

**New Fuel for a Dying Fire: How Betty Friedan's Feminine
Mystique Ignited the 1960s Women's Movement**

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	P. 2
Chapter 2: Life Before the Mystique.....	P. 7
Chapter 3: The Unfeminine Truth.....	P. 17
Chapter 4: Reviews and Renewal.....	P. 30
Bibliography.....	P. 40

Introduction

Before the radical feminist marches of the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was the quiet, polite, suburban life of the 1950s and early 1960s middle-class housewife. Her children, the home, and her husband were all she needed, as the magazines and psychiatrists told her. There was, though, something not quite right with this life. Through isolated weekdays, PTA meetings and house parties, and crying fits, she wondered why she was unhappy. That was the argument of Betty Friedan, who tackled this issue head on, digging her way through cheery women's media¹ and other outlets, trying to find the solution to the unspoken issue of the countless housewives she interviewed.² Friedan recognized that the true problem was they all suffered from the mystique, the theory of a patriarchal society that told women they should be completely satisfied with only their family and domestic life, avoiding the professional or academic world if they wanted a husband and family.³

This paper will examine *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, what led to the creation of it, how audiences received it, and how it affected 1960s women. I connect important issues of the women's movement to the analysis of the work, as well as address the problems with Friedan's argument. This paper examines what she calls the mystique and how it affected those around it, while also taking into consideration the era it was produced in and the history behind it. Within each chapter, I attempt to look at the piece and its author from an outside perspective in order to see the bigger picture.

Though I have been interested in learning more about women's rights and the history behind it since high school, my women's history classes at Purchase College are what got me interested in this topic. Before college, I had the basic knowledge of modern women's rights and

¹ Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W. Norton & Company. 1963. P. 23, 67

² Friedan P. 8

³ Friedan P. 1-2

activism, learning about it mostly through my own research. When I became a college student in 2020, I was able to take more classes that fit my interest in history and gender studies, diving deeper than I had been able to before through these classes. During my first semester, nearing winter break, my women's history class began learning about the struggle for women's rights during the 1960s and 1970s, and Friedan's writing and activism was mentioned.

Since most of my personal research of the movement up to my first year in college had been surface level, I knew that this era of women's liberation was often credited for being the mother of modern feminism, and the topic caught my attention. As I learned more about this period, I became more interested, and read what I could about it until work for other classes took up most of my time. Later, as I reflected on my time at Purchase while trying to find a senior project topic, this fall semester class popped into my head, and I decided that the three years I had spent reading and writing about the women of history and the lives they read could be incorporated into the life of Friedan, so I decided to start researching.

I focus on three main issues: the visible halt in the progression of the lives of women in the 1950s, how the mystique affected its readers and the women's movement, and what Friedan truly meant by *The Feminine Mystique*. It was clear to me after reading Friedan's work and examining some of the sources she included that the lives of many women changed drastically in the post war era. While the change in women's professional roles can be explained by the return of the male workforce from combat, the change in women's social role cannot. When looking back at the women that came before them in the 18th and 19th centuries, the difference in intelligence, independence, and activism is clear. I attempt to bring awareness to this by including documents concerning these historical women followed by the observations made by Friedan, pointing out the major change that occurred.

Reading reviews of her work helped me to gauge how the book was received, in feminist circles and elsewhere. It had always been said that *The Feminine Mystique* was the book that changed the lives of housewives, and I wanted to see how true that really was. I used interviews and reviews of 1960s housewives as well as women who used to be housewives during that time, and while many praised the book's boldness, there were also women who believed the piece was denouncing women who enjoyed their role as wife and mother. Whatever the case, Friedan's writing got many talking about their situations, or at least to acknowledge them, allowing them more awareness of society around them and to step out of the mystique she claimed was holding them back. On top of this, her writing led her to become the co-founder of the *National Organization for Women (NOW)* which had its own large effects on the movement as a whole.

The reason Friedan held such an influence over many of these women was because of her combination of theory and history to create what we now know as *The Feminine Mystique*. Although her work may be biased, as some historians later claim, she creates strong, supported arguments for the advancement of modern women throughout her piece. Friedan is able to pin-point the dissatisfaction these 1960s housewives face, and easily explains why their marriage, child rearing, sex lives, and domestic work are not as fulfilling as that of a professional or academic career. Women's magazines, social theorists, and domineering husbands are to blame for this female generation of boredom and depression, she claims. Friedan uses progressive feminist theory to support this, going against popular theory of the time and creating a new space for feminist voices.

