

### **Serial Mom**

*With Serial Mom, John Waters parodies the classical american family (as in 50's TV sitcoms), and in doing so, criticizes contemporary society's idea of the ideal family.*

When one mentions the term classical american family, visions of the Cleavers and Donna Reed, families out of “straight and narrow” 50's television come to mind. Always there is the breadwinning father to whom the children come for help, the housemaking mother who seems to find endless delight in maintaining her family, no matter how boring it may seem to us, and the children, perhaps one son and one daughter, who are ridiculously naive and almost disgustingly sweet, and always seem to have to earth-stopping crises that are easily taken care of by talking to adults.

John Waters creates a similar family for Serial Mom. Eugene, the father, is always giving advice: When Chip asks for donuts at the breakfast table, Eugene replies, “of course not Chip, you know they're bad for the teeth.” Misty, the daughter, participates in swap meets to make an extra fifty cents or a dollar that would be used to supplement her allowance. Chip, the son, who is in high school, teases Misty as though they were ten years old. Beverly, the mother, always prepares a healthy breakfast, offering eggs and cereal to her family. On the surface, the Sutphins are the model american family; Yet upon closer inspection, each family member exhibits a “darker” side. This darker side is part of the parody that John Waters makes of this classical family. Talking about this parody, Roger Ebert says:

“The laughs in the movie come not from the killings or even from the mom's secret identity, but from the details of everyday life which John Waters ... Skewers with such great affection. There is eve something about the way he

shows sunlight bathing a breakfast table that's amusing; his Sutphins look like they live in a cereal commercial.”

By juxtaposing an innocent exterior with a slightly sinister and more realistic (in terms of our current definition of society) interior, Waters makes fun of our conception of the classical American family.

Unlike the Ditmeyers in *The Brady Bunch Movie* or the banker's family in *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the Sutphins are given normalcy, in the 50's sense, at the outset. Each of these other families represent what is contemporarily connoted as the screwed up family. And unlike the title families in these same two movies, the Sutphins are given this darker underside. Both of these movies try accomplish what Waters does with *Serial Mom*, criticizing our connotation of the classic family, but both fail because the lighter and darker side of the psyche is assigned to different families, and not forced together to create a realistic people. *The Brady Bunch Movie* merely takes common events and looks at how the Bradys, representing the classic family, and current society deal with them. While both interact with each other, neither is effected by the other, and therefore events that should have caused conflict, such as Marcia's agreeing to go to the dance with two boys, wind up resolving themselves as if the family were in their own society. With *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the family is never forced to come to some sort of terms with their new society. Mr. Drysdale, the banker, tries to maintain the Clampetts status quo, and in doing so, shields them from the outside society. The effect is the same as with the Bradys, antiseptic conclusion of societal conflicts.

We begin with an average morning, and are introduced to this “model” family such that they epitomize our conceptions of a well behaved, happy, and productive family. We place these people in a good light, and look upon them with envy for their happiness as a family, which is so commonly absent from contemporary society. Once John Waters establishes this emotional

connection, he is able to use the Sutphins to explore our stereotypes and envy for the classic american family, since they seem to work so well together as a family. Furthermore, he is able to show that our envy is misplaced, that the classic american family not uncomfortable but outright undoable in our current society, and our stereotypes for what a normal family should be are incorrect altogether, that what we really see as normal is the family dynamic that manifests itself as the underside of the Sutphins.

The classical family is unable to survive in our modern society because they don't have the devices or the knowledge to deal with what are now common occurrences. The Sutphins have developed this dark underside to help them deal with the contemporary encompassing society. Unlike the Clampets, they have no shielding from everyday events, and unlike the Bradys, conflicts don't resolve as if the entire society abided by the family rules. The Sutphins are thrust into a society that is alien to them, and to cope, they have developed these alternative interests. These alternative interests, such as pornography or horror movies, aren't so far from our own interests, and because of this, we can relate to this altered family. However, putting the classical family front on top of these darker interests doesn't work. Somehow the interface between these two sides of the Sutphin's psyche serves to separately distort these two sides, and everything gets screwed up. This only proves Water's claim that a classical family doesn't work in our current society.

As a parody, *Serial Mom* takes four seemingly normal characters, the Sutphins, and turns their ideals inside out, making an otherwise unpleasant situation comical. We see on the surface a family that is "good". They eat healthily, have open conversations with each other, have very moral standards for the way society should behave; In effect they epitomize what our society believes to be the best way to live. Yet this ideology is only surface deep. Each of the family members exhibits a deeper, darker side. Most obvious is Beverly's violent nature. The ending of the first scene sets up this parody perfectly, showing Beverly relentlessly hunting a fly, a

seemingly normal event. This taking place during what would otherwise be a quiet breakfast makes the hunt seem to be more than it should, sadistic, much like predator and prey. This foreshadows the later events in the movie, as she hunts human “prey” in a similarly comical manner.

In all cases, Beverly is portrayed to be the one who is “correct”, as in getting back at a boy who hurts her daughter, and her victims as wrong, be they slovenly as in the old couple, litterbugs, or non-recyclers. These crimes wouldn’t warrant the extreme punishment of death that Beverly executes on the offenders, but as such, the punishments serve as a comical parody of the idea of a modern day suburban hero that keeps the movie from becoming too distasteful or serious.

