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A Social Historical Exploration of the Popularity of "The Rockford Files"

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A SOCIAL HISTORICAL EXPLORATION OF THE POPULARITY OF

THE ROCKFORD FILES

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Mary Frances Taormina
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore and explain the reasons behind the success of one particular television show, The Rockford Files, within the context of television as cultural expression.

Viewing television shows within the context of cultural expression opens them up to interpretation as artifacts of the society which created and sustained them. The Rockford Files appeared on NBC for six seasons, from 1974 until 1979. This thesis attempts to determine the reasons behind the apparent success of this program by assessing the cultural trends of this time period and evaluating their presence in or absence from the series.

The results of this study suggest that The Rockford Files spoke to its viewers, the American middle class, in a language that they understood well: the crime show. But the use of one particular formula within The Rockford Files transcends the viewers' familiarity with shows within this genre and creates Rockford as a depiction of the constant battle between an individual and society. In keeping with cultural currents, the individual is exalted, while most of society is vilified as corrupt and demeaning. Rockford rises above this simplistic assessment of the dialectic between individualism and society, however, by providing a hero who demonstrates to viewers that a compromise between individualism and membership in society can be effected. Jim Rockford stands as an example to the television audience of one man who succeeds as a member of society while maintaining his sense of individualism.
A SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL EXPLORATION OF THE POPULARITY OF

THE ROCKFORD FILES
CHAPTER I

The Rockford Files ran on NBC stations from 1974 to 1979, its longevity a testament to the show's high ratings and popularity.¹ Few television shows remain on the air for five seasons; many have trouble surviving their first year. The high rate of failure for television shows makes any success that much more significant. Explaining such success can reveal a great deal about the culture in which these shows thrive.

In order to arrive at just such an explanation for the success of The Rockford Files, this thesis will undertake an exploration of the Burkean dramatistic elements that are common to Rockford episodes. These elements, in turn, will reveal patterns that exist throughout the length of the series. These patterns will be assessed as formulas, according to John G. Cawelti's criteria. And finally, this

¹ In 1974, Rockford was ranked twelfth, with a 23.7 ratings share. Although the show never again ranked in the top 25, it continued to be renewed for five more seasons. The lead-in shows during the first few years of Rockford may have contributed to its success, since they were among the top ten shows themselves (Sanford & Son and Chico and the Man). A further indication of the popularity of Rockford can be seen in the #10 ranking of the theme, written by Mike Post, on Billboard magazine's Top 60 list for 1975.
formula will be used to open up American middle-class culture in the middle and late 1970s. The predominant "helping a friend" formula will reveal *The Rockford Files* as a successful attempt to recreate America's mythic individualism by portraying Rockford as a mythic individual who balances his individualism against his membership in society, thus providing relief for its viewers suffering from the need to maintain their own individualism without dropping out of society. *The Rockford Files'* popularity is attributable to this timely version of the mythic individual, Jim Rockford, and his unique and unlikely ability to survive in contemporary society without compromising his values.

Determining the reasons behind the success of any particular series is a complicated process. One must consider a great many factors: the individual popularity of the actors (James Garner in particular), the show's audience, the time slots in which it was broadcast, and the amount of promotion given the show by the network. Also important to any explanation of success are the quality of writing, production,
direction, and acting on the series. But probably the most significant, as well as the most hidden factor that determines the popularity of the show is the recurrence of a formula or formulas.

Formulas exist within the larger category of genre. John G. Cawelti defines genre as "a literary class that views certain typical patterns in relation to their artistic limitations and potentials" (Adventure, Mystery and Romance 8). That is, a genre is the product of the evolution of several formulas, exists within certain developed limits and potentials, and can be used as a model with which to compare various offerings in order to make aesthetic judgments of their worth.

Any particular genre will necessarily include a number of formulas. Cawelti defines formulas as "essentially a set of generalizations about the way in which all the elements of a story have been put together" (30). Thus, the attention of the critic must be focused on the entire story rather than upon any one particular element. The focal point for the

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2 The Rockford Files was created by Roy Huggins and Stephen J. Cannell. As part of a deal between Huggins and Garner, Meta Rosenberg, Garner's friend and manager, had been promised the title of Executive Producer on the show. When Rosenberg expressed her dissatisfaction over her lack of actual responsibility, Garner confronted Huggins. Consequently, Huggins left the show after the first season. Cannell remained as producer; other producers included Juanita Bartlett and Chas. Floyd Johnson. Cannell, Bartlett, and Johnson wrote the majority of Rockford episodes. Also, after the first season, Garner's company, Cherokee Productions, produced the program for Universal Studios.
critic is the "synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a more universal story form or archetype" (Cawelti 6). These cultural conventions draw from a "large variety of existing cultural and artistic interests and concerns" (Cawelti 30). Thus, a great many interests are brought into one form, enabling more people to "enjoy," that is, to watch (in the case of television), the story.

The creation of a story through the synthesis of cultural conventions is at once a liberating and a limiting process. The author or authors of such a story (and more specifically, of such a series) must learn to inject some originality into the formula, but must not transgress the boundaries of the genre and formula in use. Yet these bounds can act as a tool for the writer because they eliminate the need for an excessive amount of exposition; for instance, rather than being forced to explain the duties of a private investigator in a detective series, such shows need simply establish that this is the basis on which the show will operate.

particularly in writing for television, script writers know that the ease with which a story can be placed in a genre is crucial for selling the series. Television executives often communicate their ideas for series in short catchy phrases. Producer Ric Meyers, in Murder on the Air, described Rockford as "Maverick as a private eye" (211). NBC's Brandon Tartikoff spoke of three new CBS shows in a similar manner: "Magnum is Rockford with another guy in a moustache; Ladies
Man is WKRP sideways; Midland Heights is a ripoff of Dallas" (Inside Prime Time 70). Pitching an idea that does not fit precisely into a genre is generally only acceptable to a network executive when there is a near fit, as in the case of Murder, She Wrote. (Although not a private detective, Jessica does basically function in that capacity.) Today however, there is a growing trend toward successful shows that combine genres, leading to the creation of new categories. When The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd made its debut, critics could not decide whether the show was a comedy or a drama, so they simply invented a new word for it -- dramedy.

The use of formulas on television shows is beneficial to the industry for several reasons. Of course, there is the advantage of a pre-formed knowledge base on the part of the audience concerning the subject matter. Millions of viewers feel that they know what a private detective does, by virtue of the many hours they have spent watching detective shows. The introduction of a new private detective show is made easier by this collective memory. As Cawelti says, "The audience's past experiences with a formula gives it a sense of what to expect in new individual examples, thereby increasing its capacity for understanding and enjoying the details of a work" (9). Formula writing also allows the writers to work at a fast pace, having dispensed with the need to invent new dramatic structures. And the advantage of speed in writing for television, where anywhere from thirteen to
twenty-six episodes must be produced each season, is undeniable.