I am able to examine these topics through primary sources such as historical documents and mid-century newspaper articles, along with modern journal and scholarly articles. In Chapter 2, I used scholarly articles on the life of Friedan in order to create a profile of the author, making

sure to highlight her background, education, and writing career. Since she grew up with the privilege to advance in the professional and academic spheres, her experiences created the base for the beliefs she expanded on in *The Feminine Mystique*. To give more background to how she was able to gain this privilege, I included historical documents that represent the existence of the separate women's sphere, the fight for female education, and the advancement of women in the workforce during the 18th and 19th centuries.

In Chapter 3, I began analyzing Friedan's writing with *The Feminine Mystique*. During this chapter, I mostly used the title work and literary analysis to pull out different problems Friedan believed women were facing during the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as define what she meant by the mystique, or "the problem that has no name".⁴ By using the examples in Friedan's research, the reasons why society believed that women should be satisfied by housework, child bearing, and marriage easily came to light.

In Chapter 4, I was able to set up the environment *The Feminine Mystique* was reviewed in by including research from multiple historians on the events that occurred during the 1960s. While not all of these events connected to the women's movement, they represented the importance of civil rights and activism during this time. I then followed this with newspaper articles and historian research that analyzed Friedan's work through opinion and theory. I began with reviews that came out immediately after the book's release, then sources during or soon after the heat of the civil rights movement, then compared to modern day analysis and feminist theory. Near the end, I also included the work of the *NOW* to represent the work Friedan continued to put into the women's movement.

In order to approach the life and early work of Friedan, I first had to reflect on activists that came before her. I read through documents of women from the 18th and 19th centuries, such

⁴ Friedan P. 1

as Mary Wolstonecraft, Margaret Sanger, Emma Willard, Abigail Adams, and many others. Along with this, I read through the works of others who supported women like these, such as Benjamin Rush. By reviewing these sources, I was able to take the lives of these women and compare them to that of Friedan. Their work outside of the limited women's sphere of their time period allowed them to make large steps within the fight for women's rights, steps that would later benefit Friedan by providing opportunities that would have otherwise never been available to her.

Finally, when looking at the reviews of the work, it was important to me to get both a positive and negative outlook. While the book is often credited with reigniting the feminist movement,⁵ I made sure to include reviews and historians that did not specifically fall under the feminist label, instead providing outsider perspectives of historians and everyday housewives. That said, more feminist pieces were included to understand some beliefs of the movement. By including these, as well as the work of the *NOW*, the wide range of just how many people Friedan's work affected comes into view.

⁵ Jacob Muñoz. "The Powerful, Complicated Legacy of Betty Friedan's 'The Feminine Mystique'." *Smithsonian Magazine*. Smithsonian Magazine. 2021, 2023. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/powerful-complicated-legacy-betty-friedans-feminine-mystique-180976931/>

Life Before the Mystique

When Betty Friedan examined the lives of contemporary housewives in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, she quickly realized that something must change. As a woman with the privilege of education and a professional career, Friedan was able to use her experience to question the ideals of gender that surrounded her. This privilege was gained through the progressive thought of 18th and 19th century women's activists, who fought for education, political involvement, and work equality. Friedan's declaration that these women had a problem they could not place could be seen as the next step in the evolution of women's movements to be fully integrated into society.

Friedan came from an immigrant but prosperous background. She was born Bettye Naomi Goldstein in Peoria, Illinois on February 4th, 1921 to Harry and Miriam. Her father was an immigrant from Russia and ran a jewelry store⁶, and her mother was the daughter of Hungarian Jews and wrote for an early edition of Peoria's *The Journal Star*.⁷ Friedan mentions in her autobiography that her mother was originally accepted into Smith college but was prevented by her parents,⁸ so she instead completed a 2 year program at Bradley University before becoming a writer.⁹ After Friedan was born, she gave up her work outside the home in order to care for her daughter.¹⁰

Throughout her schooling Friedan pursued social reform causes, which stemmed from the discrimination she faced as a Jewish person within a non-Jewish community.¹¹ During high

⁶ Scott Yenor. "Betty Friedan and the Birth of Modern Feminism." *Gender*. 2023. The Heritage Foundation. <https://www.heritage.org/gender/report/betty-friedan-and-the-birth-modern-feminism>

⁷ Barbara Drake. "The Peoria Mystique." *The Betty Friedan Hometown Tribute*. 2023. Peoria Magazine: Illinois Valley Public Telecommunications Corporation. https://www.peoriomagazine.com/archive/ibi_article/2016/peoria-mystique/.

