

研究生教材

研究生英语精读文选

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Lesson 1

In Search of a Golden Age

By Stephanie Coontz

Prereading Assumptions

Before you begin reading “In Search of a Golden Age” please respond to each of the following key words. On the lines next to each word, write down any word or phrase that comes into your mind related to this word. This exercise should show you something about your knowledge of the ideas in the reading. When you have finished the reading and the comprehension exercises, look back at these original associations. Think about how they may have changed or expanded.

1. golden _____

2. hybrid _____

3. nuclear _____

4. self-containment _____

(1) Some of the tremendous problems we face in modern American society—from drug use to economic instability to personal alienation^S have developed in conjunction with a series of remarkable changes in the composition and functioning of American families, and many people link these two sets of facts. They blame the problems on changes in family roles or values and argue that a return to some “traditional” or “natural” family would resolve the crisis.

(2) My research suggests that all the historical evidence contradicts such a conclusion. On closer inspection, no “golden age” of the family can be found, and many of our ideals are based on a mythical family that never existed in the real world. The source of many of America’s modern problems, moreover, both in and outside of the family, does not lie in a departure from old family practices and values but in clash between unrealistic expectations and a changing socioeconomic environment. The real crisis of American society is over how to handle the dependencies associated not only with infancy and age but with illness, unemployment, and degradation of the environment. Solving the crisis will require social commitments and obligations that extend beyond the nuclear family.

IS THERE A “TRADITIONAL” FAMILY?

(3) Many people hold an image of how American families “used to be” at some particular point in time, and they propose that we return to that ideal. In fact, however, there have been a wide variety of family forms and values in American history, and there is no period in which some ideal family predominated.

(4) Colonial families are sometimes thought of as particularly

stable and self-supporting. This was a time, it is often said, when “a man’s home was his castle.” It is true that paternal rule was seldom challenged, but this was based on a thorough-going subordination of women and the brutal treatment of children. Moreover, colonial families had little of the intimacy and privacy we usually fantasize about in constructing our ideal model. Community authorities and neighbors continually intervened in all aspects of family life. Children were frequently taken away from parents by authorities who found the homes “unfit.” Even more frequently the parents themselves sent their children to other people’s homes for years at a time.

(5) The high mortality rates of that era meant that the average length of marriage was only a dozen years, making colonial families at least as unstable as modern ones. If partnerships were dissolved by death rather than divorce this can hardly have been a less traumatic experience for the children.

(6) Modern Americans who like the parental authority and male dominance of colonial families would be horrified by their routine acceptance of sexual discussions between both genders and in front of children), the invasion of privacy by neighbors and community officials, and the relative lack of emotional privilege colonial households extended to the nuclear unit. On the other hand, those who are attracted by the corporate limits on individual enterprise among colonial households and by the public nature of colonial life are unlikely to be enamored of the insistence on hierarchy and acceptance of social inequality.

(7) In the era of the American Revolution and early republic, there was increased interest in establishing independent, self-sup-

porting families, but only as part of a much larger conception of social obligation and association. This period was also marked by a tremendous increase in premarital pregnancy rates. Furthermore... all the existing notions of family were greatly compromised by their acceptance of S and often dependence upon S slavery. The short lived equality and self-sufficiency of white farm families rested on the extermination of Native American societies and the annexation of a huge hunk of Mexico.

(8) Beginning in the 1830s a new family form began to take shape in the white middle class, as men lost older routes to self-employment or accession to a family farm, and as married women's traditional household production was taken over by unmarried girls working in factories. The new middle-class family was based on a strict segregation of spheres between the sexes, intense mother-child bonding, and on the idea that children must be protected from knowledge of poverty, death, and sex. But those who turn to this model as their ideal forget that the 19th century family was the main arena for the development of birth control and, frequently, the exercise of abortion. Moreover, proponents of the "simple virtues" of this family would be surprised by how it downplayed private, heterosexual relations and endorsed intimacies among women that some would consider scandalous. Women's diaries from this period devoted page after page to rhapsodies about female friends, including intimate descriptions of their embraces and kisses, while only briefly referring to their husbands. On the other hand, those who would embrace the sisterhood of 19th-century women are likely to detest the gender-role and other assumptions that created such female solidarity.

