist, relates his perversion to an illness as Michel Foucault suggests in *The History of Sexuality*:

[T]he sexual instinct was isolated as a separate biological and psychical instinct; a clinical analysis was made of all the forms of anomalies by which it could be afflicted; it was assigned a role of normalization or pathologization with respect to all behavior; and finally, a corrective technology was sought for these anomalies.⁸

Despite the fact that Foucault is referring to the Victorian model of sexuality in which the definition of perversion was much more vast than it is today, the medical treatment of perversions is an ongoing feature of psychiatry. As such, Bill knows that he needs psychological help. Unfortunately, this admission comes too late; the damage is already done. Because of her easy acceptance of Bill as 'normal,' Trish does not read Bill's "I'm sick" as a real psychological

illness that would keep him awake at night, but instead believes it to be a temporary physical ailment. Thus, Bill does not feel better in the morning when he awakes. And this feeling of ‘illness’ is only enhanced by the words “serial rapist” and “pervert” that have been spray painted across the front of his picturesque suburban home. There is an extreme discomfort in watching Trish and her children remain in the house with the obvious indication of Bill’s crime. Yet, as explained by Judith Stacey in her study *Brave New Families*, women like Trish who are afraid of a lack of stability “value the security that ‘absolute commitment in marriage’ offer[s] more than the qualities of openness, communication, and emotional intimacy.”⁹ Because Trish relied so heavily on Bill, she was never able to question his actions or feelings. Valuing the benefits of marriage to Bill over opening the lines of communication between them, and thus possibly learning of his real flaws, Trish has been able to forge a “form of self-management”¹⁰ through her denial of real emotionality in exchange for a surface of ‘cheerfulness.’ As Trish is unable to deal with any form of confrontation with Bill, she cannot approach him about the sexual abuse he has committed and instead leaves the house during the middle of the night, loading the three confused children into her mini van.

While Trish has felt obvious comfort in her ‘perfect’ life, she can only take the cheerful optimism so far, thus it is fear for her children’s safety causes her to flee from Bill. However, in her departure from Bill and in her post-Bill life, she never speaks ill of him; in fact, she never mentions him at all. Somehow, she finds it in herself to remain hopeful of finding new love and a father for her children. In this sense, Trish can be compared to Stacey’s subject Shirley, who

⁸ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol.1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 105.

⁹ Judith Stacey, *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth Century America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 82.

¹⁰ Ibid.

“accepted herself as a traditional woman despite a personal history and practice that belied it.”¹¹ Like Shirley, Trish saw the hope in a new marital relationship after, what most would consider, a traumatic end to her marriage. Both women remain positive, largely because they are able to consider the benefits and joy that marriage brings with it. But unlike Shirley, Trish never asked herself why she and Bill were “growing apart,” and by the time she realized that there really was a problem with her marriage she was not in Shirley’s position to offer couple’s counseling as a solution.

In Stacey’s presentation of the working-class woman in *Brave New Families*, she suggests a level of independence and outspokenness that women attained through the 1970s feminist movement,¹² yet this independence is not expressed in any of the Jordan women aside from Helen. Though Stacey suggests that middle-class women are less likely to manifest these characteristics because of easier access to a more comfortable lifestyle, it seems, whether working or middle-class, women are always permitted the choice to be naive to male indiscretions, adhering to a model of patriarchal devotion and/or material comfort instead of leading a more self-motivated lifestyles.¹³ Clearly the Jordan family is of a certain class level where the three sisters have been able to make choices about how they wish to conduct their lives. Trish, like Helen, could have had a career, but she chose a life closer to her own mother’s: a life built around the nuclear family created via the marital relationship, which dependent on the endurance of that marriage.

¹¹ Ibid, 87.

¹² Ibid, 88.

¹³ Stacey discusses some of her subjects participation in the evangelical church, a choice that was made after earlier more independent/feminist ambitions had failed. This religion necessitates male dominance and female submission, though it allows certain aspects of family reform based on feminism. See chapter 3: “Pam’s Revelation and Mine.”