⁸ Yenor

⁹ Drake

¹⁰ Marion Kaplan. "Betty Friedan." *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*. 2021. Jewish Women's Archive. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/friedan-betty>.

¹¹ Yenor

school she created a literary journal that promoted left leaning politics and pacifism, solidifying her passion for activism.¹² When she graduated from high school in 1938, she decided to attend Smith College, which her mother had originally wanted. She majored in psychology and worked as the senior editor for the student newspaper. The publication promoted activism connecting to workers unions, the fight against fascism, and American involvement in WW2. She graduated summa cum laude in 1942, continuing to gain her masters in psychology at the University of California, Berkeley after being offered a space in their fellowship program.¹³

Friedan began her college career less than a century after higher education became available for women. Oberlin College was one of the first institutions to accept women in the 1830s, but they were required to take “ladies courses,” education separate from their male counterparts. Along with this, midwestern land grant schools opened their doors to women during the Civil War due to male students being called away to serve. Vassar became the first institution to offer an academic program to women without domestic requirements in 1865. In the decade after, many other women’s schools began opening in Vassar’s image, such as Wellesley and Smith in 1875, Bryn Mawr in 1884, Mount Holyoke in 1888, Barnard in 1889, and Radcliffe in 1894. As education became more accessible for women, female attendance began to increase. In 1870, out of the 1% of Americans that attended college, 21% were women. In 1910, this number nearly doubled, with women making up 40% of the 5% percent of Americans that attended college. The number of coeducational colleges increased as well, with about 22 existing in 1867 and almost 5 times as many existing in 1900.¹⁴

¹² Yenor

¹³ “Life Story: Betty Friedan (1921-2006).” *Growth and Turmoil, 1948-1977: Cold War Beginnings*. 2020. New York Historical Society Museum and Library.

<https://wams.nyhistory.org/growth-and-turmoil/cold-war-beginnings/betty-friedan/>.

¹⁴ Nancy Woloch. “College Educated Women.” *Women and the American Experience*. 1994. McGraw-Hill Inc. PP. 276-277

The admission of women to higher education was the result of two things: one was the activism of women to obtain it, and the other was the 18th century Enlightenment foundation that argued education was necessary for everyone. In France, Jean-Jaques Rousseau argued for equal education for all, as without it discrimination would occur no matter the social situation. In the new American Republic, Benjamin Rush advocated for women's education in order for wives to better serve their families. In a similar belief, Emma Willard argued that educating women would not only benefit them, but those around them through domestic work and child rearing.

Advocates for women's education did not, however, see women receiving the same learning as men. Rousseau defined women's education as time wasted on "foolish trifles", and that without it, they could live "more sensible and more wholesome" lives. Women claimed that their education was lesser so men could remain their masters, argues Rousseau, but he believed, in reality, "the more women want to resemble [men, through education], the less women will govern them, and then men will truly be the masters."¹⁵ He tells his audience that although he does not support equal education of the sexes, he does not wish for women "to be raised in ignorance of everything and limited to housekeeping functions alone." Instead, he wants them to take "the weapons nature gives them to take the place of strength they lack" in order "to think, to judge, to love, to know, to cultivate their minds as well as their looks."¹⁶

Rush thought women's education would improve their place in the household and their role with their husbands. He states things such as "the influence of female education would be still more extensive and useful in domestic life" and "if the measure have been recommended for inspiring our [female] pupils with a sense of ... moral obligation be adopted, the government of them will be easy and agreeable" when attempting to argue that women's education should be

¹⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Translated by Allan Bloom. *Emile or On Education*. Basic Books. 1762, 1979. P. 363.