(9) In the early 1900s the growth of mass production, together with the emergence of a state policy aimed at establishing a family wage led to new ideas about family self-sufficiency. Families began to lose their organic connection to social intermediaries such as local shops, neighborhood work cultures and churches, and mutual aid societies. As families related more directly to the state and the market or to new religious figures using the mass media and bypassing local congregations), they also developed a new cult of privacy. Heightened expectations were created concerning the family's role in fostering individual fulfilment.

(10) Where the 19th-century middle-class family revolved around the mother-child axis, the 20th-century family elevated the couple relationship to its central concern. The new image stressed the early independence of children and the romantic coupling of husband and wife. Same-sex ties and intense mother-son bonding were repudiated as unhealthy. From this family we get the idea that women are sexual, that youth is attractive, and that forming a family should be the end of all endeavor and the center of our emotional fulfilment.

(11) But there were big contradictions between image and reality in this family. This is the period when people first accepted the idea that the family should be sacred from outside intervention. But the development of the private, self-sufficient family depended on state intervention, not only in the economy but in the destruction of community and class institutions that provided alternatives to private, self-contained families. The invention of juvenile courts, for example, allowed middle-class reformers to incarcerate youth who did not subscribe to middleclass notions of family propriety—even if

they had done nothing illegal. Acceptance of a youth and leisure culture in the middle class...meanwhile— which consequently sanctioned early marriage and raised expectations about the quality of married lifeS also introduced new tensions between the generations and new conflicts between husband and wife over what were adequate levels of financial and emotional supportv Divorce rates in the 1920s made the highest percentage leap easide from the postwar surge in 1946) in American history.

(12) Thus the family that emerged in the 1920s provides no more satisfactory a model for most people. By stressing coupled intimacy as the main source of emotional satisfaction, the romanticizing of the husbandywife union has generated still more changesf demands for easier divorce or for the legitimation of gay and lesbian pairings stem partly from the acceptance of the idea that there are no substitutes for couple relationship and the related conclusion that an unsatisfactory couple relationship is intolerable. The liberation of sexuality and the acceptance of consumerism within marriage led to a jading of tastes and a search for new thrills that began to tempt many to venture outside the marital relation.

THE TRAP OF NOSTALGIA

(13) On close examination, it appears that many of our images of the traditional family are derived from 1950s television serials. These shows presented an idealized mixture of values that never co-existed in any real family and that were in many cases quite contradictory. For example, the family of the 19th century revolved around the parent-child axis while the family of the 20th century revolved around the couple relationshipv The hybrid modern expecta-

tion that a woman can have an intense, close relationship with her children while simultaneously maintaining youthful sexual excitement with her husband is highly unrealistic, and this has introduced enormous stresses into many women's lives.

(14) Fantasies about the working husband of the past who came home to his secluded refuge from the real world each night are similarly misconceived. The ideal that there should be a strong sexual division of labor was never historically associated (as it is in the modern myths with the ideal that the family should be a private, self-sufficient institution. The earliest proponents of the 19th-century cult of domesticity did not see the family as self-contained. Intense same-sex associations cut across the couple relationship and reached beyond the family, while supporters of the sexual division of labor and the sanctity of the home were also the most ardent advocates of public schooling and professional welfare institutions.

(15) Only in the 20th century did middle-class families achieve the suburban privacy held out to us as an ideal by the media of the 1950s. But this achievement depended on government development of infrastructures supporting the move to suburbia (highways, sewers, etc.) as well as on federal subsidies for home ownership. The latter totaled 42.4 billion in 1986, compared to only 14.3 billion in federal expenditures for low income housing assistance.

(16) A more realistic historical look at families, moreover, reveals that many of the so-called modern problems usually attributed to the collapse of the "traditional" family have been around for a long time. Women and children...for example...have traditionally borne the burdens of poverty just as heavily although less visibly within the family...as they do in single-parent families today. The

only route to survival for many 19th century working-class families, for example...was to send their children into the mills and mines as early as age 1 or 8.