Solondz introduces the problematic nature of female reliance upon marriage early into the film when Trish calls her mother Mona to have their regular chat. It is at this time Trish is informed by a weeping Mona: “Your father is leaving me [...] He says he doesn’t love me anymore.” As blind sided by this fact as Trish is by her own husband’s discontent, Mona struggles to imagine her life ‘alone’ as she dramatically searches for her Vicodin. For Mona, now in her sixties, it is impossible to picture life without her husband Lenny despite their marital quarrels. Unlike Trish, Mona does not hold her composure and vents her emotions to Lenny, yelling across their condo, “You’re in love with someone and it’s someone younger. I wish you would have done this twenty years ago. Now I’ll have to get another fucking face-lift,” to which Lenny replies coldly, “I am in love with no one.”

Throughout the film Solondz portrays Mona in the manner of a hysterical woman after maternity. Whereas Trish could be considered the traditional Foucaultian “nervous woman” who is in “organic communication with [...] the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of the children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biologico-moral responsibility lasting through the entire period of the children’s education),”¹⁴ Mona is the “nervous woman” removed from her familial responsibilities. Mona’s inferred hysteria is shaped not her by being “thoroughly saturated with sexuality”¹⁵ and family life, but instead formed from a desiccation of these attributes that have defined her throughout her womanhood. Lenny’s words impart this new hystericization as Mona’s value is stripped by the disavowal of her formal role as both sexual and maternal body, becoming instead the post-menopausal mother to grown children and the wife of a man who is no longer interested.

¹⁴ Foucault, 104.

¹⁵ Foucault, 104.

In an action that seems more like an attempt to make Lenny fear losing her than an actual realization of the deterioration of her marriage, Mona meets with a real estate agent Ann Chambeau (Marla Maples), looking to get her own condo; a move that proves to be almost ludicrously traumatic for the aging Mona. Illustrating her enduring sense of family and marital togetherness despite the fact that her children are now adults and she is supposedly moving away from her husband, Mona requests a three bedroom apartment. Ann, obviously obliged to find her client the 'right' apartment for her needs, inquires about Mona's living arrangements. She states kindly that what Mona needs, as a newly separated woman without children or pets, is a "single apartment" for "just you alone, all by yourself." Mona's composure and feigned self-assurance dissolve over the course of this meeting, as she reaches out to Ann looking for someone to comfort her. Ann tries to offer her help by saying, "You know we have a lot of divorcées in Phase 4. Would you like to see something there? Perhaps a bit smaller?," to which Mona responds, "Who said I was getting a divorce?" Mona tries to retain her dignity in front of Ann by asserting that though her husband is leaving her, there will be not divorce.

When Mona goes along to see what 'Phase 4' has to offer a newly single woman, she is a taken aback as looks over the railing to see an elderly woman with a walker on the first floor. While Ann informs her that this resident is "the exception to the rule" and that everyone else is "much more youthful," Mona feels herself relinquished to slowly deteriorate alone in Phase 4. By juxtaposing Mona to the younger, happier, and more physically fit real estate agent and to the elderly woman at the bottom of the stairs, Solondz illustrates Mona's inability to return to her youth; Mona may have once been confident and sexy, but she will not be able to regain that image, and will only grow older and weaker over time. And while the agent is able to say being divorced "is the best thing that ever happened to me," Mona is left to dwell on her earlier

comment about needing another face-lift trying, in the most superficial way, to retain any remaining youth. Surely the casting of Maples, Donald Trump's second wife, was done with some irony as both she and Trump have proved (in his case numerous times), that marriage is not a life long institution and there is the possibility of happiness (or happinesses) after one marriage dissolves. As age is a reoccurring theme in *Happiness* it is important to call attention to the fact that the age gap between Trump and his wife grows with each marriage, proving that despite arguments to the contrary, age is a key factor in finding 'love' with a 'good' man.

