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**Here's to you Mrs Robinson:  
Alienation, Allegory and the American Wet Dream**

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Ben Braddock, talented hero of Mike Nichols' film 'The Graduate;' both sportsman and academic, is reaping the rewards of his achievements under the indulgent eyes of his rich, middle class parents. One of his prizes is, in the form of no-questions asked, sex with the wife of his father's business partner – the defiling (?) Mrs Robinson.

Ben wants something else. The film focuses on the alienating force of consumerism in mid-sixties, middle class, America and challenges traditional gender positions. This paper will assess how much the film is political; examining its psychological content and consider the family as one of Louis Althusser's ideological mechanisms.

The Braddocks and the Robinsons represent the generation Ben wants to defy. The film can be seen as an allegory for the end of America's innocence in the Sixties. Ben's transformation from poolside lounge to social iconoclast parallels something of America's spirit of the time.

Critics were divided and confused by the Graduate directed by Mike Nichols, in America in 1967, and starring Dustin Hoffman and Anne Bancroft. They were not sure whether it was something of a rites of passage romp or of more importance. With the seduction of a young man by an older woman it came to be the film all men sniggered about because, of course, we all want to sleep with our mothers but it 's men who are forbidden the thought.

When I came to write a critique of 'The Graduate' in 1999 I realized that the Marxist sociologist Louis Althusser would see the hero, Benjamin Braddock, as a person who had been interpellated to fit a tight social code. Ben, an only child and successful academic and sportsman has been carefully created by his rich ambitious middle class American parents to live by the codes and conduct they have established for themselves.

The evidence of the film points to the control practised in the realm of the Braddock family, which is duplicated and mirrored in the lives of his father's partner's family the Robinsons.

This paper attempts to position the 1967 Oscar-winning box- office hit, into the fifth category devised by members of the collective who edited *Cahiers du Cinema*, in Paris, after the political upheavals of 1968. It will be placed as at first sight belonging 'firmly within an ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turns out to be so only in an ambiguous manner' [1]. It will be examined through the lens of contemporary film theory drawing on a number of texts; from *Film Quarterly* Spring 1968, Louis Althusser's 1970 *Ideology and*

*Ideological State Apparatuses*, but the guiding light to be shone on the work pointing to the family as realm will come from Sigmund Freud's essays *On Sexuality*.

Ambiguity in *The Graduate* becomes apparent when it is seen as a metaphor for Sixties America when questions were being asked about racism, imperialism, and sexism, when undergraduates and blacks were rebelling against the predominantly WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) regime, set against the film's received interpretation as a rites of passage romance in which a curious young man, initiated into the mysteries of sex by a predatory older woman, later woos and wins her daughter.

*The Graduate* was considered to be 'cleverly fashionable and confused' [2] by critics Stephen Farber and Estelle Chngas writing in *Film Quarterly* a year after its release in 1968. They dismiss the movie as failing to engage completely with the concerns of the youth of the day. There is too much at stake, they suggest, for Nichols to 'tell it like it is' and say he is, 'adored because he's hip and safe at the same time; his audiences know he won't go too far' [3]. Yet they recognised that young people were 'falling for the film along with old people, because, (they said) it satisfies their most infantile fantasies of alienation and purity in a hostile world, their most simplistic notions of the generation gap, and their mushiest daydreams about the saving power of love' [4]. Through insights from a psychoanalytical reading *The Graduate* appears to deal little with the 'saving power of love'. The hero's concerns, to break with tradition and question the status quo, engages thoroughly with the mood of youth, touching on emotions and experiences which echo fears from childhood. The viewer is left ready to evaluate his or her own social and psychological position rather than to accept the Hollywood view that romantic love is the source of happiness.

Farber and Chngas while suggesting that the movie fails to firmly engage with the concerns of the youth of the day they do not completely overlook *The Graduate* as political, but their reluctance to assess how much it is political is indicated by their refusal to examine the film's psychological content and to consider the family as an ideological mechanism. Louis Althusser states that the family has other functions than as an Ideological State Apparatus in that it 'intervenes in the reproduction of labour' [6]. The Braddocks, functioning within a bourgeois ideology, are intent on producing another lawyer or businessman for white middle class America. In more general terms and in other societies as Althusser notes, 'In different modes of production it (the family) is the unit of production and or the units of consumption' [7]. I

contends that it is not until Ben has completed a degree of psychological maturity that he can reject the prevailing ideology of the family, representing as it does white male power and aspirational consumerism.

