Tunnel Vision

In the essay, The Madness of the American Family by Midge Decter, many interesting points were brought up concerning how Americans, who are so fortunate, have gotten themselves into such a predicament as to debate what ‘family’ means. Decter's main claim is that by marrying and raising a family in the traditional way, we will fulfill the destinies intended for us, which will give our lives full meaning. She explains that we can’t fool Mother Nature and if we try to, we will end up with all sorts of problems. If we live solely for ourselves and not be part of a traditional family unit, then again problems are created. Finally she notes that we need to relearn the old lessons our forebears knew about time-honored limits. Decter's claim is narrow, as well as some of her reasons she puts forth in establishing her claim. Plus, she does not talk to a diverse audience and therefore I cannot recommend her essay.

One strength Decter brought to her essay was the background information on herself. Before the essays starts, an important fact is mentioned. The readers learn that she has a life outside of her deep family commitments. She is a writer, social critic, and a trustee of the Heritage Foundation, and these things are important to know as they added weight to her argument. Her character is seen as honorable because she is interested in the family unit, free enterprise, limited government, traditional American values, and a strong national defense, which are the same things most Americans are interested in too.

Decter's main claim about how life should be lived--that only by marrying and being "part of the onrushing tide of generations" can our lives have full meaning--is very limiting. This doesn’t include the possibility that people may be very fulfilled living a single life. It also doesn't address other situations that create single life such as death of a spouse or divorce. After someone loses a spouse to death, they may not want to get married again, and the same goes for divorced people, especially if there is abuse present in the marriage.

One of the main points that Decter states is that we can't fool Mother Nature because our very bodily constitutions are aimed toward having a family. If we try to change the natural order, problems will develop. Many people would agree with this reasoning because there is a vast amount of scientific evidence to support the fact that when one
small component of creation is missing or out of sync, this causes a chain reaction of other problems. When looking at the common cold and what that small problem does to us, we can then reason that if our lifestyle is not in line with the natural order, havoc will also follow. This brings up the questions of whether people living singly are living out of the natural order. If people who are single know they don't want to get married, for any reason, they should not be forced because they are hurting no one, and in fact may become miserable, as well as their spouse, if forced to marry. Most people today are still interested in being married and raising a family in the traditional way, so if a small portion of individuals want to live singly or marry without having children, there is not threat to the extinction of the human race as she fears.

Decter notes that problems also follow people if they choose to live life concentrating on "Self". Most people would agree that concentrating solely on oneself is selfish and not a desirable attribute, and that could cause problems, as no one enjoys the company of a self-centered person. What she implies about single people is that they are selfish for not being part of a family because she makes no exceptions to her idea that all people should marry and have a family, and if they don’t, they are not fulfilling their lives. She does not seem to consider that single people can be unselfish, fulfilled, and happy. Her tone is rather light but serious at first, but as the essay comes to an end, her tone changes to be cutting as she describes men and women waking up to becoming "real" husbands and wives. Her view is very narrow at this point and I imagine that if there had been single people in her audience, they would have been offended.

Lastly, Decter passionately appeals to our sense of emotion as she talks about our forbears' sufferings and the age-old lessons that they learned about the limits of life. We do live in a day and age where the limits of living have been greatly enlarged compared to those of our forbears. The comforts we have, the choices we can make, and the health that we enjoy can be taken for granted, but this does not necessarily tie in with whether we are married or not. Decter seems to think that we have lost our thankfulness and respect for our easy way of life and that is all tied up in the fact that we are given too many choices. She doesn't want marriage to become a casual choice, like deciding what to wear for the day, but rather the most important choice we can make. Most people would agree that marriage is a very important choice to make. But what they don't agree with is that it is the only choice to make. She believes we need to relearn to be thankful and to respect the wisdom of our forbears. She states that because of our prosperity and the choices before us, many young people are living "at bottom unnatural lives", and that has created a dangerous swamp of "willfully defined individual freedom". Also, this is the reason why single people are always running to therapy, doing drugs, mutilating their bodies, seeking phony excitements and emotions. Most people would not agree with her reasoning that these problems are all due to people being single. Some may be due to selfish individuals but those individual can also be married. In fact, the reason most people need therapy is because of
relationship problems, married or not, not because of the lack of relationships. Today's problems are complex and do not have one answer.

In conclusion, I think Decter makes good points in her essay except that they're too narrow. Her goal was to not let the traditional family fade away because if it does, she fears all of human existence could fade away. I understand her urgency and the seriousness of the subject. But if she had realized that most people are still drawn to a traditional family life style, she could have viewed single people as less of a threat. As stated before, the problems of today's society are more complex than what she proposes. Most people of today, especially young people, do have problems directly because of negative family issues. So if more effort could be directed toward supporting families, not just having families, then our society could function at a healthier level, which would then give our lives their full intended meaning.