According to Cawelti, the explanation of the manner in which "cultural imagery and conventional story patterns are fitted together constitutes a partial interpretation of the cultural significance of these formulaic combinations" (30). Consequently, explaining the primary formula of a show can uncover at least some of the fundamental concerns of the culture of the viewers, as well as indicating the manner in which this culture is inclined to deal with these concerns. Clearly, a close examination of the way in which The Rockford Files combines cultural imagery and conventional story patterns will go far in any attempt to explain the show's popularity with its audience.

Kenneth Burke's understanding of dramatic action provides useful categories for detailing the formulaic pattern of The Rockford Files. According to Burke, the dramatistic process involves four elements: pollution (rejection), guilt, purification, and redemption.

The initial element, pollution, is a rejection of hierarchy. Norms are violated, and disruption of the social order occurs (Brock 350, Chesebro and Hamsher 591). In terms of plot, the commission of a crime witnessed by the viewer in the opening moments of the episode typifies this element.

Pollution is followed by guilt, primarily for violating the hierarchy of social order. Someone or something must be
assigned the responsibility for causing the pollution (Chesebro and Hamsher 591). Assigning guilt is often a point of confusion in the story. Although the viewer almost always knows who is guilty, the characters often do not. In almost all episodes, however, it is Rockford who accepts the responsibility for the guilt -- i.e., he agrees to put things back in order.

The third Burkean element is purification. This portion of the dramatistic process is devoted to putting the hierarchy back into place and eliminating the pollution and guilt. As Burke views purification, it can be an act of either mortification or victimage. Mortification involves self-sacrifice, while victimage involves the elimination of guilt through the use of a scapegoat (Brock 351). Both types of purification are in evidence in Rockford. At times, when working on a case, Rockford takes the blame and the punishment (e.g. being beat up) for his guilty client. At other times, he succeeds in catching some criminal who becomes the scapegoat to insure purification.

The final Burkean dramatistic element is redemption, where order is achieved and the hierarchy (or some new hierarchy) is put back in place. A standard demonstration of redemption at the conclusion of an episode of Rockford might involve that traditional feature of detective programs, the loosely-disguised summing up and explanation of what went on in the now-concluded story. Typically in this sort of scene,
Rockford, his client(s), and any of the cast involved in the story, are at Rockford's trailer having dinner or just relaxing. They talk first about the case and state its conclusion. Then they move on to a discussion of what the client(s) will do next, now that their problem has been solved (purified) and they have been redeemed.

Burke's theories work well in conjunction with those of Cawelti. C. Ronald Kimberling, author of *Kenneth Burke's Dramatism and Popular Arts*, points out three similarities between these theorists that demonstrate their compatibility.

. . . 1) both start from the premise that the interaction between the audience and the work is dialectical, not merely a behaviorist response to the formal "stimulus" of the work of art; 2) both place great emphasis on the artist's and audience's social environment as a "Scenic" backdrop for the work; and 3) both stress the prominence of the symbol as it is developed and carried forth by the formal properties of the work. (51)

Pollution, guilt, purification and redemption will be useful in defining the commonalities among the episodes viewed. These four elements provide a certain structure around which the stories are built and enable the critic to move past this structure to the manner in which it is employed. That is, by analyzing the four elements present within each episode, an eventual decision can be made as to the formula that is being
used in any particular episode. Identification of the formula will facilitate insight into the popularity of the series.
CHAPTER TWO

The success of The Rockford Files as a series depended upon two main factors. The first of these was the genre in which the program was cast -- the crimeshow, or as David Marc calls it, the "comedy of public safety" (Demographic Vistas 65). Cawelti discusses the mythology of crime in our society, calling it a "great imaginative obsession" (51). This obsession dates as far back as ancient Greece and Rome, where murder was a favorite subject of dramatists (52). And its continuation through the evolution of society is clearly marked. Books, plays, folk ballads, newspapers, radio and film from their inception dwelt on violent crimes, especially on those that really occurred. It is little wonder that one of the staple show types that appears on American television centers around crime and the apprehension of criminals. In general, such programming fulfills an audience's basic fascination with violence and crime.

Despite the clear desire of the public for shows that center around crime, not all shows within this genre are
automatically successful.³ It is not enough to provide the audience with its accustomed dose of criminal enactments and resolutions; there must be some sort of gimmick, a hook that makes the show different from any of the others. And in order to create an audience for The Rockford Files, its writers and producers did what came "naturally." They took characterization, the key to the success of comedy on television, and transported it to the drama series, thereby adding the second main ingredient in their recipe for success.

Just as a situation comedy is centered around a particular set of circumstances, a dramatic show that bases a large part of its appeal on its characters must rely on a similarly consistent manner of presentation. The Rockford Files relies on one formula for the majority of its episodes, a formula that is well suited to showcasing the charm of its characters. This formula can be succinctly described as "helping a friend." Nearly every show fits neatly into this single formula and even the exceptions seem to be derivations of the main features of the formula.⁴

³ The reasons for success can be varied; some shows may receive low ratings, but earn critical praise, while others may be critically panned, but earn high ratings. Both instances describe some sort of success. The important factor in judging the success rate of these series, given the fluctuation of these other markers, seems to be their longevity.

⁴ Out of the approximately 113 hours of Rockford that exist, I viewed thirty-six hours. These episodes were selected from the collection of approximately 80 episodes held by the Library of Congress. I purposely selected episodes representing all six years of the show's production, but applied no other restrictions to my random process of
Because the "helping a friend" formula enabled the series to focus on Rockford and his friends, Rockford's producers were able to introduce a unique comedic element to the series. This light-handed approach to a private detective program was an innovation in 1974. Jim Rockford does embody some of the mythical qualities of more traditional detectives, but he also carries his own personal trademarks into the television arena. Countering his solitary and somewhat sordid lifestyle (as symbolized by his filthy trailer, which is not yet paid for) is his close and fulfilling relationship with his father. Although Rockford has reason to be bitter about the way in which his life has turned out, and in particular about the time he served in prison for an armed robbery that he did not commit, this prison time is instead a source of comedy for the show. This comedy most often materializes through Rockford's interaction with Angel, a former inmate at San Quentin with whom Rockford maintains a sort of friendship. The various situations into which Angel manages to put himself, and by association, Rockford, comprise a great many of the Rockford episodes. And the traditional lack of respect for the police force, while present in the series, is at once softened by Rockford's friendship with Sergeant Dennis Becker and made comedic by the irate posturings of Lieutenants Chapman and Diehl.