Saying that, 'The incestuous longings that lie beneath the surface of the relationships are too uneasily sketched to carry much force' [8]. Farber and Changas ignore film matter which encourages a psychoanalytical approach. They argue that the film misses opportunities to explore a 'potentially explosive situation' [9] by being purely moral, but they overlook the psychological content of relationships in the film by failing to engage with the structures, identified by Freud, beneath the surface of the narrative.

Ben the silent, speechless hero matures throughout the action through an exploration of incest and family dynamics, in time to challenge the old order. White middle class values are questioned at the same time as America was questioning them. The ways in which the film succeeds as a gentle piece of protest and iconoclasm is not in Ben's ignoring advice to "go into Plastics" and in rescuing Elaine Robinson, his mistress's daughter, from a conventional marriage with the all American "Make-out King," but in the construction of the film itself; its camera angles, its screen-play, its direction, its editing.

It is not just a cleverly fashionable entertainment but an examination of cultural values as a metaphor for contemporary America, with Ben Braddock's uncertainties about his identity, only resolved through protracted family encounters, echoing the concerns of 1960s American youth family. Ben Braddock is seen failing to find a career, refusing to continue his education, having sex with one of his parent's contemporaries and rejecting the support of his family. His refusal to conform, lying around in the pool for weeks on end, his silence and erratic moods make up the filmic discourse which raises issues about Ben's motives and intentions.

As *The Graduate* opens we are focused on the alienating force of consumerism in mid-sixties middle class America. Ben's bored, complacent face on the right of the screen looks left as he is transported from plane cabin to airport in an unsettling unconventional shot. The instructions for travel read out over the airport's PA system sound like a totalitarian dictator's commands. There is a close-up shot of Ben's suitcase on the carousel emphasising the importance of property. Back at his parents' home he is asked about how he wants his life to be. His only comment then, and throughout the narrative, is that he wants it to be different.

The first ten minutes of the film concentrates on seeing him as a child in the thrall of his parents. He becomes an androgynous figure. We are encouraged to believe he is re-entering the pre-gender womb. He is surrounded by water, either the fish tank or the swimming pool. From an impossible camera angle we are inside his goggles as he fights through the adoring crowd to the pool in a gender-free diving suit given him by his father for his 21st birthday. He is not the archetypal male figure in the cinematic landscape but a rubber-clad hermaphrodite trying to stay outside the Patriarchy. Yet he cannot break with the values of middle class America until he becomes liberated from the family.

It is made evident that the Braddocks are hesitant about freeing their son to become fully adult. During a speech at Ben's party his father has great difficulty in referring to him as 'young man' rather than 'boy'. Sigmund Freud writing about the journey from child to adult in *Family Romances*, in 1909, describes the 'liberation of an individual.' He says, 'It is quite essential that liberation should occur and it may be presumed that it has been to some extent achieved by everyone who has reached a normal state. Indeed the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition between successive generations' [11]. Ben is unable make any decisions about how he will play his part in society until he reaches this normal state. Belief in Ben Braddock's incomplete maturation rests on seeing him hampered in a stage of his development. The treatment of the narrative shows the difficulty he has in separating his parents from the Robinsons. As a result he is seen as failing to separate his identity from the generation before his. The transitional phase is described by Freud: 'as intellectual growth increases, the child cannot help discovering by degree the category to which his parents belong. He gets to know other parents and compares them with his own, and so acquires the right to doubt the incomparable and unique quality which he had attributed to them' [12]. In Ben's case the nearest parents to his own are the Robinsons who fit a similar category to the Braddocks and who are often shown in the film in *loco parentis*.

Ben is not yet able to make the discovery which will speed his development and liberation. Naiveté leads to his difficulties as a man and his strange childlike qualities produced by the film, mean he is available for seduction by a woman he almost certainly confuses with his mother. We are left in no doubt that we are witnessing an Oedipal affair, even though as Freud says, 'the Oedipus complex reveals its importance as the central phenomenon of the sexual period of early



childhood' [13]. The idea that the Robinsons have known Ben all his life is repeated. "You've known me all my life," Ben tells Mrs Robinson.