Thus, Mona's belief that attracting a lover is largely based on youth cannot be considered completely false. Not only do most men find it desirable to have a partner who 'keeps him young,' but building a relationship is facilitated by the possible longevity of that commitment, a longevity that is seems impossible for someone who is already considered a senior citizen. It becomes clear that Mona is not only afraid of Lenny's departure after forty years of marriage, but of her inability to replace Lenny with a 'newer model,' creating a replica of her original family situation. For Mona, as for her daughter Trish, her value is ultimately tied to her ability to make a 'good catch.' As such, when Lenny tells Mona that he no longer loves her, despite his assertion that he loves 'no one,' she sees his departure being tied to a younger woman named Diane (Elizabeth Ashley). In Diane's ability to steal Lenny away, she seen by Mona as having more value as both a woman an a lover. Though Lenny initiated the separation, Mona sees herself as being at fault because, in the same way a man must be caught, he must be held onto.

Though Michael Kimmel asserts that "fewer men than women try to get out of marriage by initiating divorce,"¹⁶ it is twice as likely that a man will be unfaithful in a marriage as a

¹⁶ Kimmel, 121.

woman.¹⁷ Lenny's choice to separate from his wife, while choosing to remain in the same home and even the same bed, serves as evidence for Kimmel's statement that "marriage benefits men."¹⁸ Kimmel notes:

Given the traditional division of labor in the family (she works, he doesn't) and the nontraditional division of labor outside of the family (he works, and she probably does, too), the husband who works outside the home receives the emotional and social and sexual services that he needs to feel comfortable in the world. His wife, who (probably) works as well, also works at home providing all those creature comforts— and receives precious few in return. Marriage may be good for the goose much of the time, but is great for the gander all the time.¹⁹

Thus, Lenny has little reason to leave his wife, who has, for the greater portion of his life, been there to take of their home and children. Though their relationship is not perfect, and it is apparent that they argue frequently, Lenny has no real reason to leave Mona aside from his growing emotional distance. Lenny's detachment from Mona branches from a general malaise, best exhibited in one of their earliest conversations in the film:

Lenny: I just want to be alone.

Mona: I could let you be alone more.

Lenny: It's not that. Things change, people change. I want out.

Lenny does not simply want out of his marriage to move on to another lover; he feels that his life is coming to a close. After seeing another senior have a heart attack on the golf course, Lenny visits his doctor fearing that he might have a tumor or a heart condition. However, he is informed, "you're as healthy as an ox" and "you'll live to be a hundred," to which he can only respond, in a state of despondency, "so I still have another 35 years." And while Andrew M. Greeley writes in his 1994 study "Marital Infidelity" that "adultery increases gradually for men

¹⁷ Andrew M. Greeley, "Marital Infidelity," *Society* 31.4 (May-June 1994), accessed via *Academic OneFile*. Actual statistic: "Marital infidelity recorded by data collected by the National Opinion Research Center reveals that 20% of American men and 10% of American women were not faithful in their marriages. Gender is the most constant predictor of infidelity rates."

¹⁸ Kimmel, 121.

with age and duration of marriage,” stating: “One can think of many different explanations, none of which exclude one another– unhappy family lives, low levels of sexual activity with spouse, absence of religious and moral motivation, disorganized or troubled personal lives, [...] perception of poor health,”²⁰ Lenny’s implied cheating has little to do with any supplemental satisfaction. It seems instead that his relationship with Diane makes him no happier than his marriage to Mona. Lenny is simply fed up with his life and recognizes the impossibility of his pleasure. This may boil down to a question of impotence, a possibility that is raised for the viewer when two women in bikinis walk by when Lenny and Diane are talking by the pool. Lenny receives no satisfaction from the viewing of these women and instead turns to Diane to assert that he will not be getting a divorce despite what she has heard. As such, when Lenny says to Mona that he wants ‘out’ it cannot be read as simply a desire to be out of his marriage, but must be seen as the result of what he sees as irreparable dissatisfaction with his life on earth.