Under any other circumstances, Beverly would be a modern societal hero, weeding out the unscrupulous. It is this juxtaposition of hero-usque qualities with the role as a model mother that makes this movie so comical. These are two situations, representing 50’s style TV genre, melodrama and horror all at once, which under normal circumstances never occur together, yet when forced to coexist, they make for a completely farcical story. The idea of a seemingly happy and normal housewife becoming a murderer behind everyone’s back is completely nonsensical when told within the classical american family. Yet when viewed in the greater context of the current society, it seems to be more of a device for Beverly to cope with her societal situation, albeit in a rather drastic way. Edwin Jahiel claims:

“On this send-up of 1950’s life-as-lived-on-TV, Waters places a 1990s overlay. He mocks our obsession with media personalities and our heroicizing them, no matter who they are. He contrasts violence with bourgeois values...”

By contrasting violence with bourgeois values, Waters shows us that our differing ideals for different sides of modern society, as in the family versus the maladjusted child or marauding vigilante, are completely ridiculous. Why should we have different standards of right and wrong

just because we are dealing with a suburban mother instead of an inner city hero? Waters is telling us that the elusive perfect family is not what we should be striving for as individuals since such a family would be completely out of sync with our modern society and value system. Rather, a more rounded family, perhaps a toned down version of the Sutphins, with decent family dynamic but moderated exploration into what is connoted as the darker side of our contemporary society, is what we should herald as the correct way to live.

The assertion that the classical american family as our goal is no longer even a question. Our society is no longer so cut and dry as to make such a choice. Waters realizes this, and tries to show that what is right for one may not be right for another. Watching pornographic movies or eating chicken may be disgusting for some, but very normal for others, and attacking another's lifestyle choices just because they are not similar to yours is not a means of cleaning up society. The other characters are also not what they seem. Misty, who we are introduced to as a perfect daughter involved with the community and healthily pursuing her hobbies, transforms into a whore of sorts, who moves from man to man, taking time for a photo opportunity, and continuously flirting with whoever is around. We don't see her sleeping with every man she sees, as this course of action would quickly lead to her being ignored as a main character, since she would be outwardly appear incongruous with the rest of her family. By merely suggesting her whorish qualities, Waters allows us to accept her actions as normal, not excessive, because her actions fall within contemporary society's limits of acceptable behavior.

Chip, whose very name harkens back to 50's cleanliness, turns out to be exactly the opposite of this behavioral connotation, immersing himself in the gore and fantasy of horror flicks. Yet his interests as well fall well within the fanaticism for movies that our society deems acceptable.

The father metamorphoses into a sadistic dentist who takes pleasure inflicting pain on his patients by drilling teeth without anesthetic. This behavior is more extreme than either Chip's or Misty's, reminiscent of the Dr. Scrivello in *Little Shop of Horrors*, whose sadistic, womanizing behavior is frowned upon by Seymour. While this behavior would seem unacceptable in even contemporary society, it does seem understandable as a device for coping with reality. Sadomasochism is fairly common behavior in the more private areas of our society, and while Eugene's behavior would certainly be understood as unacceptable by today's standards, his drawing pleasure from inflicting pain on others would not be unsuitable, so long as it was carried out with the permission of the other party.

While these behaviors would be scorned somewhat by contemporary society, by endowing each of these characters with these hidden interests, John Waters accomplishes two goals. This darker side gives more depth to each of the characters, making them more believable, as well as represent the darker side of each of us, which we prefer to keep hidden, within the protagonists. By doing this, Waters creates character that we connect with as well as understand, not as members of a classical American TV family, but as real people with real, and sometimes ulterior motives. In an interview with John Waters, Richard Corliss reported:

“All this is a parodic setup.... It's a tatty freak show, and Waters loves it. 'I'm a participant in every thing I criticize,' he insists. 'My moves aren't about violence but about how America is so confused...’”

When we remember these characters, we remember not the pristine family of the opening credits, but the down to earth, moderated, faulty people that evidence themselves from their darker behaviors. By remembering these “real” people as opposed to the perfect people, we achieve Water's goal to realize what our society should understand and accept: That we should see the American family as one which doesn't always get along, and whose values may not be of “pristine” quality.

Through this character development, Waters shows us that these are really normal people, and that the characters as portrayed before their deeper motives are revealed are really the shallow and farcical ones. In effect, he is saying that our contemporary society embraces these “unacceptable” characters as normal. No one in today’s society is as clean cut as one of the classic american family members. Each of us have desires and deeper motives that we hide from the world for fear of appearing too deviant or not fitting in with “proper” society. Furthermore, John Waters asserts that our deeper characters shouldn’t be kept secret for fear of not being accepted. Perhaps if Beverly knew this, her temper might have been moderated, and her behavior become more acceptable. Further, we should embrace the differences in each one of us and view our modern society not as striving for the perfection of the classical american family, but rather as a diverse group whose individual qualities are an asset to our society and which make our culture more creative and interesting.

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