¹⁶ Rousseau P. 364

encouraged.¹⁷ Educated women would become “stewards and guardians of their husbands property” and enable them “to concur in instructing their sons in the principals of liberty and government.”¹⁸

Willard believed “females... with minds thus strengthened... they might be expected to acquire juster and more enlarged views of their duty, stronger and higher motives to its performance” and “females would be enabled to perceive the nature and extent of that influence which they possess over their children... to become their instructors, to devise plans for their improvement, to weed out the vices from their minds and implant and foster the virtues.”¹⁹ Much like her male counterparts, she argues that the main goal of education should be for the improvement of the home and family.

Even with the ideas of these thinkers, many women used their education for other purposes. They joined the paid workforce in larger numbers. In 1860, the number of American women in the workforce was around 10.2 percent women, 15.2 percent in 1880, and 18.1 percent in 1900. New opportunities opened for college-educated women within the professional sphere, increasing their presence in the workforce.²⁰ Even so, “the largest numbers of women wage earners in the early nineteenth century labored as domestic servants, laundresses, and seamstresses- work that was low-status and ‘invisible,’ because it was performed in one’s own home or someone else’s.”²¹ Later in the period, women also worked within mill and factory jobs, but with the same undermined result. Although many were joining the workforce due to the

¹⁷ Benjamin Rush. “Thoughts Upon Female Education.” *Early American Women: A Documentary History, 1600-1900*. Compiled by Nancy Woloch. 1997. The McGraw-Hill Companies INC. P. 137

¹⁸ Rush P. 141

¹⁹ Emma Willard. “A Rationale for Female Education.” *Early American Women: A Documentary History, 1600-1900*. Compiled by Nancy Woloch. 1997. The McGraw-Hill Companies INC. P. 177

²⁰ Woloch P.587

²¹ Woloch P.134

increase in education, women were still left out of the professional sphere, pushed into work that fit within the domestic sphere.

By the time Friedan entered the workforce around 1940, women constituted 24.6 percent,²² and with the build-up to World War II, “government measures to revive the economy created more women’s jobs,”²³ allowing for the increase. She moved to New York City in 1944, continuing her career in Journalism under the United Electrical Workers Union shortly after.²⁴ Within their publication *UE News*, Friedan wrote about the fight against discrimination on the basis of sex within the company, as well as major events within the cold war which were occurring around her.²⁵ Along with her work for the union, she gained experience as a freelance writer for various women's magazines, experience that would later be used in her research for her book.²⁶

Journalism had been an accessible profession for women for more than a century when Friedan started writing professionally. The first woman magazine editor was Sarah Hale, who began editing *Ladies Magazine* in 1828. Her magazine was filled with advice columns, fiction, and self-help articles that addressed the notion of women’s sphere, the mid-19th century ideology that said a middle-class women's center of existence was her husband, home, and family. Besides housekeeping topics, Hale made sure to include articles that concerned politics and society, such as moral reform.

Along with Hale, many other female writers from the 18th and 19th century helped to bring awareness to women's writing, such as the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Virginia

²² Woloch P. 587

²³ Woloch P. 447

²⁴ “Life Story: Betty Friedan (1921-2006).”

²⁵ “UE Honors Friedan, Fighter for Women’s and Labor Rights.” *UE News*. 2006. United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America.

<https://www.ueunion.org/ue-news/2006/ue-honors-friedan-fighter-for-women’s-and-labor-rights>

²⁶ “Life Story: Betty Friedan (1921-2006).”

Woolf. *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Gilman²⁷ and *A Room of One's Own* by Woolf²⁸ both contain feminist viewpoints that were considered revolutionary during their time of publication. Both authors recognized the inequality of their patriarchal society and called it out, facing negative pushback and criticism from those who benefitted from their oppression. In the end, their works continue to be republished and studied within feminist, literary, and academic circles because of the insightful and bravely honest arguments they presented. Because of authors like these, space was created for women to create critical analysis of the gendered society around them through literary works, all while keeping their families and role as women.

Friedan married Carl Friedan in 1947 and they had their first child the following year. She continued as a journalist for *UE News* while raising her first child, but was let go during her second pregnancy in 1949.²⁹ While Friedan claimed it was due to her request for maternity leave, the United Workers Electrical Union claimed “other unions used [the Cold War] to chip away at UE membership. In this crisis situation, the *UE News* staff experienced a layoff and Betty [Friedan] lost her job.”³⁰ Whatever the reason, Friedan switched from union work to freelance writing full time. She had her third child a few years later.