When considering the instance of infidelity and divorce in established marriages such as Mona and Lenny’s it is important to recognize the impact of the prevalence and easy attainment of divorce in combination with the all time highs in life expectancies of Americans. Kathleen B. Vetrano writes, “When life was shorter, there was not much future to think about.”²¹ But Lenny is unlike Vetrano’s senior in search of “happier more meaningful life.”²² Instead, historian Leonard Stone’s argument must be considered: “The median duration of marriage today is almost exactly the same as it was [a] hundred years ago. Divorce, in short, now acts as a

¹⁹ Ibid, 121-122.

²⁰ Greeley.

²¹ Kathleen B. Vetrano, Esq., “Suddenly Single Seniors,” *Vetrano & Vetrano*, <http://www.vetranolaw.com/CM/Publications/Publications23.asp>

²² Ibid.

functional substitute for death: Both are means of terminating marriage at a premature stage.”²³ Lenny simply wants to be left to himself, and since death will not be taking him any time soon, he must find his own exit. Like Bill, he sees that “we’re all alone,” just playing a role that society has set out for us, whether that be the detached husband, the hysterical wife, or the lonely sister.

What functions perfectly in the portrayal of Lenny and Mona’s marriage however, is the inability for either character to stand on their own, while simultaneously being constantly hostile toward each other. In this tension, the pair seems logically doomed to failure in their marriage from their first introduction in the film, yet they are ultimately inseparable. As the viewer wonders ‘who else would take this miserable pill popping old lady?’ and ‘why would anyone want the curmudgeonly Lenny hanging around?’, they come to understand why this marriage ‘works’; these two people are impossible to make happy so they might as well settle for each other. And in the end, that is what they as a couple do, as the final scene of the film finds them together at the dinner table with their daughters. Of course, this does not mean that Mona and Lenny are not still separated. Mona even asks Helen if she has found ‘anyone’ for her yet. After all, if Lenny is not interested in Mona, she might as well keep her options open, even if just to be the thorn in Lenny’s side. Though try as she may, Lenny could care less about Mona’s empty threats to their shell of a marriage; he knows that neither he nor she is not going anywhere and that is more painful than the threat of her leaving.

This final scene begins with Helen turning to Joy to tell her that she has met a guy that she thinks that Joy would like, to which Trish replies, “What about me?” Clearly Helen has found someone who is more the lonesome Joy’s type and says, “Trish, trust me on this one, not

²³ Kimmel, 137. Quoting Leonard Stone, “A Short History of Love,” *Harpers Magazine* (February 1988); 32.

for you?” Mona rings in with a “What about me?” to which Helen explains in a very controlled way that it is “hard.” For Mona, this statement confirms to her fear that being a senior will in fact ruin her chances of finding new love. Mona hears “hard” and thinks that Helen is implying that it is difficult to find love for an ‘old lady,’ instead of believing that Helen may mean that it is ‘hard’ for her to find suitors these three women while at the same time maintaining her own relationship. At this point Lenny attempts to take some weight from Helen’s shoulders by making sure to tell her *not* to look for a date for him; this is not because he has found a lover, but because “there’s no one.” What is essential to this scene is that, despite the each of their unsuccessful attempts in love, the Jordan women are all willing to give it another chance. As such, Joy, who has had no luck over the course of the film, seems glad to hear that Helen has found her another possible love interest, even though, as indicated before, these blind dates arranged by her sisters never work out for the better.