The Rockford Files may have been the first show to cast selection.
the detective in the role of the occasional fool; its success in doing so is certainly the explanation for the proliferation of the technique since the mid 1970s. Magnum P.I. is essentially Jim Rockford in a younger body, with a slightly more macho manner of operation. Simon & Simon, although featuring two protagonists, also portrays detective work in a somewhat comedic manner. The two brothers, opposite in nature, play off of one another for laughs. Riptide, created by Stephen J. Cannell, who produced Rockford while still working for Universal Studios, almost completely abandons the idea of detecting in favor of story lines that focus on the relationship between three men who live on a boat together and own a detective agency.

In short, The Rockford Files began with the raw materials of the generic hard-boiled detective and tailored them to the persona of James Garner. Interestingly, five years before the filming of the premiere Rockford episode, Garner made a movie titled Marlowe, a "sleeper feature" based on the Raymond Chandler character. It seems entirely plausible that this movie served as the original inspiration for the Rockford character (Variety April 10, 1974). But any series with Garner seemed destined to showcase his trademark style, which Variety describes as "sardonic and sometimes a little

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5 Interestingly, Tom Selleck had been a struggling actor until he landed a guest role on Rockford playing Lance White, the "perfect" private investigator. He was so successful in his role as Rockford's foil that he was featured in a second episode. Soon after, he was offered the pilot for Magnum.
whimsical" (September 18, 1974). Although Garner had made a
number of movies, it was not until he starred in the Maverick
series as Bret Maverick, riverboat gambler, that he managed
to achieve the success and popularity that he maintains to the
present. This character was something of a con artist,
allowing Garner to lay on his smooth Oklahoma charm. Jim
Rockford is essentially the Maverick character placed in a
different set of circumstances. Todd Gitlin, author of Inside
Prime Time, quotes NBC programming executive Perry Lafferty
on the subject of casting and James Garner: "The key to every
television program's success -- and this will get a lot of
people mad, but it's true -- is casting. . . . It's who
plays the lead. I can't tell you any plots from The Rockford
Files. I used to love it. I love James Garner. . . " (67).

The principle behind situation comedies is putting the
same characters in a variety of situations in order to see
what happens. This principle is at work within the "helping
a friend" formula of Rockford. Just as sitcom characters
sometimes exhibit larger-than-life strengths or weaknesses,
the characters on Rockford display their personality quirks
often and prominently. Rockford himself is portrayed as the
perpetual loser, mainly victimized by others. He is the
mainstay around which the other characters, who generally have
more typical sitcom features, revolve. Rocky, Jim's father,
is a slightly foolish old man, sure that Jim is ruining his
life by working as a private investigator and equally sure
that all would be well if Jim would become a trucker, as Rocky had been before retirement. Beth Davenport is Rockford's "slightly spaced-out, bleeding heart lawyer" (Marc 90). With her odd assortment of clients in need of investigatory assistance, she is quite likely to provide Rockford with the situation around which any given episode might revolve. Dennis Becker, as has been mentioned, is a police officer. Early in the series, he is a sergeant and, although he usually is willing to do favors for Rockford, he must constantly resist doing so, or at least appear to resist, because his superiors detest Rockford. Later in the run of the series Dennis makes lieutenant and the usual scenes where Rockford attempts to con or bully Dennis into helping lose some of their charm. It is no longer very risky for Dennis to help Rockford. The last recurring character of significance is Angel Martin. Rockford met Angel when they were both in prison and they have maintained an embattled relationship after their releases. Angel is a constant irritant on the show -- his con artist approach to any situation, along with his double-crossing, selfish tendencies, provoke both Rockford and the viewer.

The inferior quality of all police work, in comparison to Rockford's skills, is a continual theme throughout the series and no other factor demonstrates this inferiority as vividly as the characterization of police officers featured on the program. With the exception of Dennis and the
occasional officer who is an acquaintance of Rockford through Dennis, police officers on *Rockford* are either not presented as three-dimensional characters or they are shown as obnoxious and repellent. The two lieutenants, Diehl and Chapman, are basically interchangeable. They both have crusty dispositions and do not approve of Dennis (in large part because of his continued friendship with Rockford). Diehl and Chapman serve as comic foils for Rockford's superior wit and are continually made foolish by Rockford's ability to solve crimes without police assistance. Also, despite their extreme dislike of Rockford, both lieutenants adapt an attitude of subservient politeness when dealing with anyone else, even if they are Rockford's clients. Their behavior indicates that they are not rejecting civilians in general, nor even all private investigators. It is Rockford himself who brings out such vitriol in these societal regulators.

Unlike most characters on an hour long crime show, the recurring characters featured on *The Rockford Files* are allowed some room for development. They are not typical sidekick characters, such as Howie on *The Fall Guy* or Sam on *Quincy*. *Rockford*'s characters are unique. They each have a singular appeal, engaging the viewer's interest on their own merits in addition to the attention they earn by virtue of

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6 In "White on White and Nearly Perfect," Chapman turns out to be a close friend of Lance, who calls him "Chappy." Chapman even asks Lance's advice on the investigation of a murder.
friendship with the show's protagonist. This sort of attachment is similar to those formed on situation comedies. When *Happy Days* premiered, the Fonz was not meant to be anything other than a supporting character. Nevertheless, when it became clear that the Fonz was an appealing and popular character, the writers featured him much more prominently in the show and made him more complex. The writers for *The Rockford Files* give the actors sufficient time within the hour-long format to develop the illusion of the complex personalities of their characters. Although the show is ostensibly about Rockford's adventures as a private investigator, its hidden agenda is the depiction of relationships. Rockford's job serves as a backdrop for the more important drama of his relationship to the world around him and to his circle of friends.

One of the most important relationships that Rockford maintains as a result of his job is with the police department. Despite Rockford's general contempt for the police force, he continually calls on them for aid when he finds himself in a tough situation. There can be no denying the value of the police force for an investigator who works alone. At these times, Rockford seems to regard the police as his own personal bodyguard service.

Rockford's attempt to mold the police force to his own desires is reflected in his relationship with the law. In accordance with the conventions of private detective stories,
Rockford has a somewhat mysterious past. We know that he served time in prison for an armed robbery he did not commit, but we never learn how Rockford happened to be wrongfully convicted. Such an important omission on the part of the writers and produces raises other questions about Rockford's past. The only details revealed to the viewers concern the time Rockford spent in prison and his stint in the Army during the Korean War. But Rockford knows a great deal about things such as running con games and breaking-and-entering. Often, the script attributes this sort of knowledge to something he learned in prison, but this explanation seems contrived, given the hidden nature of his past. Rockford's character quite possibly was originally developed with many more criminal tendencies than actually surface during the run of the show. He is, after all, a con man; at times, there are even hints of past glories from successful con games. But placing a criminal character in the role of the hero in a prime time television series has never been possible. Audiences must be able to identify with television heroes and no audience will identify fully with someone who continually engages in criminal activity for its own sake.