(17) In fact, the prolonged innocence of 19th-century middle-class children, whose loss is so bemoaned by some observers, was dependent upon the early maturity and exploitation of working children, especially the young girls whose domestic labor in other people's homes created a "haven" for the development of true motherhood, and whose labor in the sweatshops created the cheap consumer goods that gave middle-class families an elevated standard of living. (Today, too, youth are the core workers of fast-food industries that make life a little easier for some two-income families.) Detailed analyses of working-class budgets reveal that married women routinely denied themselves food in order to give the male "breadwinner" enough to get by, while they also expanded their paid and unpaid work to "take up the slack" in periods of economic contraction. In our own era, divorce is simply the latest means of redistributing poverty toward the most vulnerable groups in America women and children.

(18) Another problem with nostalgia for the "traditional" nuclear family is that in cases where elements of the myth did exist, they embodied internal contradictions or tendencies that may have contributed to our modern dilemmas rather than providing an alternative to them. To illustrate, many of the ideals we now hold about the sanctity of the family were developed after the Civil War as part of a trend toward disengagement from wider social obligation and community responsibilities that continues to this day.

(19) The inventors of the ideal of the nuclear family were also

the most fervent supporters of the growth of state educational systems and penal or welfare institutions...and for the same reasons private families and public institutions were both seen as substitutes for inconvenient social interdependencies that involved human relationships of reciprocity and obligation. Henry Ward Beecher, preacher par excellence of middle-class values, explicitly put forward the family as a substitute for earlier notions of social responsibility. He offered this ingenious answer to those who had "serious scruples³ about the morality of withdrawing from wider social obligations:

The family is the digesting organ of the body politic. The very way to feed the community is to feed the family. This is the point of contact for each man with the society in which he lives. Through the family chiefly we are to act upon society. Money contributed there is contributed to the whole.

(20) In this sense, of course, the notion of the family as an alternative to individualism was primed to self-destruct. The Victorian family can actually be seen as a halfway house on the road from larger notions of community interdependence to modern me-first individualism. If the family was not obliged to neighbors, class associations, or larger social responsibilities, why should family ties be based on anything broader than self-interest?

(21) The new 20th-century family was held together not by shared commitments to larger social groups and communities but by the notion that personal fulfillment could best be found in family relationships, especially through the joint consumption of new household goods...services...and appliances. The advertising industry pic-

tured happy families listening to the radio, reading together in the electrified home, eating new brands of food, luxuriating in new carpets or living-room furniture. But acceptance of consumerism within families fostered a certain confusion about the commensurability of things and emotions, creating a tendency to define oneself in terms of a growing neediness for more of both. Women increasingly agonized over whether to expand household consumption by taking paid work or by improving standards of housework within the home. Notions of deferred gratification clashed with demands for expanded consumption, so that child care literature vacillated between advocating indulgence and repression at different stages of a child's development.

(22) But most of the forces that have undermined family harmony in these ways were integrally connected with those that elevated family unity to a central value for 20th-century Americans. The 19th-century view of the family as refuge seems modest compared to emerging 20th-century demands that the family provide a whole alternative world of satisfaction and intimacy. Where a family succeeded in doing so, people might find pleasures in family life never before imagined. But the new ideals have also increased the possibilities for failure. Even the rudest shelter can provide a refuge, but the personal relations and material furnishings required to construct an alternative world within the home are harder to come by, especially given the expectations raised by commercial amusements.

(23) The recurring sense of "crisis" in the 20th-century American family is inseparable from the establishment of the private family as the preeminent site for satisfaction of all the emotional needs of men...women...and children. Ambiguity about the future of the

family” was inherent in the triumph of a system of cultural symbols that portrays the establishment of a new family as the happy ending for every story. One conclusion seems obvious. Any economic and political change that made family life less satisfactory as a source of consumption and personal fulfilment would cause shock waves in this conception of the family.

(24) This leads to a final point about the „crisis” of the modern American family. Very few of the problems we face today can be shown to be a result of the abandonment of traditional family values. More often, they are a response to economic and social conditions that make old family behaviors impracticable. In fact, many of the problems stem from the maintenance of old values under such new conditions.