When she first tries to seduce him we are looking at him, looking at her daughter's portrait as she comes into view in the mirror. Our confused gaze helps us identify with his confusion. To add to the tensions of his unwilling seduction, after he has innocently given Mrs Robinson a lift home, there is emphatic and deliberate use of the Eisenstein effect by Mike Nichols. As she removes her clothes we are treated to brief flashes of her body as she disrobes - each sequential element is perceived not next to the other but on top of the other, a technique designed to yield extra meanings. Here the technique promotes Ben's feelings of terror as the penis-free human is revealed to evoke his unresolved castration fears. Mr Robinson is firmly established as a father figure for Ben. He trots out the same parental platitudes and banalities of his father's generation, and while repeating how long he has known Ben he clinches it for us by saying, "In many ways I feel as if you are my son." He also suggests that Ben should, "Sow a few wild oats," little knowing that they were being scattered in his own barley field. At this point in the narrative there is an important difference between the novel, by Charles Webb and the script by Buck Henry and Calder Willingham, in the exclusion from the screen version of Ben's experiences with fire fighting and stays in brothels in North America. In the novel Ben tells his father, "There were a few whores included in the tour, yes' [14]. The deliberate omission of this chapter in Ben's near adult life from the film scenario leaves the way clear for Mrs Robinson to lay claim to Ben's virginity and for his development into adulthood to be delayed for much of the action.

Editing and camera work in *The Graduate* involves two repeated techniques. Ben is seen with just half his face in frame with out of focus middle distance background space between him and other protagonists equally on the edge of the frame - Ben and the hotel desk clerk, Ben and Mrs Robinson, Ben and Elaine as they discuss their future, after he has followed her to college in Berkley. This allows the viewer to feel ambivalent towards him, seeing him as unable to fully involve himself with others. We are also shown close-ups of his face; in bed, in the pool, at the desk, in conversation with his parents. These shots make up the content of the film so Ben is seen both as distanced and also as the direct recipient of the spectator's look. It is Mrs Robinson who provides scopophilic (pleasure in looking) contact with the female form as the fetishised object for Ben and the cinema audience's male gaze. Laura Mulvey's insightful interpretation of

Freud's original concepts can be drawn on here to further explain the Freudian view of the film. Mrs Robinson, stripping for Ben, (she invites him to watch); her leg as she rolls her stocking down, just in frame, as Ben stands transfixed in the same sequence, provide moments of clear fetishization for both hero and viewer. As Mulvey explains, 'The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from his castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), *in which Ben is involved*, counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object; or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the presented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous' Mrs Robinson is objectified by men who watch *The Graduate*. She is viewed as the desirable older woman by cinema audiences, although she is rejected by Ben who sees her as a disgusting alcoholic as he matures into the adult who no longer needs to demystify the castrated (m) Other. Before he rejects her Ben is seen as the prey of Mrs Robinson by the direction in which our gaze is led. While waiting for her, after he has taken up her offer of casual sex, he appears as a tiny figure in the hotel foyer viewed from far overhead. She appears as a vision over him as we see her at the same time as he does, reflected in the shiny hotel lounge coffee table.

There is the childlike idea that bedrooms are for sleeping in as he yawns and says "Goodnight" to the desk clerk (played by screen-writer Buck Henry) although it is still daylight. Ben also frequently makes little baby squeaks whenever he is nervous throughout the film. His immaturity is amplified as he kisses Mrs Robinson while she has a mouth full of smoke. When he asks her what he should do while she undresses she replies "Why don't you watch?" Yet we know he is the object of her desire. At this moment in the film Ben is in the place identified by Freud as the second stage in the Family Romance. Freud describes the less than totally mature person as 'the child, having learnt about sexual processes, tending (tends) to picture to himself erotic situations and relations, the motive force behind his desire to bring his mother (who is the subject of the most intense sexual curiosity) into situations of secret infidelity and into secret love-affairs' [16]. Ben is offered the opportunity to take part in these fantasies acted out *mise en scene* for the voyeuristic pleasure of the cinema audience. The sex Ben has with Mrs Robinson is associated with his parents, giving their set-up a familial twist. When Ben accuses her of being a broken down alcoholic he is playing out the stage at which children see parents as no longer the beautiful exclusive creatures imagined by pre-pubescent child. Freud nostalgically