Of course, criminal activity for a good cause is an entirely different matter. Rockford and countless other television investigators and police officers habitually break into offices, leave the scene of a crime, or commit other offenses, but each time they are acting on behalf of some
other party, working to eliminate the "Burkean" pollution created by others. Many television shows provide their heroes with criminal pasts, but invariably they seem to have some good reason for their behavior. For example, in one episode of *Hardcastle and McCormick*, Hardcastle convinces McCormick to become law-abiding by enlisting his help in enforcing the law. The *A-Team* is forced to break laws and elude the police because they are wanted for a crime they did not commit. And if there is any doubt about the validity of their fugitive status, the team spends their spare time working on behalf of people who have been victimized by real criminals. As on *Rockford*, the message of the writers and producers seems to be that a little law-breaking for a good cause is perfectly acceptable. Only criminal behavior for personal gain is improper.

Although the writers for *Rockford* tended to fudge the lines between criminal behavior and abiding by the law, they never allowed any obscuring of their opinions on organized crime. They constantly featured members of organized crime and their organizations as the guilty parties in *Rockford* episodes. Most of the time the mobsters were Italian in descent, but several variations on the traditional Mafioso also occurred during the run of the series, including Chinese gangs, labor union leaders, and corrupt business men. These mobsters hold Rockford in contempt, mirroring the reception he receives in the police station from Chapman and Diehl.
This deliberate distancing of Rockford from both the mob and the police effectively places him in his own category as an individual separate from conventional standards and values.

As with any action-adventure type of show, there has to be some way of drawing the characters into the action to begin an episode. In the case of Rockford, the "helping a friend" formula serves this purpose. Time and again, Rockford succumbs to the pleading of one friend or another who needs him to help solve a problem. Sometimes Rockford is more than willing to get involved. These cases usually involve his father, Beth, or Dennis. When the friend in need is Angel, Rockford usually is forced to intensify his cursory involvement, against his will, when the people who are after Angel also go after him. At other times, friends and acquaintances needing help are generated in the more usual television manner: old friends, perhaps old girl friends or army buddies, reappear in Rockford's life for the space of an hour, only to leave again after their problem is solved. Twenty-three of the separate thirty-two episodes viewed fall into the "helping a friend" formula; of these twenty-three, eleven feature one of the four main characters discussed earlier as the friend in need.

Several subformulas exist within this larger formula. These include helping a romantic friend (either a new girlfriend or one from the past) and helping a friend who
ultimately causes Rockford more trouble than he bargained for. Examples of the latter instance include episodes such as "Just Another Polish Wedding," where Rockford helps a fellow ex-con get a job. The friend ends up competing with Rockford for a finder's fee on a missing person's case. Another example of Rockford's good nature being taken advantage of is evident in "The Aaron Ironwood School of Success." Aaron is Rockford's foster brother, whom he and Rocky have not seen in years. When Aaron returns to Los Angeles as a highly successful businessman, he cons Rockford into believing that he needs help making up with his wife, when what he really needs is someone to protect his business from the mob. Rockford helps these people against his better judgment because he is basically unable to say no.

Because nearly half of the "helping a friend" episodes center around one of Rockford's close friends, a careful examination of one representative episode should reveal a great deal of the significance of this formula both for the structure of the show and for the overall importance of the series. One representative episode is the two-part story entitled, "Gearjammers." Like so many Rockford episodes, this one centers around Rocky and features Dennis in a strong supporting role. As in most Rockford episodes, the opening moments of the action reveal the Burkean "pollution" which motivates the plot. A friend of Rocky's who works at the docks has been accepting money from a member of organized
crime in exchange for looking the other way when stolen trucks are used to steal a shipload of furs from the docks. But when the mobsters learn that Rocky witnessed their transaction with Losalvo (Rocky's friend), they decide that they must kill Rocky and begin to hunt him down. The threat against Rocky, who does not even realize what he saw or why people are trying to kill him, dominates the story; Rockford and the other characters maintain an intense emotional involvement in the outcome of the situation.

Guilt is assigned rather quickly to the generic Rockford villain: the mob. Although the viewer is made aware of mob involvement in the opening moments of the show, it does not take long for Rockford himself to establish the same fact; two gangsters come to his trailer looking for Rocky. The mystery for both Rocky and Rockford is never really who is guilty (although they do not know specifically who until the end of the story), but rather what "crime" incurred this guilt.

Predictably, most of the story centers around the struggle to purify and resolve this situation. Rocky, Rockford, and Dennis are actively involved in this project. Because it is a two-part story, the writers are able to devote an extra amount of time to the development of the problem, making it appear more complex than some Rockford stories (although quite a few stories were produced in two-part installments). The viewer is just as mystified as Rockford as to why so many trucks are being hijacked. That there is
a connection between the hijackings and whatever it is that Rocky witnessed seems clear, but it is only in the closing moments of the show that the connection is revealed (simultaneously to the characters and the audience). In the meantime, Rockford's and Dennis' efforts to purify the pollution are continually impeded by the need to protect Rocky from a succession of attempts on his life. These threats to Rocky include ransacking his house, following Rockford, wiring Rockford's car with explosives, and shooting at Rocky -- once when he and Rockford are on the highway and once at the trailer. As in all episodes of Rockford, the guilty are eventually caught and redemption takes place. In "Gearjammers," both Rocky and Rockford play a crucial role in solving the crime and apprehending the villain. Dennis is present also, but proves to be rather ineffectual due to the restrictions that his job imposes on his actions. Rocky's involvement in the apprehension of the guilty is significant. Because the "helping a friend" episodes usually center around regular cast members, these friends often help Rockford solve the case or at least participate in much of the legwork. Rockford usually cleanses the pollution, but the friend/client always plays a crucial role, perhaps supplying some bit of information thought irrelevant earlier or noticing some act on the part of the suspect that Rockford fails to see. In "Gearjammers," Rocky transcends his previous image as a bumbling and charmingly naive old man and becomes a man of
dignity and courage. Not only does he finally realize what he has witnessed, but he takes decisive action by following one of the hijacked cabs.