THE REAL CHALLENGE TO FAMILIES

(25) As a historian, it seems to me that many so-called “modern” family problems are symptoms rather than causes of our social ills, and concentrating on the family symptoms rather than the cause is at best ineffective, at worst counterproductive. Part of the problem in starting or maintaining families, for example, is a product of deterioration in men’s as well as women’s economic position.

(26) The percentage of male-headed families with income at or near poverty level increased from 8.5% in 1978 to 11.6% in 1983. Young men’s real earnings have dropped by almost one-third in the past 10 years, young black men’s by almost 50%. In 1963, 60% of men aged 20–24 earned enough to keep a family of 4 out of poverty; by 1984 only 42% could do so.

(27) In 20th-century America, men have traditionally reached

their peak earnings between the ages of 25 and 35. From 1949 to 1973, an employed man passing through this age bracket could expect to increase his earnings by an average of 110%. But from 1973 to 1984 this figure fell to only 16%. A man passing from the age of 40 to 50 between 1949 and 1973 could similarly count on a 30% increase in earnings. In the years 1973—1984, however, he faced a 14% decline in earnings over the same decade of life. Meanwhile, the cost of sustaining an urban household increased by 35% between 1980 and 1984 alone. These are structural problems, not problems caused by divorce or by the “loss of childhood,” though they are certainly likely to make divorce and the loss childhood more prevalent.

(28) The family wage system to which many people wish to return, forgetting the realities of corporate decision-making and employment in the modern world, was based, as Coleman points out, “on both dependents and incomes being distributed across households.” But recent economic and demographic trends have created “an increasing distribution of income away from households which have children or other dependents.” Households without children ordinarily do not redistribute the household’s income to children.” This impoverishment of families with children is one of the most striking modern economic trends in America: the income of young families with children (household head under age 30) fell by about one-fourth, measured in constant dollars, between 1973 and 1986; the poverty rate for such families rose from 12% to 22% in that period.

(29) Ironically, many of the most visible symptoms of a “family crisis” are caused not by those who have rejected traditional

family values, but by those who cling to those values in this changing socioeconomic climate. Divorce, for example, is most frequent among women who marry while still in their teens or who have left their education incomplete. Divorce, according to researcher James Coleman, has no negative impact on children's school performance in situations where there are supportive educational••community••or religious institutions for the mother and/or children. This suggests that one of the most serious problems with divorce is not the divorce itself, but the continued adherence to unrealistic standards of privacy and self-containment.

(30) As for teen pregnancies, 1957—the height of the “traditional family values” era—was the peak year—when 97 of every 1,000 girls aged 15–19 gave birth compared to 52 of every 1,000 in 1983). Almost every Western nation with more sex education and less religion than ours has had much lower premarital teen pregnancy rates for the past 30 years.

(31) Similarly, John Demos points to studies showing that abusing families tend to be marked by “constant competition over who will be taken care of.” This suggests that abuse is an extension of the demands for privacy, intimacy, and individual fulfillment that are part of the 20th century ideal of family life. Colonial families, without such ideals, did not seem to have such corruptions of them either. Battering often occurs in the most private parts of the household; it tends to be triggered by very traditional demands for domestic services from the man and perpetuated by submissive, rather than assertive, responses by the women.

(32) I've argued, then, that “common sense” causal arguments suggesting that deviant families are the cause of many social

problems do not hold water. Such misconceptions stem from the idea that there is some natural family form out there, whose relationships are somehow “better” for people’s development than other families. Of course we know that some relationships have a healthy dynamic in our society and some don’t, but that’s a very different thing from saying that one particular form is most likely to create healthy relationships and should therefore be imposed on people, regardless of their diverse conditions. As adaptable and flexible institutions that operate in the real world, families are constantly changing. They cannot be constructed or deconstructed on ideological grounds.