Joy, as the quiet standoffish girl who always gets her heart broken and cannot accomplish much in life or love, is a stark contrast to the other women who inhabit the film. Unlike Trish and Mona, Joy is not willing to give herself completely to a man no matter how devoted he seems to be. In the opening scene of *Happiness*, Joy is seen at a nice restaurant with Andy (Jon Lovitz), a stocky, nasally gentleman who has loved her since their first date. However, Joy does not reciprocate these feelings and breaks up with him at dinner in the most polite non-confrontational way that she can. Being that Joy is thought of as sensitive and portrayed as an extremely meek woman, one would anticipate that she would carefully let down her doting lover. However, she is unable to reach out to Andy as he begins sobbing at the table. Her attempt to comfort him comes verbally, when she says, “It’s good we did this before it went too far.” When Andy asks Joy if there is “someone else,” she responds in what becomes noticeable over the

course of the film as the cold Jordan manner, best exemplified by Lenny, telling him, “No, it’s just you.” Andy sees this breakup by Joy as a result of his looks, as he has treated her well and shown her nothing but affection. The emphasis on physical appearance, as well as economic stability, in the make up of a ‘good’ partner is essential to the view of successful marriage within the Jordan family and indicative of American ideology in general. Finding the ideal partner is important to Joy who is willing to give some men a ‘test drive’ but not willing to settle down until she has found ‘mister right.’

While Joy recognizes she is becoming older and that her sister’s are “speaking for her own good,” she seems to know that neither they nor she will be satisfied if she marries the first guy who comes along. Joy’s character can be seen as similar to Angela McRobbie’s reading of Bridget in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*:

[S]he is the product of modernity in that she has benefited from those institutions (education) which have loosened the ties of tradition and community for women, making it possible for them to be disembedded and re-located to the city to earn an independent living without shame or danger. However, this gives rise to new anxieties. There is a fear of loneliness, for example, the stigma of remaining single, and the risks and uncertainties of not finding the right partner to be a father to children as well as a husband [...] There is also the risk that she will be isolated, marginalized from the world of happy couples.²⁴

In her desire to be seen as more than the “lazy” sister who will “always be alone,” Joy chooses to attempt to create a ‘normal’ life by being “picky,” instead of settling for any one of the numerous rejects she finds in her office or that her sisters set her up with. Joy seems to want both a career and a love life, but struggles to fully develop either one, let alone balance both, living in a society that has given women the tools to build their lives as they choose, but has offered no real directions on how to successfully do so.

²⁴ Angela McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4.3 (2004): 261.

After Joy's breakup with Andy, she finds out that he has committed suicide. In a life changing move, Joy quits her job in telephone sales, which only reminds her of Andy who was also an officemate, deciding that she wants to "help people." Much to her sisters' dismay, Joy takes a job teaching English as a Second Language in New York City. The fact that Joy's change in job is so upsetting to Helen and Trish is ridiculous, as one can hardly believe that her prior job was of a much higher status. But considering the absurdity of Helen's finger-quote filled statement that "[Joy] doesn't understand that she is good she doesn't need to do good," and Trish's comment that Joy is "only getting older," it becomes clear that whatever Joy chooses to do with her life will be the topic of her sisters' distaste. Joy as both the anti-Trish and the anti-Helen, becomes the only thing that the two of them can agree on, as they are in competition on every other front. Helen and Trish not only go back and fourth on which one of them has a busier life, they even have short tiff about which of the two sisters Joy should be confiding in. With the constant competition held by the Jordan sisters, if Joy were ever to commit herself to one path, either postfeminist or new traditionalist, she would always have at least one sister whom she has let down and one sister who she would be in direct competition with.

Thus, it is no surprise that Joy never tells either of her sisters about her love affair with Vlad (Jared Harris), a Russian cab driver who attends her ESL class, who surely would not meet Helen's standards of attractiveness or Trish's standards of a husband/father. Solondz does his best to paint Vlad as a classic romantic who is in love with Joy from the moment she steps in front of the class. As such, a day (or two) later when Vlad pulls his cab up next to Joy as she is crying on the side walk in New York City, his insistence that she let him drive her home does not seem at all wrong or out of line, and the viewer comes to hope for the best as it appears that Joy has found someone who really cares about her, who also, in some strange way, meets her

standard of how a lover should appear and act. Though it is initially hard to put a finger on what it is that makes Joy so drawn to Vlad, it becomes clear that she is compelled by his difference; his strong Soviet-type masculinity combined with, what she interprets as, a loving sincerity. Joy sees Vlad as a ‘good catch’ because he is her perfect opposite, unlike Andy who was at least as weak as her emotionally and much worse off physically.