This reassertion of Rocky's worth and capability is typical of the "helping a friend" stories. These stories usually begin, of necessity, with the friend in a troublesome situation, often of their own doing. For example, in "The Farnsworth Strategem," Dennis falls prey to a timesharing scheme, and Rockford must try to save some of Dennis' investment. In "Portrait of Elizabeth," Beth asks Rockford to work for her client and current love interest, who turns out to be a thief. In another episode, "Coulter City Wildcat," Rocky is taken in by an oil field lease lottery scheme; he holds title to a lot that organized crime wants for its illegal oil well operation. Clearly, these people are capable of getting themselves into incredibly silly predicaments, often as a result of their gullibility and naivete.7

The vulnerability displayed by Rockford's friends and acquaintances is significant for several reasons. It is always interesting to feature regulars in tight situations -- viewer interest is piqued by the dangerousness of the situation. And there is the added advantage of being able to

7 It is interesting that one of these naive characters is also a police officer. Although Dennis is usually competent and on top of the situation, he still possesses enough naivete to require the aid of the more worldly Rockford.
write in a sort of shorthand, since no new characters need to be introduced as Rockford's long-lost brother or former girl friend. The writers can rely on the history of the relationships between Rockford and the regulars known to the viewers. The trick is to balance the two varieties of "helping a friend" stories, because while most episodes that feature regulars might be more easily written (and certainly require less background information), to have these same four people embroiled in an endless stream of ridiculous or dangerous situations borders on the laughable. Luckily, it is an accepted convention of television that characters on such shows have selective memories. They are able to build on their relationships with each other from week to week, but do not refer often to specific events that may have occurred, for instance, last season.8

Another reason that the vulnerability displayed by Rockford's friends and acquaintances is of significance is the implied superiority of Rockford to these people. Rather than placing the emphasis on Rockford as a professional, this type of episode emphasizes Rockford as friend, skilled as an investigator, but working in the capacity of friend first and foremost. In other words, while the friends are using

8 Viewers are also assumed to possess these selective memories. Rockford owns the same Pontiac Firebird throughout the run of the series. The car apparently weathers the various accidents it suffers (driving off a cliff, being blown up, regular high speed chases, and gunfire) without sustaining any fatal damage.
Rockford's professional skills and sometimes make a point of putting the case on a professional level, they have selected Rockford to help them because he is their friend. It is a happy coincidence that they happen to be friends with a private investigator. Out of this dynamic emerges Rockford as superior friend, capable of extreme loyalty and willing to go to great lengths to extricate his friends from their troubles. Even in "Gearjammers," when Rocky is able to demonstrate his worth and ability, Rockford emerges from the situation in a superior position. He is not shaken by the dangerous chase which concludes the show, though Rocky is; and Rocky demonstrates his naivete yet again by demanding that the fee be split with him. Rockford points out that there was no client, and thus there is no fee -- but he is willing to let Rocky share in the expenses.

Because *The Rockford Files* was so committed to focusing on the relationships among its characters and within their world, there are very few episodes when the plot is introduced in the traditional private detective show manner, by a client arriving at the detective's office (or trailer) with a problem. For the most part, this sort of story seems to have been seldom used because its businesslike nature undercuts Garner's charm. That is, when Rockford is on a case in which he is emotionally involved, even if he is only helping a client of Beth's, his most endearing qualities are brought to the forefront. Garner, as Rockford, shows a sense of
protectiveness combined with good-natured exasperation at the predicament his friend has landed them in. His complaints and refusals to help any more are taken by his friends for what they are: hot air. But when Rockford is hired by a stranger, Garner is unable to employ his most effective tools. Therefore, even the "straight hire" episodes usually become hybrids of the more typical "helping a friend" variety.

Of the thirty-two episodes viewed, only five episodes develop out of the "straight hire" tradition. But each of these episodes eventually become versions of "helping a friend." The pilot episode, "Backlash of the Hunter," stars Lindsay Wagner as a woman who asks Rockford to solve her father's murder. In the first hour of the two-hour movie, Rockford forges a romantic relationship with his client. In "Counter Gambit," Rockford reluctantly agrees to work for a convict who beat him up while they were imprisoned together. The convict hires Rockford because he is sure that Rockford will be reliable; presumably, Rockford can expect another beating if he does not do a good job. This episode becomes a sort of anti-"helping a friend" story, when Rockford manages to implicate his client in a criminal act, the antithesis of exonerating him from such an accusation.

Other hybrid episodes seem intent on making inside jokes or social commentary. "The Italian Bird Fiasco" is a Rockford version of The Maltese Falcon. "So Help Me God" shows a grand jury out of control, exercising its powers without forethought
or discretion. This episode even carries a tag at its conclusion which states, "The abuse of the Federal Grand Jury system as dramatized here is currently permissible under existing laws." Someone, apparently, had an ax to grind.

One of the most popular of these hybrid episodes, "White on White and Nearly Perfect," introduced viewers to Tom Selleck. In a deliberate and successful effort to capitalize on Rockford's image as a schlemiel, the writers placed Rockford in direct competition with someone who not only represents the best and brightest in private investigation, but also is admired as a truly "good" man. The episode even opens with a reminder of the generally seedy nature of Rockford's existence: he is returning from a night spent in jail. Rocky is waiting for him in the trailer. When Rockford arrives, he explains that the cops busted the poker game which he joined in order to make enough money to pay the note on his trailer. He then goes to the refrigerator for some milk, and takes a swallow from the carton. Of course, the milk is sour and, after spitting it out, Rockford opens a new carton and drinks. Setting the tone for the episode, he says, "Well this one's ok, but I can still taste the other one. Sort of a commentary of my life."

This episode, while appearing to be about a simple missing-person case, quickly develops into an amusing portrayal of the dichotomy between Lance and Rockford when Lance White (Selleck) meets the man who has hired Rockford for
the case. Lance, being nearly perfect, impresses the client and Rockford is forced to allow him to help solve the case. Lance is almost saintly in his efforts to be kind and fair to one and all. He sets his watch alarm to go off at ten minute intervals in order to appreciate the passage of time. And he feels that the client's company should not charge the Israelis for a missile shipment that is being sent out because it is, after all, just a small country. Rockford, however, is full of his usual cynical opinions and "realistic" expectations. And while Rockford holds his own as an intuitive and savvy investigator, Lance is the one who gets the credit for their success and marries the client's heiress daughter.

Aside from the obvious comic aspects of such an episode, it is interesting that the writers of the show seemed unwilling to produce conventional "straight hire" episodes. What may begin in the alternative formula almost invariably evolves into something else. This evolution speaks to the true subject matter of The Rockford Files: the relationships among Rockford, his friends, and the outside world. Roy Huggins developed Rockford as a vehicle for James Garner and designed the program to capitalize on Garner's success in the role of Bret Maverick. Placing Maverick in contemporary Los Angeles as a private investigator lends Rockford an extra bit of panache, elevating the series above other, more traditional, private detective shows. Its creators, Roy Huggins and Stephen J. Cannell, gave the network a show in a
format proven to be sound television programming, with a star possessing broad-based appeal. Given this combination, the success that The Rockford Files enjoyed is not surprising. But many other television shows meet these same criteria and still do not manage to achieve Rockford's level of success.⁹ The popularity of The Rockford Files does not rest solely on the merits of the show and the savvy with which it was presented. Only a closer look at the middle-class culture of this time period (1974-1979) can provide insight into the reasons that The Rockford Files satisfied its audience's psycho-social hopes, fear, and desires.