While she loved her children and family life, she found herself unfulfilled. As a college educated woman, Friedan went from working on major research projects and writing for union news sources to staying home with her children and writing pieces that encouraged homemaking and femininity. This was not uncommon during the post-WWII era. During war years, over 6 million women worked wartime jobs, 3 million volunteered for the Red Cross, and over 200,000

²⁷ Kristin Käuper. “Charlotte Perkins Gilman.” *Projects*. 2020. History of Women Philosophers and Scientists. <https://historyofwomenphilosophers.org/project/directory-of-women-philosophers/gilman-charlotte-perkins-1860-1935/>

²⁸ Emily Cersonsky. “Virginia Woolf.” *The Core Curriculum*. 2023. Columbia University. <https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/content/virginia-woolf>

²⁹ Yenor

³⁰ “UE Honors Friedan, Fighter for Women’s and Labor Rights.”

served in the military.³¹ As the war ended, many women were told to leave their jobs in order to create spaces for the returning soldiers as well as cushion the economic drop from wartime economy. Women continued to work after the need for wartime help died down, but instead of factory work or national service jobs, secretarial, retail, and clerical jobs were all that was available to them.³²

Outside of the professional role, the domestic role became popular among women post WWII because “women who had grown up during depression and war and looked forward to stable, traditional roles in secure, prosperous environments.”³³ Even though the female employment rate continued to rise, as in 1960 “two-thirds of new employees were women” and “two out of five held jobs, twice as many in number as in 1940,”³⁴ domestic ideology was developing, incorporating “backlash against women and fear of female competition that had followed the war” to keep them inside the home.³⁵ Critics believed that working women, specifically working mothers, “led to child neglect, emotional ailments, and juvenile delinquency,”³⁶ and stressed that women needed to focus on “[easing] the combination of home and work responsibility.”³⁷

It was due to factors such as these that Friedan decided to see if her readers really lived and enjoyed the housewife life.³⁸ In 1957, before the reunion of her 1942 graduating class at Smith, she decided to write a light-hearted article on the lives of women who became

³¹ “Women in the workforce during World War II.” *Tennessee State Library and Archives*. Tennessee Virtual Archive. <https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll18/id/65>

³² Elaine Tyler May. “Women and Work.” *American Experience: Tupperware!*. WGBH Educational Foundation. 2003. http://www.shoppbs.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/tupperware/sfeature/sf_women.html

³³ Nancy Woloch. “High Expectations: 1950-1975.” *Women and the American Experience*. The McGraw-Hill Companies INC. 2006. P. 498.

³⁴ Woloch P. 503

³⁵ Woloch P. 498

³⁶ Woloch P. 506

³⁷ Woloch P. 507

³⁸ “Life Story: Betty Friedan (1921-2006).”

housewives for her freelance career.³⁹ To do this, Friedan sent out a survey to her former female classmates asking if they felt happy with their current situation.⁴⁰ The questionnaire contained questions like “Is your marriage satisfying? Do you enjoy being with your husband more than anyone else? Does your husband complain about your housework?” and “Do you worry about money? Do you have a career ambition? If your main occupation is homemaker, do you find it totally fulfilling?”⁴¹ She found that many of these women regretted giving up their career or education to start a family, and that around “eighty percent said their greatest regret was not planning to link their education to a profession.”⁴² Magazines like *Redbook* and *McCalls* rejected the article, claiming it was too depressing for their female readers and that “hysterical housewives” was not a topic of interest.⁴³ After these denials, Friedan realized there was more to this story than female hysteria. Instead, these surveys held something deeper, she recognized, and soon after began to continue her research to create what would eventually become *The Feminine Mystique*.

Some critics thought Friedan was rebelling against the contradictions of the mid-19th century concept of the separate sphere, which limited middle-class women to the family and home. Nothing defined the sphere better than Catherine Beecher’s 1841 book entitled *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School*.⁴⁴ She provides guidance for young mothers and wives on how to run a successful household, stating things such as “Monday... is devoted to preparing the labors of the week... Tuesday is devoted to washing, Wednesday to ironing. On Thursday, the ironing is finished off, the clothes folded and put

³⁹ Sheila Rowbotham. “Betty Friedan.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News & Media Limited. 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2006/feb/06/guardianobituaries.gender>

⁴⁰ Yenor

⁴¹ “Life Story: Betty Friedan (1921-2006).”