Later that night, Vlad’s ‘perfection’ is confirmed when he plays her a beautiful version of “You Light Up My Life” on her acoustic guitar, singing with strong bravado, before passionately making love to her. It is important to note that in the depiction of intercourse it is Vlad who is on top, showing his power over Joy, who despite (or maybe because of) her subordinate position, cries out in ecstasy. The issue of male vitality creeps into *Happiness* without ever truly announcing itself, and it is telling that the only depiction of a heterosexual sex scene is between Joy and this immigrant man who the viewer is forced to see as ‘Other.’ Reading Vlad as non-American, which is asserted repeatedly in the film, Solondz’s suggests not only the feminization of American men though the liberation of women, but also the American woman’s lingering (and perhaps unsavory) desire to be swept away by a strong unrelenting masculine lover. Vlad, though not even close to the image of the muscular superman on the cover of a pulp novel, is alluring because of what he is not: the passive-aggressive Lenny, the artificial Bill with his secret life of paedophilia, or a nameless suitor that serves more as a fashion accessory than a man. Vlad is simply who he is for better or worse, and feels no shame or need to hide.

Largely, *Happiness* denies that sexual gratification can occur in any ‘normal’ relationship as both married couples, Trish and Bill, and Mona and Lenny, no longer have sex, and conversely, Helen, who is presented as having a great sex life, cannot have even one meaningful relationship. Thus, according to the standards Solondz’s has set fourth, this scene in which Joy

has sex with a man whom she has just met and whom leaves immediately after the act, is more normal than sexual pleasure within an established relationship. Yet, it must be considered that sexual pleasure is only one factor in a relationship and is often articulated by other aspects of that partnership. As such, the dissatisfaction that plagues these other couples must be considered part of a greater problem felt by either one or both of the individuals in the relationship.²⁵ Therefore, this wonderful sexual experience had by Joy should not be interpreted as the beginning of a 'good relationship,' especially considering Joy and Vlad's overall incompatibility, if not to mention Vlad's quick departure.

Joy's illusion of blissful romance is quickly put to rest when Vlad fails to show up for class the next day, and instead Joy is greeted with a full-contact assault by his live-in girlfriend. This is only compounded when Joy later goes to apologize to the girlfriend and comes to find that Vlad, who was a professional thief in Russia, has her guitar and stereo displayed prominently in his living room. It is then more for the girlfriend's benefit when Joy allows Vlad to borrow five-hundred dollars. Solondz's employs parallel shots of the two women, the nervous Joy sitting by Vlad's side and the abused Russian woman cowering in the corner, to elucidate Joy's reasoning in agreeing to the loan. In this scene, Joy is able to see the reality of a man who she had originally viewed as an exotic romancer. Her dreams of a relationship with Vlad are crushed as it is confirmed that he is no more ideal than the other men in her life. His masculinity becomes his major flaw as she is witness to his rough treatment of his girlfriend. Joy comes to realize that he never loved her, he loved what she represented, the American Dream: success and prosperity, symbolized by a wealth of material goods and nice house in the suburbs.

²⁵ Michael Young, "Sexual Satisfaction Among Married Women," *American Journal of Health Studies* (Spring 2000), accessed via *bnet.com*.

In their final scene together, as Joy hands Vlad his cash in exchange for the items he took from her, he goes to kiss her and says, “I love you.” To which Joy replies, “You love New Jersey,” showing that she realizes that she has been taken advantage of by a man who cares only for his best interest, not for her, nor the girlfriend he abuses, nor the screaming infant in his apartment. As Joy walks away, Vlad says under his breath, “Stupid Americans,” which rings as a statement about American expectations for true love. While Joy was trying to paint a picture of a traditional Hollywood romance she ignored the obvious signs that this interaction with Vlad would not form into a long-term relationship. He was more honest with her than she could be with herself. Joy was the one who invited him into her home, he told her that he was a thief, and had she asked if he lived with a woman, he would have probably told her the truth about that too. Vlad was not deeper than he appeared and this is what let Joy down. She wanted him in his ‘Otherness’ to be what no other man has been for her and this simply was not the case.

