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***Rosemary's Baby* and the Cult of Domesticity**

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For the Classroom

In this essay, the author engages with weighty themes: psychological horror, the failures of religion in a modern society, and the cult of domesticity. Given that this essay centers around an analysis of *Rosemary's Baby*, it's only natural that this essay harkens back to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's seminal short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," a heavy inspiration on Ira Levin's novel and Roman Polanski's 1968 film adaptation of the same name.

The influences on this essay are innumerable, and these influences yield the deeper, complex themes that this author embraces in her essay. How did she get there? We can read her essay in full here, but what sorts of scaffolding got her to this place? As a class, create a reverse outline for "*Rosemary's Baby* and the Cult of Domesticity," giving specific attention to the variety of sources that the author used, as well as making note of where the essay blurs the lines between film review and film analysis.

***Rosemary's Baby* and the Cult of Domesticity**

Brooke Coughenour

The year is 1968 and the film *Rosemary's Baby* has been released in theatres, directed by Roman Polanski, featuring lead actress Mia Farrow playing the waifish Rosemary Woodhouse. The public waited in lines to catch a glimpse of the terrifying pregnancy, and accolades were plentiful, with actresses Ruth Gordon (Minnie Castavet) and Mia Farrow (Rosemary Woodhouse) earning Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations, respectively. Fifty years passed, and the movie has failed to go out of style, standing among other “culturally, historically or aesthetically significant” films in the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress. Horror movies so widely honored are few and far between, which leaves one to wonder what *Rosemary's Baby* has done to maintain its status over half a century after its release. Though much of the movie is concerned with the occult and deals with the devil, the truly disturbing and memorable parts arise when one looks at the psychological horror that is developed through religious tension, domesticity, and an overall loss-of-control as it impacts the main character.

Roman Polanski opens the film with New York, 1965. Scrawled across the screen in pink calligraphy, the words “*Rosemary's Baby*” spread across sweeping overhead shots of New York City. An unfamiliar viewer could easily assume that the movie is a lighthearted “chick flick,” maybe a bit dramatic, but with a few laughs and cries throughout. The audience meets a young married couple consisting of Rosemary and Guy Woodhouse (John Cassavetes), who have just signed the lease for their new apartment, which Rosemary plans on redecorating to make more welcoming. She is eager to start a family, but Guy's struggling career as an actor (he has been in *Luther* and *Nobody Loves an Albatross*, Rosemary is quick to tell anyone she meets) has put their family situation on hold. They meet Minnie and Roman Castavet (played by Sidney Blackmer). The older couple is charming, albeit intrusive, and quickly befriend the Woodhouses, notably forming a relationship with Guy, who spends significant time offscreen in the Castavet apartment. Guy's career takes off when his colleague mysteriously goes blind, and he consequently tells Rosemary he is ready to start a family. In actuality, he plans to help impregnate Rosemary with the anti-Christ in exchange for his success, which builds over the course of the movie.

The film is often reflected upon as having heavy social commentary within it. Film critic David Sterritt nods towards religion as one of the subjects the book and movie comment on, pointing out that director Roman Polanski and secondary character Guy Woodhouse both share a cynical attitude on religion, calling it “showbiz” and teasing its costumes and rituals. They undercut the importance of religion and yet it is religion that so sinisterly takes over the Woodhouses lives, especially Rosemary, who finds herself at the center of a twisted ritual mocking Catholicism, where she is drugged and sacrificially raped by Satan (Sterritt). In this vein of thought, it also worth noting that the novel and film were released during a time where traditional religion was being looked at in new and sometimes shocking ways. The April 1966 *Time* magazine cover reflects this, asking “Is God Dead?” in what was the first *Time* magazine cover to include only text. The question was repulsive for many people and was the source of inspiration for many angry sermons and letters (Rothman). A strictly religious perspective on the movie and novel though is quite limiting, and arguably misdirected as it misses out on the potent sources of terror throughout the film.

Rosemary's Baby lends itself to a deeper analysis when the audience's lens moves into the domestic sphere. Rosemary's pregnancy at the hands of the Satanic cult marks a particularly dark twist in the tone of the film, as the not-so-classic movie monster is introduced.