⁹ Even Garner's stardom is not infallible. Nichols, with Garner in the title role, was introduced in 1971, and barely lasted the full season. And after Rockford, Garner returned to NBC in a refurbished Maverick, which also met with a quick demise.
Given the large number of programs the television viewer may choose from at any time, the success or failure of a particular program is an indication of the concerns of the dominant middle-class culture during the run of that program. Watching The Rockford Files some ten to fifteen years after it originally aired, the clothing, hair styles, and expressions immediately signal their outdatedness. Such obvious characteristics of the mid to late seventies are easy to identify and quick to evoke memories of the time period. But other factors besides the visual and verbal signs that are strewn throughout each episode provide a more solid basis on which to build an understanding of the factors inherent in Rockford that made it more attractive to its audience.

Despite the focus on relationships characteristic of The Rockford Files, the series is unmistakably rooted in the traditional private detective story that made its first appearance with the pulp novels of the nineteenth century. The private detective may have moved from these novels to film, radio, and finally, television, but he always maintained one crucial element: his individuality. From Philip Marlowe to James Rockford, each detective lives a bachelor's life,
usually in sordid surroundings, and likes it that way.

In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert N. Bellah and his coauthors call the hardboiled detective a mythic individual. The detective traces his roots back to the first popular American hero, the cowboy. Traditionally, cowboys have no home, but wander from town to town with what little they can carry on their horse, doing what they can to earn a living. The cowboy is no longer a member of society and travels outside of social conventions. Nevertheless, the cowboy hero is no mere transient -- he is a pilgrim of sorts, on the road in search of justice and right. The cowboy is destined to "defend society without ever really joining it" (Bellah 145).

This mythic figure receives its modern incarnation in the hard-boiled detective. Like the cowboy, the detective is a loner, existing on the fringes of society. But the detective is not a wanderer. He lives in the heart of the city and works among the derelicts and dropouts of society. Where the cowboy would simply give up and move on to the next town, the hard-boiled detective, never harboring any illusions about what he will find, is there for the duration.

The hard-boiled detective acts as a sort of sanctioned vigilante in the traditional American middle-class view of justice. He exists as a more civilized alternative to personal vigilantism. In this role, the detective's marginality is indispensable. It is because of the detective's status as an outsider that he is able to cure
society's ills. And in the traditional detective story, society is portrayed as very corrupt. According to Bellah et al., "It is this boring into the center of society to find it rotten that constitutes the fundamental drama of the American detective story" (145). The drama has very little to do with the initial crime and everything to do with the individually corrupting power of society's heart, where rich and powerful people offer the detective money, power, or sex in exchange for his duplicity. The detective's rejection of these temptations and tenacity in solving the crime, regardless of the implications to the structure of society, make up the true hard-boiled detective story.

The Rockford Files emerged from this tradition of the hard-boiled detective, but it did not duplicate the detective shows on radio in the 1940s or even those on television in the 1960s. In order to speak to a contemporary audience, the producers jettisoned or modified certain elements of the tradition.

One element of the tradition that remains essentially intact is the nature of crime. There are very few episodes of Rockford that can be called unusual or creative in this regard. Rockford deals with the same sorts of crime as Marlowe, Peter Gunn, and Columbo. Rockford even borrows stories from other sources on more than one occasion (e.g. "The Italian Bird Fiasco" and "A Different Drummer"). Usually the crime is murder, motivated by the desire to make money,
keep money already made, or protect whatever illegal scheme the victim discovered and threatened to expose. The mundane approach to crime by Rockford's writers and producers points to the relative unimportance of this aspect of the detective series in the 1970s. Traditional criminal activity still spoke to the television audience of the 1970s; there was no need to change it.

There was, however, a great need for change and adjustment in other areas of the program. One element of the show that received a great deal of attention was Rockford's lifestyle. The traditional detective keeps his office in a shabby building somewhere in the heart of the city and often lives in this office. But television detectives must usually aspire to better surroundings, if only because television demands such an atmosphere in which to sell advertisers' goods. Todd Gitlin, in Inside Prime Time, describes the "sumptuous and brightly lit settings of most series" as amounting to "advertisements for a consumption-centered version of the good life. . ." (269). Such voluptuous materialism directly contradicts the traditional surroundings of the private detective, making an adjustment mandatory.

The Rockford Files manages to construct a neat compromise between the traditional shabbiness and television's "good life" packaging. Rockford lives where he works, in a grimy trailer. But the trailer is parked outside of Los Angeles, in Malibu, and is on the beach. This location seems
explainable only in terms of effecting this compromise, since Rockford does not spend much time on the beach, and is not a "beach bum" type. Also, many of Rockford's cases lead him to the downtown area; he is a Los Angeles detective. Rockford's car further typifies his lifestyle. Throughout the run of the series, Rockford drives a sporty Pontiac Firebird. Although Rockford demonstrates his lack of concern with material goods through his residence and his wardrobe, his sportscar represents a concession to the fulfillment of ownership.

Despite television's inevitable blurring of the traditional image of the private detective, one essential element of his personality remains: his individuality. Like the cowboy and like the earliest versions of the hard-boiled detective, Rockford maintains a fierce sense of his individual and independent nature. He has no boss and does what he pleases --if he chooses to go fishing one day, instead of working, there is no one with the power to stop him.

This sense of individuality feeds off of the tradition of individuality Americans have always prized. Bellah et al. write that there are some things "that are basic to American identity. We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual" (142). Regardless of their place of birth, ethnic origin, occupation, or economic status, Americans learn to value the individual freedom to live their lives in the way that they choose. Above all other considerations, the matter of personal freedom dominates American values.
Bellah et al. see this extreme emphasis on individualism among the American middle-class as both a strength and a problem. Individualism is a basic tenet of American government. People have "inalienable rights," and are "created equal." But the exact definition of individualism for different groups at different times has varied and at times conflicted with other definitions.

According to Bellah et al., there are several notions of individualism, each with its place in American history and middle-class culture. One type is "classical republicanism," centered on the active citizen working for the good of all, in a sort of government by voluntary participation. Another tradition of individualism, "biblical religion," places great worth in individuals but, in keeping with biblical customs, maintains "unequal rights and obligations" (143). Both of these traditions center their sense of reality in societal institutions (government and religion). But the modern form of individualism among the American middle-class, which Bellah et al. ascribe in part to the therapeutic ethos which arose out of the traumas of the Industrial Revolution\(^\text{10}\), lacks such an institution in which to base its reality. These institutions have finally been stripped away, leaving only the

\(^\text{10}\) For a summary of the psychological traumas that are attributed to the Industrial Revolution in America, see Daniel T. Rodgers' *Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), and in particular, Chapter Four, "Play, Repose, and Plenty," which discusses neurasthenia.
self. Modern individualism, with its self-based reality, has lost the foundation which encourages Americans to relate to society. Whereas other traditions induced the individual to exist in relation to government or church, institutions that signify social order, modern individualism demands that the individual exist in relation to himself. According to Bellah et al., modern individualism invalidates earlier individualistic traditions without providing viable alternatives.

