



CONTEXT

Invasion of the Body Snatchers and E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial

Historical Context - Representation in focus films

The periods when both films were made was a time of profound socio-economic change in America. Studying how age, gender and authority are represented in a film can also tell you about what was happening historically. Similarly, understanding the values and beliefs during the time of production can also give you a deeper understanding of the film.

Science-fiction and horror genres in particular often reflect the hopes and fears of the period when they are made.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers - Historical Context

Teacher's Note: if students have studied *The Crucible* in English/Drama, then they may already know some of this background.

Research task: Big Question

Look at the date the film was released - what else was happening in America (and the rest of the world) at this time?

Key words/phrases to help your research: Cold War, 'Reds Under The Beds', witch-hunt, Communism, McCarthy, atomic tests.

Some other background:

- **Economy:** the US had a post-war economic boom, becoming the wealthiest population in the world (note the massive cars and huge houses all the characters have!). Many people - especially families - moved out of city centres, to the 'suburbs' or to small towns, where new, more spacious houses suited growing families
- **Gender:** in the 1940s, many men left to fight in WWII. Women took many traditionally



masculine jobs: mining, steel-working, farming, but also in banking, law and other areas. When the war ended, it was felt too many women were now expected to return to domestic life. By the 1950s, it seemed that once again there was little opportunity for women outside the home; or a traditionally feminine role such as nurse, teacher or secretary. By the 1960s, this frustration would help fuel the feminist movement

- **Age:** scarred by war, mainstream America seemed to want to return to traditional values and gender roles. But children who reached adolescence during the 1950s felt these values (that their parents had fought for) were old-fashioned. They began to rebel against them. They began to question and reject traditional beliefs, and generated a distrust for the authorities (government, FBI, police, army, even doctors and teachers). As films, fashion, TV and music sought to target this age group, young people found they had more power than ever before

Extension research: Read this article about how *Bodysnatchers* reflects the political situation in 1950s America. <http://www.celluloidcinema.com/post/invasion-of-the-body-snatchers>

Discussion question: *“In time of fear and upheaval, people often turn to traditional values and institutions.”* How true was that of the 1950s in America? What were their fears? How might this affect the representation of:

- Men and women?
- Children and adults?
- Authority (police, army, government)?

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial - Historical Context

Look at the date the film was released. What were some events that occurred in America (and the rest of the world) between the 1960s and 1980s?

Key words to help your research: counterculture, civil rights, radical feminism, sexual revolution, hippie subculture, anti-Vietnam protests, Nixon impeachment.



Some other background:

- **Economy:** the US had another economic boom, especially at start of the 80s, where President Ronald Reagan's policies encouraged business and capitalist/consumerist culture. *Where can you see evidence of a wealthy, middle class lifestyle in the film?*
- **Extension:** *think about the scene where Eliot brings ET into his room and shows him his toys. What does this say about the importance of consumer culture?* (see Focus Scene Analysis section for ideas about this)
- **Gender:** during the 1960s and 70s, radical feminism entered the mainstream and joined with other civil rights movements to challenge traditional values in every area: age, race, sex, gender, sexuality. More women than ever were in work - giving them financial independence from men - but these jobs were often underpaid. Feminism caused many women (and men) to question traditional sexual and romantic relationships, and divorce rates rose as women gained more independence in society. Whilst liberals applauded these changes, conservatives blamed feminism for breaking up families. Some men felt they were 'under attack' by feminism, and that their role in society was threatened: as a result, some 80s culture tries to reassert traditional masculinity. *When you look at the representation of women in the film, consider this context. In what ways does Eliot's Mum reflect the status of women in the 80s? What about the role of men? Think about Eliot's absent father, or the 'Keys' figure - in what ways do they challenge or reassert traditional male roles?*
- **Extension:** *read this university student's paper about women in 80s cinema:* <http://sbccfilmreviews.org/?p=6569>
- **Age:** the baby boomers born during the 1950s had grown up during the social upheavals of the 60s and 70s. Increased disposable wealth amongst children and parents meant children were targeted by media and other industries more than ever. Films, books, videogames, music etc. revolving around child- or teen-friendly characters led to stronger 'youth culture' than ever; and one that was increasingly adopted by adults. As the counterculture generation (e.g. Spielberg) grew older and took on adult responsibilities, they still continued to hold many progressive values: equality, tolerance, anti-violence,



questioning authority, introducing these to the mainstream. *When you are watching think about the different portrayals of adult and children's lives. How does Eliot's family reflect young peoples' independence? How does it encourage an adult audience to empathise with the children? How does it encourage us to distrust authority?*

Discussion question: *"The 1980s was a clash between the progressive ideas of the 60s/70s, and the 'backlash' towards more traditional, conservative values"*

How true was that of the 1980s in America? What were liberal hopes? What were their fears?

How did conservative views differ? How might this affect the representation of:

- Men and women?
- Children and adults?
- Authority (police, army, government)?