Previous movies such as *The Creature of the Black Lagoon* (1954) and *Tarantula!* (1955) followed a long trend of having very inhuman antagonists, but it becomes apparent to the audience that the antagonist of this story is quite human after all: Rosemary's baby. Though a religious lens can argue for the cult of Satan being an antagonistic entity, author of the novel *Rosemary's Baby*, Ira Levin, admits that his purpose in creating the story was not to turn Christian ideas on their head or make some statement on religion, but rather explore the idea of a fetal monster, where tension is built for a grueling nine months before the creature even appears (Levin). Choosing to make the baby Satan's earthly child as opposed to a product of an alien abduction was simply one of Levin's choices in writing the novel, and less so a statement in itself.

Those motivations behind the novel blends well with some of the more feminist interpretations of the movie, which is widely recognized to be one of the truest adaptations from the bookshelf to the big screen. Shortly into her pregnancy, the Casteverts recommend that Rosemary stop going to her current obstetrician, Dr. Hill, and visit a friend of theirs, Dr. Sapirstein. Sapirstein rejects modern medical practice, ordering Rosemary to drink mysterious concoctions and to throw out all of her pregnancy books. As her pain and worry escalates, she is still told to follow orders, and when she says she read a book about ectopic pregnancy, Sapirstein disregards it and the book, telling her to "go home and throw it away, please." At a house party Rosemary throws as a way of distracting herself from the pain, she reaches out to her female friends, who assure her that her worries are not unfounded and that she should get another opinion on it. The rather tense scene, with her husband angrily at the door telling Rosemary to not listen to her friends, culminates with her pain finally ceasing, and her feeling the baby's first kicks. But the control men have over her life does not cease. As the movie marches to its conclusion, and Rosemary discovers some of the dark forces at play in her life, she flees her apartment and runs to one of the only trustworthy people she can think of: Dr. Hill. She confides in him, knowing she sounds crazy but has nowhere else to go. He tells her that she is safe now and can rest. Rosemary and the audience breathe a collective sigh of relief, until a knock comes at the door. Hill has called Guy and Sapirstein to the case, not because he is 'in on it' but simply because she is a hysterical woman and she needs the men in her life to make sure she is safe. Of all the movie's scenes, this one is ripe with cold sinking dread as Rosemary – and the audience – realizes that her world has turned against her entirely.

The suffering undergone by Rosemary at the hands of people she believed she could trust is a classic example of the heroine being victimized by systematic patriarchy, and aside from the demonic fetus, Rosemary's rough pregnancy that she is made to believe is normal reflects a classic maternal anxiety: whether or not something is wrong with the baby (Jacobs). Karyn Valerius elaborates on this idea of *Rosemary's Baby* possessing a social message, saying that it focuses on twisting traditional ideas on heterosexuality, family, and marriage in the spirit of Gothic novels and films. As a result, it is received strongly by contemporary feminist and queer readers, especially when it is contextualized historically with the criminalization of abortion in the mid twentieth century. Those factors contribute to a film that, for many, is a cry for the reproductive and sexual freedom of women (Valerius 119). Rosemary's position as a mother, and thus her vulnerability at the hands of her friends and family, resonate with viewers (Greco).

Motherhood and pregnancy are only one side of the domestic themes present in the movie. Rosemary's status as a housewife is very clear in the film, which aside from a handful of scenes, is limited entirely to the Woodhouse apartment. But the home that Rosemary so lovingly creates in anticipation of starting a new family is twisted in upon her. She hangs new wallpaper and rolls out rugs in a fashion compared to what one would see in a home renovation magazine. It is in every way a perfectly ordinary home, something Rosemary clings to even as her life becomes more and more unordinary. The chic interiors Rosemary becomes trapped in go hand in hand with the idea of her becoming victimized by conservative ideas on womanhood. One

scene in the movie is a long take of Rosemary sitting on a chair in her living room. She is folded in on herself, frozen in pain. “It’s like a wire inside me getting tighter and tighter,” she says in an earlier scene. This act has no music, only the sounds of heavy rainfall as the viewer sits with Rosemary, alone and suffering. She lies in the home she has made, once a respite from the outside world, but now something more akin to a prison. That isolation and loss of control she experiences is a significant part of the movie. Susanna McCollough focuses on this loss of control as a central scare of the movie. The audience is absorbed in Rosemary’s point-of-view, she argues, and thus the pain and deceit she experiences are understood in a limited way, creating a very cerebral film that encourages an empathy between the watcher and the main character as her life and body spiral out of her control (McCollough).