explains the 'child's longing for the happy, vanished days when his father seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men and his mother the dearest and loveliest of women' [17]. Ben's parents want him to become part of the world of the father, preparing for a career and so on, but Mrs Robinson keeps him out of her adult world, refusing to discuss her married relationship with him. We learn that she is a victim of the ideology of the Fifties, which led to her marrying without love, and having to give up Art studies. Ben agrees never to take out Elaine (her daughter) and he and Mrs Robinson agree not to talk at all, making love perhaps for the last time in a pre-language tactile conspiracy.

A Freudian treatment of *The Graduate* sets up the notion that Mrs Robinson is against Ben marrying her daughter in support of the Taboo of Virginity. Ben says to Mrs Robinson, in their final intimate scene together, "So, Elaine is a taboo subject, then?" In a move which 1960's Feminists would approve, Mrs Robinson takes on the role more usually taken by the father as defender of her daughter's virginity.

In knowing exactly what sort of lover her daughter's potential de-flowerer is she has intelligence of special interest to a Freudian. Perhaps she believes that Ben has no gift for sexuality and that her daughter would be committed to a frigid marriage. Freud has consistent views on the subject drawing from case studies and written evidence that the first act of intercourse for a woman can have many and lasting repercussions. He says of this initial experience, 'very frequently it means only disappointment for the woman, who remains cold and unsatisfied, and it usually requires quite a long time and frequent repetition of the sexual act before she too begins to find satisfaction in it' [18]. If Mrs Robinson was either familiar with Freud or had had a similar introduction to sexual intercourse, she would be aware of how important were its implications. Although Freud admits that there are other factors such as a man's insufficient potency, he cannot but give special priority to this first act, 'There is an unbroken series from these cases of mere initial frigidity which soon vanishes, up to the cheerless phenomenon of permanent and obstinate frigidity which no tender efforts on the part of the husband can overcome' [19]. Not a fate a mother would wish on her daughter. There is also the idea, expressed by Freud in the same chapter on the *Psychology of Love*, when he adds an observation which would surely apply to Elaine Robinson, should she take on her mother's ex-lover, 'Girls often say openly that their love loses value for them if other people know of it' [20].



When Ben agrees to meet Elaine, against his better judgement but to stop having to entertain the Robinsons *en famille*, he behaves in an immature way. She treats him like a child; seen as amused by him in either a sisterly or adult mode. Yet on their first date we are convinced that here is the motivating force which will lead to Ben's liberation. As misunderstandings fade and they buy a drive-through meal we are separated from them as they begin to collude as members of their own generation, filmed from a long shot outside the car with no audio access, only a gradually distancing view of their obviously animated conversation.

When Ben finally decides to defy convention and halt the wedding speedily arranged by the Robinsons for Elaine, he is still financially dependent on his parents. His car, their graduation gift and a sign of consumerist America, is discarded as it runs out of gas. In Charles Webb's novel it is sold earlier in the plot to finance Ben's trip to Elaine's Ivy League college. By showing Ben rejecting the trappings of middle class America, at this moment, we are directed to witness his alliance with the homeless, the jobless, the under-educated. He sprints the last half mile to the church, where the wedding is taking place, and becomes a crusading iconoclast wearing white torn garments, like a Christ overturning the money changers' tables in the temple. Elaine Robinson and Ben Braddock reject the values of their parents and her wedding guests to establish their independence and identify with the 'have-nots.' The film's final sequence shows the couple on the back seat of a bus, with space between them allowing only half their faces in frame, as the camera cuts briefly to a view of the thin, dark-eyed, shabbily clothed passengers who stare in amazement at the dishevelled bride and her liberated knight.

The film can be seen as an allegory for the end of America's innocence in the Sixties. A series of devastating set-backs; war, assassination, racial tension and later political corruption meant that America's status as the land of opportunity and democracy was being seriously challenged. Ben's transformation from poolside loungeur trapped in the realms of the family to social iconoclast parallels something of America's spirit of the time.

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