Richard Merelman, in *Making Something of Ourselves*, identifies a similar problem. For Merelman, middle-class individualism results in "the cultural weakness of church, state, and class," which "leaves the individual alone and adrift in an often alien social and political universe" (2). American middle-class culture is forced to function without the boundaries set up by these institutions (represented by doctrines, laws, protocols, etc.), resulting in a state that Merelman calls "loose bounded." The basic cultural unit becomes the liberated individual, unassociated with any social groups. Any group membership that the individual maintains is strictly optional and non-binding.

The result of modern individualism described by both Bellah et al. and Merelman is a profound ambivalence. On the one hand, modern individualists are freed to revel in their individual choices, unencumbered by previous restrictive
institutions. And over two centuries of tradition reinforce the value of the freedom they believe they possess. But the reduction of the middle-class culture's basic cultural unit to the level of the individual effectively removes the individual from society. Without society, existence as an individual is rendered meaningless. Thus, modern individualism leaves American middle-class culture in an impossible situation: each individual must exist as such, but must also make some sort of concession to the society without which his individuality cannot exist. Finding the appropriate concessions presents a unique challenge to each individual which is met in varied ways, possibly including church membership, participation in self-help groups, and involvement in community service projects.

Jim Rockford is an example of a character who successfully balances his individualism and his membership in (and responsibility to) society; he is an amalgamation of Bellah's mythic individual and modern individualism. Remaining on the margins of society by virtue of his profession, Rockford still maintains close ties to society through his associations with people who represent its most law-abiding segments. The show introduces Rockford to the audience as a detective, drawing on the mythic associations that the profession evokes, and then reveals him as more than a little seduced by the pull of society and the regimented sense of belonging it provides.
The balance that the character of Jim Rockford portrays between a rejection of society and an affirmation of his membership in society demonstrates itself through several relationships and situations that exist throughout the life of the series. Perhaps the most significant relationship depicted by the writers is Rockford's friendship with Dennis. Since Rocky is Rockford's father, and Angel more or less forces himself upon Rockford, Dennis is the only male friend with whom Rockford maintains a friendship on a voluntary and equal basis throughout the series. (The writers added John Cooper, a wrongfully disbarred lawyer, as a friend of Rockford's in the last two seasons of the show). The irony of an ex-convict (albeit a pardoned one) with a best friend on the police force is typical of the Rockford sense of humor. But the situation is more complicated than this simple irony indicates. Rockford lives his life in the most independent manner possible, given the necessity of making a living. He does his job with little regard for the protocols of the police force and has a minimum amount of respect for police in general and, by association, the laws they uphold. Therefore, Rockford's friendship with Dennis, with its inherent respect for Dennis and his work, contradicts his basic contempt for police officers. A constant tension exists between the two men, based on Dennis' knowledge of Rockford's opinion of his chosen profession. Unlike Rockford, Dennis is able to function in the bureaucratic setting of the police
department, although on occasion he does feel rebellious. The respect that the two men have for one another as colleagues is thus undermined by the different choices they have made as to how they will pursue their work. Not by accident, Rockford regularly proves himself to be the more competent of the two investigators. Rockford's superiority as an investigator is partially due to the constraints that Dennis must operate within as a member of the police force. Nevertheless, Dennis is a friend who understands and sympathizes with Rockford's choices; consequently he is not portrayed in as insulting a manner as are most police on the show.

One of the most damaging aspects of Dennis' professional life, as far as his superiors are concerned, is his friendship with Rockford. Of course, it is only through this friendship that viewers are acquainted with Dennis and the disapproval of his superiors only demonstrates their absolute incompatibility with all that Rockford stands for. Again, Dennis' membership in and tacit approval of the police force is made more acceptable; his superiority to most officers is demonstrated by their inability to recognize his value. Their disapproval also causes Dennis to choose sides, even if only on a small scale, in nearly every episode. He must decide whether or not to help Rockford by supplying information (usually a license plate registration) that is forbidden to civilians. Dennis' indecision indicates his attachment to society's norms; his instinctive reaction is to follow the
rules. His usual capitulation indicates his basic alignment with Rockford's mild renunciation of society.

The Rockford Files links Rockford's individualistic interpretation of the law to the development of his own personal code of honor. Like many other television heroes, he has been wronged by the law and thus feels forced to abandon it for his own superior standards. It is not surprising that the public did not question Rockford's self-imposed code, since this attitude toward the law was a part of the stereotype of the hard-boiled detective. But public events in America during these years reflected Rockford's personal experiences with the law. The disillusionment that Rockford displays parallels the disillusionment with the integrity of the American government that swept the nation after the Vietnam War, the Kent State shootings, and Watergate. Experiencing these injustices first-hand probably further justified (in the eyes of the viewer) Rockford's judgment of the law as ineffective and unreliable.

The show's overall tone of discontent with society in general and bureaucracy in particular is further demonstrated by the continual use of organized crime as a scapegoat. As previously mentioned, nearly every episode of Rockford features some configuration of organized crime activity, with villains ranging from the traditional Mafiosa to labor union leaders to Chinese gangs. In effect, many plot conflicts boil down to Rockford, the individual, pitted against two evils -
- the socially sanctioned system of law and order and its equally structured counterpart, organized crime.

Government bureaucracy, the corporate world, and organized crime all offer opportunities for gaining great power. Rockford, the individual, provides the perfect representative target for their abuses. And, as the hero, Rockford always resists any efforts to corrupt him, whether they come from godfathers, captains of industry, or police officials. His word is his bond and if he agrees to solve a case, no amount of temptation can stop him from doing so.

At the same time, the writers keep Rockford charmingly mortal; he is no superhero. Even if bribes and offers of power cannot sway him from his task, threats of violence to his person can. But this flaw is at once a part of the charm that Garner brings to the character and a way of reducing Rockford to "everyman" status. Rockford goes his own way, living by his personal code in a manner that most middle-class Americans could only dream of doing, but he shares with each of them a fear of physical danger. While certainly no coward, Rockford never goes out of his way to get into a fight. Some of the funniest moments of the show take place when Rockford tries to charm and con his way out of a fight. But when there is no other choice, Rockford comports himself in a manner of
which all can be proud.  

As strongly as the writers pit Rockford against society and its traditional structures, they still maintain his strong and undeniable ties to society. These ties are primarily identifiable in the nature of the cases that occupy his time. Since so many episodes center around Rockford helping a friend, it is hardly necessary to point out the value that Rockford places on friendship. But Rockford's connection to society is stronger than an acknowledgement of the worthiness of friendship. The regulars on The Rockford Files in effect constitute Rockford's family.