And while it is inferred that Joy wants both a career and love, it is clear that she cannot balance or separate the two. First she quit her job in telephone sales, which Trish referred to as Joy’s “life line,” after Andy’s suicide, now she informs Vlad that she probably will not be returning to teach the class. Work for Joy becomes her only social outlet beside her sisters, and as such, her love interests are formed out of that situation. When these romances fail she feels the need to quit her job, putting the whole thing (work, love, any resulting associations) behind her. Read superficially, this connection between intimate relationships and work suggest that Joy is over invested in finding love at any cost, however it can be read as more indicative of Joy’s general dissatisfaction as she finds neither her work nor her love life are developing into anything she can be proud of. Considering Joy’s ultimate goal of making a career of her music, a fairly lofty aspiration for a shy and socially awkward person, she essentially sets herself up to be

judged as a failure by her sisters. Joy may seem to have little initiative because she, even in some small way, realizes that she will not succeed in her goal. “Sensitive Joy” who is “only getting older,” always, in the eyes of her family, fails before she begins. The necessitation of Joy’s resolute helplessness, serves to illustrate the importance of social ‘Othering’ of women who are not successful in love or life by those who have attained some level of achievement, such as Helen, Trish, and Mona. Joy as the black sheep of the family serves as a constant referential for the other women’s achievements, which, despite some slumps and slopes, will always be greater than that of Joy who has nothing of her own: no husband, no kids, no condo or house. To her family, Joy does not have anything that they have not given to her, and even that she has not put to good use.

It is at times ambiguous as to whether the Jordans actually want to see Joy succeed. Her sisters do attempt to arrange dates for her and set positive life models, especially Trish who reads similar to Judith Stacey’s subject “Eleanor,” who states, “I think single people need to see married people, they need to be around them, because they need to see something good and positive in that kind of relationship.”²⁶ But, there is a way in which placing a single woman, Joy, in the midst of a couple’s married life is detrimental to her, while serving to make the married woman, Trish, feel that her life is better because she can assert what she *has*, her value, over the woman who is ‘alone’ and attempting to provide for herself. Trish’s major accomplishment is her marriage and even after it dissolves it remains something that Trish once had; something that Joy is less likely to obtain with each passing year. Trish maintains superiority over Joy through asserting the cultural import placed on marriage, which creates a rift between those who have, or have had, a happy marriage and those who have not been able to forge that commitment. The

²⁶ Stacey, 136.

recognition of marriage in America remains of crucial importance, holding with it traditional sentimentality and a sense of stability. As historian Nancy Cott writes in *Public Vows*:

Alarmists declare certainly that marriage is withering, but its firm grip is more of an enigma. Even with failed marriages staring them in the face, individuals still hope to beat the odds. The belief persists that a couple have achieved the ultimate reward, the happy ending, by adding the imprimatur of public authority and making their relationship formal and legal.²⁷

This enigmatic hold of marriage on a society that would in some ways benefit from the loosening of the public policy tied to marriage is maintained by women like Trish and Mona who are persistently hopeful that they will find happiness in love, and as such live for the rewards found in the bond of marriage. Therefore, no matter how much the world around them changes, or if old-fashioned morals come to crumble before their eyes, Mona and Trish find that marriage allows them to retain a traditional model of familial life that is beneficial to their needs as women who have remained inside of the domestic sphere for much of their adult life.

