

THE PARENT TRAP

Directed by David Swift
Distributed by Disney's Buena Vista Distribution
Released in 1961

Perhaps it is more than ironic that one of the iconic movies of divorce was produced before the divorce revolution. *The Parent Trap* is an insightful and fun examination of the breakdown and restoration of a marriage. It was released in 1961. In 1960 the United States divorce rate was 22% (meaning that the number of 1960 divorces was 22% of the size of that year's total marriages). To have parents that were divorced was something utterly foreign. By 1985 that figure had reached 50%. Part of the fun of the movie is that divorce was so uncommon that it could provide a suitably bizarre comic setup for Susan and Sharon's inventive matchmaking. Nowadays it's not so funny.

Of course, to get divorced one has to be married first. Today only 60% of American children are born to a married mother. In 1960 that rate was 95%. Let's consider the implications of these changes.

New York, in 2010, became the last state to allow no-fault divorce. Social conservatives have decried liberal divorce laws but, under the old paradigm, private investigators were routinely employed to find evidence of adultery. And if the spouses were amenable, the man would often 'confess' to an extra-marital liaison that never happened, just so both parties could move on with their lives.

So, while divorce was less common, it was just as messy back then. Additionally, many marriages were utterly miserable, with spouses reduced to being little more than roommates. And adultery was still rife. No wonder that Jesus told the Pharisees that Moses allowed divorce not because it had God's approval but because of the hardness of man's heart. Moses was just being realistic.

Divorce sometimes is necessary.

Not to be disputed, however, is the effect of divorce on children. The children of divorce are the most hesitant to wed. They don't want to put their children through the same mess they endured. Women whose parents divorced have a 59% chance of getting divorced, themselves. And when a man and a woman experienced divorce growing up, their own marriage is virtually doomed to fail. And so they delay marriage, opting instead to live together out of wedlock.

It's often said that couples who live together before marriage are more likely to divorce each other. Now, there's a big problem with showing causation there, since those that would be willing to live together may be more likely to divorce later anyway. Just as they are unwilling to commit before living together, perhaps the same people are less likely to stay committed after marriage. Regardless, it's not the living together before marriage that portends doom, but the people, themselves.

While couples were less likely to shack up in 1960, there were certainly more shotgun marriages. Men were expected to make a commitment to the women they had 'knocked up.'

But around 1970 a revolution in birth control devices and the availability of abortion began to take hold. Soon men could callously, but realistically, demand that women 'take care of it.' And women, no longer facing societal approbation for having an out-of-wedlock birth, began to embrace sexuality as not something just to keep a man, but to enjoy for its own sake. U.S. adoptions peaked in 1970. Five years later the number of agency adoptions was halved from 86,000 to 43,000. Less kids were being born, and more single moms were taking those kids home.

The whole dilemma is best examined with a simple premise: An unmarried teenage girl gets pregnant. In the 1950s she would be shunned and leave school and stay with a relative until she came to term. She might raise the child, but would often be pressured to give him or her up for adoption. Nowadays being a teenage mother is very common. There's almost no shame attached to it. For many young women, while frustration and resentment may be at play, having their own child guarantees the unconditional love they have heretofore been denied.

But the child is denied the embrace of two parents.

Columnist and former Ronald Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan attended a high-school graduation in the early 1970s. A pretty girl with red hair, her body swelling underneath her graduation robe, received a standing ovation from the attendees.

Noonan writes:

[I]n the sound of that applause I heard a wall falling, a thousand-year wall, a wall of sanctions that said: We as a society do not approve of teenaged unwed motherhood because it is not good for the child, not good for the mother and not good for us [...] The old America would not have applauded the girl in the big graduation gown, but some of its individuals would have helped her not only materially but with some measure of emotional support. We don't so much anymore. For all our tolerance and talk we don't show much love to what used to be called girls in trouble. As we've gotten more open-minded we've gotten more closed-hearted.

In this broken world our accommodations for human weakness don't seem to make things any better. People *will* fail, but making excuses for each others' failings just encourages more failure. We're always faced with the same problems—selfishness and short-sightedness—manifested in different ways. In the end, it is apparent that it is not the choice of spouse which is the most important decision a person can make, but the choice of sexual partner. It is that choice that leads to disease, pregnancy, unavoidable bonding, regret, jealousy, violence, rivalry, guilt, and discord.

So we end up with less marriage and delayed marriage. And while there are probably fewer kids now who have parents who are divorced, we have far many more with parents who were never married. This hardly promotes more stability. On top of that, we have successions of pseudo-dads and hangers-on that make many household units amorphous blobs unworthy of the title 'family.' In 1960, 450,000 couples lived together outside of wedlock. By 2012 the number had reached 7.5 million. There is no security in it. Oftentimes, the woman feels used, waiting for a commitment; while the man enjoys his 'test drive,' delaying the inevitable choice of breaking up or marriage. Indeed, the 'decision' to live together is merely the inexorable result of economic efficiency tied to long nights of post-coital sloth.

Even though *The Parent Trap* is in many ways ancient, it gets two things right—the crushing effect of a broken home on the kids, and the selfish egotism that causes once-lovers to reject each other and shirk their promises, writing off an entire marriage like they would a bad investment.

People have to find a way to love without getting love in return. If we can do this, we can redefine the popular definition of love so that it is less of a feeling and more of a decision. Love means sacrifice. Love is a choice more than it is a state of mind. Because of our culture's rapid embrace of lasciviousness, coupled with a chronic unwillingness to condemn anybody for anything, the institution of marriage is in big trouble. We cannot even decide what marriage is anymore.

And while marriages entered into by upper-income partners in their late 20s and 30s have, lately, proven remarkably stable, marriage is almost unheard of amongst the poor and lower-middle class. The very stability that marriage can provide, both to parents and children, is shunned by the people most in need of it. This is a tragedy.

How delightful that Susan and Sharon succeed in showing their parents the error of their ways. In 1961 the fantasy was that parents would be divorced. Now the fantasy is that parents ever get married to begin with.