The creation of families out of configurations of single, middle-class characters on television was probably most effectively done on The Mary Tyler Moore Show. Here, characters who shared a workplace formed a metaphorical family. At that workplace, each found fulfillment that would ordinarily come from family ties. In Rockford, the family does not share anything as structured as a workplace with one another. Instead, they share a common regard for Rockford, who is the central figure in their impromptu family.

Rockford, as the central figure in the family, assumes many of the traditional roles of fatherhood. Rockford's survival skills surpass those of all other family members and

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11 Rockford's tenacity overcomes his fear of physical hurt most readily when he is trying to save someone's life -- especially if that someone is a friend. Friendship clearly takes priority over personal physical concerns.
he is naturally the one to whom the other family members turn when they need help. Ironically, Rockford's individuality, which he struggles to maintain against the strongest forces in society, is compromised without a fight through his regard for these people.

Each member of the Rockford family is a member solely by virtue of a personal relationship with Rockford. That is, each is brought into the family by Rockford. The others accept each member on the basis of Rockford's tacit recommendation. Rocky is the most logical member of Rockford's makeshift family, as he is a blood relative. But the writers foreground the unusual nature of this family by reversing the roles of father and son. Rockford, the son, is the sensible, responsible, and care-giving person, while Rocky, the father, seeks guidance and stumbles into trouble. Rocky does preserve some of his traditional paternal prerogatives, such as trying to convince his son to get married and get a better job. But overall, Rockford has assumed the duties of fatherhood and Rocky looks to Rockford for leadership.

Dennis' role in the family is that of brother. As discussed earlier in a different context, the writers accord Dennis nearly equivalent investigatory skill, but his slight inferiority to Rockford is clear. While his membership in society's bureaucracy (i.e., the police force) is not as noble as Rockford's independence, Rockford nevertheless views Dennis
as worthy of great respect. As the only married member of the Rockford family, Dennis has outside responsibilities to fulfill that justify his choices. In one episode, Rockford in effect endorses Dennis' status as a police officer when he helps Dennis regain his job after some of his fellow officers have framed him ("The Becker Connection").

Beth functions as a sister in Rockford's family, but only after a false start as Rockford's love interest. Like Dennis, Beth has joined the system, as a lawyer. When Beth meets Rockford, she is working in a large firm as an associate. But the financially dictated goals of the firm soon gall Beth into resigning and starting her own law practice. Her independence allows her to take on the clients that she wishes to represent, rather than working with those assigned to her at the firm. It is this sense of independence and her eagerness to help the innocent, even those who cannot pay (not to mention her often gratuitous representation of Rockford), that endears Beth to Rockford.

Angel is the final member of the Rockford family. He functions as a sort of brother/child, the black sheep who lives in a constant state of trouble. Probably because Angel befriended Rockford in prison and helped him to survive there, Rockford continues to count Angel as a friend. And while Angel does have occasional value as a street-smart operative, Rockford's friendship with Angel is largely one-sided. Angel seems to like Rockford, but he is such a coward that he
betrays Rockford (and anyone else) without a second thought. Like any good parent, however, Rockford continues to see Angel's good qualities (whatever they may be) and helps Angel out of trouble whenever possible. The rest of the family cannot understand Rockford's regard for Angel, but they tolerate him out of respect and consideration for Rockford.

The Rockford family members share some similarities, as diverse as they are. All but Dennis are single (and we rarely see his wife on the show) and live alone. Beth is the only female in the group, but she belongs to a traditionally male profession. Four out of the five members are involved with crime: Rockford, Dennis, and Beth help to solve it and bring guilty parties to justice and Angel commits it. All except Beth are financially unstable, in varying degrees. And of the three employed members, only Dennis works for someone else in a traditional sense; Rockford and Beth are both self-employed, as was Rocky before retirement, and Angel never works for anyone else for very long.

These general similarities point to the bonds that keep this family united. Aside from their common regard for Rockford, each family member shares a certain affinity for the sort of lifestyle that Rockford has chosen, with its implicit self-tailored code of honor. Richard Merelman, in Making Something of Ourselves, describes what he feels to be television's typical interpretation of the family in our loose-bounded society: ill-assorted characters who are held
together by emotional bonds rather than by intellectual understandings, shared values, or traditional status relationships (104). The Rockford family, however, often does share intellectual understandings of the society that they live in. They also share common values, as demonstrated by the similarity of the manner in which they live their lives. Unlike other "real" television families that do meet Merelman's criteria, The Rockford Files offers its viewers a more substantial, yet less sentimental, set of familial relationships. And the success that Rockford's producers had with episodes in the "helping a friend" formula indicates the believability of this family and the acceptance that the family won among its viewers.

Rockford's wholehearted participation as the central figure in such a familial structure indicates his unwillingness to completely renounce society and its norms. As individualistic as his work allows him to be, he nonetheless spends the majority of his time helping friends, rather than pursuing his own objectives. The juxtaposition of Rockford's rejection of society (and its rejection of him) with his affirmation of his place as a "family man" in society creates a character who was able to demonstrate to the mid-70s, middle-class viewer the possibilities that exist for those who have the courage to follow their convictions.

Rockford ultimately becomes the 1970s' version of the traditional mythic individual. The cynicism of the time
rendered viewers unable to accept a hero who purported to be a white knight. They needed someone who possessed a similarly cynical or at least pessimistic outlook on life, combined with the ability to operate in the world of big business without liking it or giving in to its seductive powers. Rockford embodies these needs, and in doing so, remythologizes the lone individual. Always faithful to his family and friends, but not willing to be the target of any form of abuse, Rockford manages to convey both traditional values of love and respect for others and a skeptical outlook on the world around him. The ambivalence that affected society in the '70s, the basic conflict between the value of individualism and the need to belong to society, can be seen in Rockford's inability to belong completely to either side. The fact that he holds on to both sides demonstrates his unwillingness, and that of his audience, to abandon traditional principles and values.

The fact that Rockford appears successful in his attempt to synthesize his individualism with his membership in society is reflected in the six-year run of the series. Rockford's victory is not glamorized in any way -- he is still the middle-aged single man, living in a trailer, and sporting a slight paunch. But the monetary, physical, and domestic success that eludes Rockford also eludes most of his viewers. What Rockford demonstrates is that this lack of success does not mean automatic unhappiness, for Rockford is basically happy with his life, despite his various disappointments.
Unlike Gitlin's argument that television presents the packaged good life, where everyone seeks wealth and material consumption, The Rockford Files presents a hero who is unconcerned with material things, as are his friends (family) (Inside Prime Time 268-269). Instead, Rockford is rich in the things that he values most: individualism, self-respect, autonomy, and friendship -- the tools of the trade for a modern version of the dominant culture's mythic individual. As this symbolic modernized mythic individual, Rockford becomes everyman, a perpetual loser cast in the role of a winner.
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