These outstanding aspects of *Rosemary’s Baby* have recently resurfaced as movie makers attempt to bring more social commentary in their work. In the past five years several horror films have emerged which trace themselves back to *Rosemary’s Baby*. Clarrise Loughrey details *Get Out* and *Hereditary* as two such films in her article “Rosemary’s Baby at 50: How the classic is influencing the latest generation of horror filmmakers.” *Get Out* focuses on main character Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya), who nervously prepares to meet his white girlfriend’s family as her black boyfriend. He navigates through the story as he is repeatedly convinced that everything at her family’s home is ordinary, though perhaps uncommon and even a little awkward. The story ends as the truth of the family’s plot, with a clear discussion of race relations, is unraveled before Chris. The strong social message and the brilliant use of a gaslighted main character with limited perspective is something that director Jordan Peele connects to horror films of the past like *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Stepford Wives* (another Ira Levin novel turned film).

Hereditary is another contemporary horror movie, directed by Ari Aster. It opens with the death of Ellen Paige, while her estranged daughter Annie (Toni Collette) attempts to cope with the impact it has on her family, notably on her own children; Peter – her sixteen-year-old son, and Charlie – her thirteen-year-old daughter. She shares with a support group that her mother was mentally ill, and she fears her own family will continue to struggle with similar issues. In a tragic accident Charlie is killed, mere months after her grandmother. Annie and Peter struggle with their own grief and guilt over Charlie’s death while unraveling a strange history their family shares with a coven, which seems to have been led by Ellen. Members of the cult stalk the family, specifically Peter, who seems to have been chosen as a host for the demonic lord “Paimon,” explaining that Charlie was a vessel wrongly marked as a host, but the mistake has since been corrected. *Hereditary* has a similarly eerie ending as *Rosemary’s Baby*, as Peter is now possessed by Paimon and being worshipped by the cult members. The melding of occult themes with tortured family units is a clear connection between the two movies as their main characters find themselves victims of a larger scheme.

As an avid lover of the horror genre, I can say with certainty that *Rosemary’s Baby* has resonated with me stronger than other twentieth century horror movies, and even some contemporary films. Polanski, using Levin’s story, brings together something that is both entertaining and filled with scares, but also truly artful, which many horror movies fail to do, if they even try. If *Get Out* and *Hereditary* are marking the beginning of a new type of horror movie, which I believe they are considering that Peele and Aster have both created new, similar, movies following their debut’s – *Us* and *Midsommar*, respectively – then the genre and its fans have much to look forward to as the real potential of horror becomes highlighted.

Rosemary’s Baby is a movie deserving of a thorough investigation considering its relevancy and thought-provoking nature over fifty years after its release. Though its discussion of religion is worthwhile, some of the most outspoken elements of the story are seen when looking at the way feminine roles like motherhood and homemaking are turned against the main character, which builds a strong sense of losing control of oneself and one’s surroundings. The audience watches Rosemary unravel the truth, engaged but never truly sure that any of what

Rosemary is thinking is real due to the limited perspective. The conclusion is strong, yet up to significant interpretation, as is the rest of the movie. After a grueling and somewhat disorienting labor, Rosemary is told that her unborn child has died due to pregnancy complications. But, just a wall away in the Castavet apartment, she hears a baby's crying for several weeks as she recovers. In the final scene Rosemary is seen crossing the threshold of her well decorated apartment into the more occult setting that is the Castavet home, where she meets her child, whose eyes resemble his father's (Satan, not Guy), and despite all of the horror Rosemary has undergone, she makes the conscious choice to be the mother of this child, reclaiming the position so unrightfully thrust upon her, and just as quickly taken away.

Though I would argue that her act is one where Rosemary defiantly takes up a new, non-traditional, self-empowered position of motherhood, the ending can just as easily be seen as representing the strength and continued standing of conservative family units as her maternal desires overrule the dark circumstances. Or perhaps Rosemary failed to escape the trap she was in entirely, leaving the audience with a more somber look at those victimized by patriarchy, whose bodies and lives are still under its control. The "true" message of the movie, if such a thing exists, is less important than the discussion it provokes. The film remains worthy of current discussion because it is consciously and artistically crafted. It is chilling as it puts the viewer in a position of being victimized by a supernatural force, leaving them to wonder if the real horror is supernatural at all. Contemporary movie makers have followed this trend, marking the possible beginning of a new era in horror, an era where its movies can be both thrilling and insightful.

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