(33) Perhaps the most important implication of this argument for policymaking is that we should avoid simplistic value judgments about family relationships. The astonishing variety of structures that people have used to coordinate reproduction and organize emotional interactions suggests that any solutions we attempt should not rest on blaming the family or setting up restrictive definitions of what a proper family is. We need to recognize the fluidity of family boundaries under different social and economic settings, respect the ways that people improvise in order to survive, and seek ways of supporting their own decisions and actions rather than trying to force them to accept models of what a family should be that do not exist in history and are ideological in nature.

(34) As Judith Olmstead has argued, the difference between functional and dysfunctional families often lies not in the form of their families but in the quality of their support networks outside the family. Indeed...the so-called crisis of the family in America may well be a mere subset of a much larger crisis of social interdepen-

dence and community obligation^v The family has become the receptacle of obligations and commitments that have been thrown out of all other interpersonal relations^u it has been charged with the maintenance of duty, morality, and self-abnegation in a world where self-interest prevails everywhere else.

(35) Since it is very doubtful that a society which denies obligation in the public sphere can maintain it in the private one it seems to me that the “crisis of the family” is part of a larger historical crisis in our society. That crisis revolves around the question of which decisions should or can be private and which can and should be social. It raises the issue of what we owe to others and can expect from them, and it challenges us to rethink the basis on which we conceptualize the periods of dependence that characterize the life of every human being, in or out of a family.

Notes to the Text

1. 斯蒂芬尼·库茨(Stephanie Coontz)是美国当代作家和研究美国家庭问题的学者。在她的“寻求黄金时代(In Search of a Golden Age)”一文中,她探讨了当代美国家庭所面临的危机和传统家庭模式之间的关系。
2. **alienation** /ˌeɪliəˈneɪʃən/ **nv** withdrawal...as of feeling or the affection (感情上的)疏远;离间
3. **conjunction** /kənˈdʒʌŋkʃən/ **n.** combination 结合,联合,关联
4. **commitment** /kəˈmɪtmənt/ **n.** 交托,提交;承担义务
5. **mortality** /mɔːˈtælɪti/ **nv** the condition of being mortal or subject to death^u death rate 致命性;死亡率;失败率
6. **traumatic** /trɔːˈmætɪk/ **a.** pertaining to or produced by a trauma or wound 损伤性的;外伤性的

7. **enamor** [i'næmə] . **v** to inflame with love...to charm 使倾心, 使迷恋
8. **extermination** Ieks,tə:mi'neifən/ **n.** to get rid of... by destroying 根除; 灭绝, 消灭
9. **annexation** I,ænek'seifən/ **n.** act of annexing, esp. new territory 吞并; 兼并
10. **hunk** Ihʌŋk/ **nv** a large piece or lump 大块, 大片
11. **segregation** I,segri'geifən/ **n.** act or state of being segregated 分离; 隔离
12. **arena** Iə'ri:nəl **n.** a space for combats or other performances 竞技场; 活动场所
13. **downplay** ['daunplei] .. 对...轻描淡写; 贬低, 低估
14. **heterosexual** I,hetərə'sekskʃjuəl **a.** pertaining to the other sex or to both sexes 异性爱的; 不同性别的
15. **endorse** [in'dɔ:s] .. to approve, support, or sustain 赞同; 认可
16. **rhapsody** I'ræpsədi/ **nv** an epic poem; exaggerated expression of feeling or enthusiasm 叙事诗; 狂文, 狂诗, 狂言
17. **intermediary** I,intə:'mi:djəri/ **a.** being between 中间的, 媒介的 *u* **n.** 中间人, 调解人
18. **cult** I'kʌlt/ **nv** a particular system of religious worship 礼拜, 迷信
19. **coupling** I'kʌpliŋ/ **n.** 联结, 结合
20. **repudiate** [ri'pjʊ:dieit] . **v** to reject as having no authority *u* to reject with a denial 拒绝接受; 批驳
21. **incarcerate** [in'kɑ:səreit] . **v** to imprison *u* confine 监禁, 禁闭
22. **subscribe** [səb'skraib] . **v** agree with; approve of (to) 认同, 赞成
23. **propriety** Iprə'praɪəti/ **nv** the conventional standards or require-