⁴² Drake

⁴³ Rowbotham

⁴⁴ Catherine Beecher. “*A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*.” 1841. Marsh, Capen, Lyon, and Webb. PP. 13-14, 142-154

away... Friday is devoted to sweeping and house cleaning. On Saturday...everything about the house [is] put in order for Sunday. All the cooking needed for Sunday is also prepared.”⁴⁵ Her writing continues on like this, suggesting helpful storage ideas, efficient ways to clean and to keep spaces clean, and many other basic household tools that one should understand in order to run a successful domestic space.

According to Beecher, the “education of a man decides the welfare of an individual; but educate a woman, and the interests of the whole family is secured” and “the woman who is rearing a family of children... who labors in the school room... who, in her retired chamber, earns, with her needle, the mite to contribute for the intellectual moral elevation of her country.”⁴⁶ It is clear to see that Beecher holds high regard and responsibility to the women of this period, addressing their influence over children, the home, supporting the family financially alongside the male breadwinner.

It was the women who extended their education outside this domestic sphere that saw the gender based problems with their society. Abigail Adams is an example of politicization of women’s roles in society dating back to the Revolutionary War era. Adams was a housewife, but actively advised her husband and her son. Within letters to her son, she reveals her intellect and compassion for her country in the hopes he will take the wisdom she was unable to share with the world. She writes a list of virtues she wishes for him to uphold, stating things like “justice, humanity, and benevolence are the duties you owe to society in general. To your country the same duties are incumbent upon you, with the additional obligation of sacrificing ease, pleasure, wealth, and life itself for its defense and security...” and “one of the most useful lessons of life,

⁴⁵ Catherine Beecher. “System and Order.” *Early American Women: A Documentary History, 1600-1900*. Compiled by Nancy Woloch. 1997. The McGraw-Hill Companies INC. PP. 161-162

⁴⁶ Beecher P. 161

the knowledge and study of yourself...there is no knowledge so hard to be acquired, nor of more benefit when once thoroughly understood.”⁴⁷

Such ideas are also reflected in her famous letter to her husband, John, who was at the time writing a code of laws for the not yet independent America. Within the letter, she states “in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would remember the ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors” and later “remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or representation.”⁴⁸ Adams’ holds herself steady in this letter, showcasing her intelligence and awareness of the world around her. She knew that pushback was bound to come if women were limited to their domestic roles, much like the resistance described in Friedan’s writing.

Women of the past created pathways for the privilege that Friedan experienced, allowing her opportunities in education and professional work. Women of the present provided Friedan with the inspiration and drive she needed to make a change in the budding women’s movement of the 1960s and 70s.

⁴⁷ Abigail Adams. “A Republican Mother.” *Early American Women: A Documentary History*. Compiled by Nancy Woloch. The McGraw-Hill Companies INC. 1997. PP. 134-137

⁴⁸ “Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776.” *Founders Online*. National Historical Publications & Records Commission. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0241>.

The Unfeminine Truth

“I want something more than my husband and my children and my home,”⁴⁹ wrote Betty Friedan within her 1963 book titled *The Feminine Mystique*. Selling nearly three million copies within the first three years of its release,⁵⁰ it quickly became the bible for the 1960s women's movement. Just with that one line, Friedan exposes what the feminine mystique wanted to destroy. She wanted to change the 1950s housewife into a person with a fulfilling life and a more prominent identity.

Friedan divides her work into three parts concerning female identity. First, she identifies the roots of the titles of her book. Because of post-war fear and exhaustion, many young men and women began to try and recreate the conservative home life they experienced before WW2. In order to do this, many women were forced, or rather falsely decided as Friedan claims⁵¹, to deny their education and professional lives to build their perfect home and family life. The mystique is the concept that tells these women to focus on this way of life, to stay in the home, and that a life full of education and a meaningful job is a masculine one. She then explores the theory behind this mystique, and how it spread throughout 1950s society. Friedan's last section discusses how the mystique works in theory and not in practice. She focuses on the lives of housewives and how they are driven to place their energy into unfulfilling feminine roles. Friedan argued that female identity is lost within this period due to the mystique, and claims that women's lives must change and they must develop new opportunities in order to allow the private, internal identity within women to be rediscovered and utilized.