Cott further explains this cultural reliance upon marriage stating:

The preeminent stature of marriage in public opinion is not unwarranted because it still *is* a public institution, building in material rewards along with obligations. History and tradition cement the hold of marriage on individual desires and social ideals. Marriage also continues to appeal subjectively, despite the alternatives visible, because of the relief it seems to offer from the ineffable coercions and insistent publicity of the postmodern world.²⁸

Marriage, in all of its ups and downs, is not only a meaningful commitment between two people it is a guarantee of their privacy, without which an individual's life is opened to the scrutiny of those around them. Not a single member of Trish's family thought of questioning her relationship with Bill because it was *their* private life, not communal property. In this way, if a married person chooses not to disclose relationship problems it is assumed that the relationship is

²⁷ Nancy Cott, *Public Vows* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 225.

²⁸ Cott, 225.

fine, whereas a single woman's life is constantly in question; she must earn that privacy through the bond of marriage. Because "[m]arriage can be imagined as setting this boundary and providing private liberty inside it,"²⁹ Joy's search for a stable relationship can be read, in part, as a way to begin her own private life. Through marriage Joy would assert her own ability to have success in life, and as such, place herself out of her sisters' hands for crude analysis of her failures. While sisters will always talk about each other's foibles, Joy's life would no longer be the contrasting 'nothing' to Helen and Trish who 'have it all.'

However, the possibility of Joy's success is not realized by the end of the film and the viewer is left with the image of Joy relegated to Helen's matchmaking for another chance at happiness. Though both Trish and Mona are dealing with the deterioration of their own relationships, it is Joy that Helen reaches out to help first and foremost. There is this way in which the offering of the man to Joy asserts Helen's feeling that Joy is helpless and needs to have someone look out for her, whereas Trish and Mona are seemingly much stronger. This final scene, which conveys a kinship model of reliance as the women look toward each other for support, concurrently destroys the importance of kinship as the central focus of the conversation is the breaking of the larger family unit into couples, and for some, nuclear families. The emphasis is clear: adult women should not be spending time with their parents and siblings, they should have their own lives, and by that their own families, as independence in America has been tied to the creation of an autonomous living arrangement outside of the extended family. The women's toast to 'happiness' at the dinner table suggests that this current arrangement in which they have come to rely on each other is not permanent, and they all have faith that they will be 'happy' soon enough.

²⁹ Ibid, 226.

Because *Happiness* concludes without any of the Jordan women having a major epiphany about love, life, or what happiness really is, there is in fact no end. This inconclusively echoes the ambiguous place of marriage within postmodern society; it remains alive and well, though there is no coherent evidence as to how or why this is so. Confronted with contrasting images of the successful career woman, the happy housewife, the newly separated grandmother, and the thirty-and-still-single pseudo-bohemian, the viewer comes to see love and relationships from a variety of angles, none of which seem overtly positive. Yet, each of these ‘types’ of women are in some way drawn to the notion that marriage can provide happiness and serve as a marker of personal success. In the postfeminist postmodern society women have numerous and sometimes conflicting choices to make. Granted more rights and privileges than ever before, women can be independent without being ostracized, however it is clear that traditional values creep into even the most progressive minds. This cultural paradox that McRobbie refers to as a “double-entanglement,” “comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life, [...] with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations.”³⁰ While not one of these women can have ‘it all’ like they believe they can, they are allowed the private space to create the public illusion of having everything that contemporary America promises to allow.

In a society driven by paradoxical politics and morals, *Happiness* comes to unveil marriage as a façade of social acceptability and normalcy that facilitates private life while largely dictating what that private life should be like. Solondz shows that even the most ‘perfect’ lives are filled with messy incidents, shameful moments, and covert traumas. And while he asserts the problematic nature of marriage as a ‘until death do you part’ institution by juxtaposing the

³⁰ McRobbie, 255-256.

cultural value placed on the longevity of marriage and stable family life against the reality of divorce and moral deviance, he also resoundingly suggests that the prospect of ‘happiness’ is enough to keep Americans looking toward marriage as a life-changing and valuable institution in which they would be glad to take part– with the ‘right’ person of course.

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