

B. The nuclear American family B2

- 1 Look at the picture and say what kind of family life it illustrates.
- 2 Read the text, explain how families used to live during the period from the Great Depression to post-World War II.
- 3 Indicate how government policies and economy reshaped the American family structure in the 1950s.
- 4 Say what women's role and the family profile of the Victorian period were and make a comparison with the 1950s.

The Great Depression and World War II placed strong limits on the degree to which "proper" family life could be lived out by large numbers of people. It was not until the post-World War II period that the ideal became a real possibility for the masses. Most basically, the great economic boom of the 1950s made for an increase in real wages. It made also possible substantial amounts of government spending: on the GI Bill¹, on sewer² and highway construction, and on the extensive subsidization³ of home mortgages⁴. These factors, combined with the savings that many Americans had been able to generate during the war years, contributed to massive housing construction and the creation of suburbia⁵. During the period of the Depression and World War II, many Americans had lived with relatives or strangers in crowded housing conditions; the idea of a "home of one's own" containing only one's spouse and children came to seem highly desirable to many. (...)

What was new was not only that wide segments of the population were coming to believe in the desirability of living only with spouse and children; also new were many of the expectations people held about what such a family was to be about. While the Victorian ideal of domesticity included wife and mother at home, it portrayed her household activities in very different ways from the ideal of the 1950s. A notion of woman as moral guardian of the hearth⁶ who left her more practical tasks to servants gave way to an ideal of woman who was morally and psychologically fulfilled through housework and child-rearing. The family became seen as the site of leisure⁷ and consumption where, ideally, leisure activities were carried out together.

Linda Nicholson, *The Myth of the Traditional Family*, 1997



1. GI Bill (exp.) [ˌdʒiːˈaɪ bɪl] = government programme helping WW II veterans to get access to higher education and find jobs
2. sewer (n.) [ˈsuːə] = égout
3. subsidization (n.) [ˌsʌbsɪdaɪˈzeɪʃən] = subventionnement
4. mortgage (n.) [ˈmɔːɡɪdʒ] = crédit immobilier
5. suburbia (n.) [səˈbɜːbɪə] = banlieue
6. hearth (n.) [hɑːθ] = home
7. leisure (n.) [ˈleɪʒə] = free time for enjoyment