⁴⁹ Friedan P. 22

⁵⁰ Ben Wattenberg, Alice Kessler-Harris, Betty Friedan. Betty Friedan and “The Feminist Mystique.” *FMC Program Segments 1960-2000*. The Public Broadcasting Service. 2000. <https://www.pbs.org/fmc/segments/progseg11.htm>

⁵¹ Friedan P. 212

In Chapter 1, Friedan introduces the concept she calls “the feminine mystique” which she uses to analyze the lives of the modern housewife. Her first reference is to “the problem that has no name,”⁵² and in an attempt to describe what the mystique is meant to achieve, she states

“it is easy to see the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife, the continual demands on her time. But the chains that bind her in her trap are chains in her own mind and spirit. They are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices. They are not easily seen and not easily shaken off.”⁵³

Friedan is arguing that women are being exposed to oppressive social theory through ads and magazine articles, and because there are no other outlets for them, this is what they cling to. They are continuously being told that the mystique is the only way to live, therefore limiting them to the home.

In Chapter 2, she analyzes how women's periodicals illustrated the gradual change to women's place in society. Beginning with publications from the 1930s, Friedan focuses on inspirational stories of career women, or “the New Woman”⁵⁴ as they were called at the time. Many of the women included in these publications, usually fictional, faced hardships involving professional work or worldly issues, uncommon in the later lives of 1960s housewives. She even mentions “[they] were almost never housewives... they were young because the future was open”⁵⁵ to emphasize the difference in where their values lie. One of the strongest examples Friedan provides of the difference in values and lifestyle reads “she hadn’t an ounce of picture book prettiness, but there was strength in her hands, pride in her carriage, and nobility in the lift of her chin. She had been on her own... [and] had earned her way, she needed to consider

⁵² Friedan P. 1

⁵³ Friedan P. 21

⁵⁴ Friedan P. 29

⁵⁵ Friedan P. 30

nothing more but her heart.”⁵⁶ She makes clear that 1930s women were presented as independent, hard working, and level headed.

These characters were inspired by real life women of the time period, Friedan argues. She provides examples like Margaret Fuller, a successful female journalist for publications like *New-York Tribune*, Lucy Stone, a strong voice in anti-slavery movement, and Elizabeth Stanton and Lucretia Mott, two of the most important women within the women's suffrage movement. Moreover, Friedan sees these women as not just working and accomplished, but also human and humane, stating “[these women] all loved, were loved, and married... in an age when passion in woman was forbidden as intelligence, as they were in their battle for woman’s chance to grow to full human stature.”⁵⁷

By the 1960s, these women were portrayed as caring more about following societal rules rather than breaking them, Friedan argues. Using a table of contents from a July 1960 edition of *McCalls*,⁵⁸ she is able to show the difference in topics between magazines in the two time periods. It lists “a short story about how a teenager who doesn’t go to college gets a man away from a bright college girl... six pages of glamorous pictures of models in maternity clothes, four glamorous pages on ‘reduce the way models do’... an article called ‘An Encyclopedic Approach to Finding a Second Husband’ ...”⁵⁹ Instead of careers and independence, these articles suggest self image and marriage are what women should be looking for. These fleeting trends fill the pages where once strong, career-oriented heroines found themselves.

⁵⁶ “Mother-In-Law.” *Ladies’ Home Journal*. June, 1939

⁵⁷ Friedan P. 83

⁵⁸ *McCalls*. Ed. Herbert Mayes. McCall Corporation, 1960. Vol. 88.

⁵⁹ Friedan PP. 25-26

This was no mistake, she points out. 1960s Editors like Bruce Gould of the *Ladies Home Journal*,⁶⁰ Otis Wiese of *McCall's Magazine*,⁶¹ and John J. O'Connell of *Cosmopolitan*⁶² wielded enormous influence in changing the nature of articles to portraying women as passive. Friedan cites an older female editor to support this, stating “the old image of the spirited career girl was largely created by writers and editors who were women... the new image of woman as housewife-mother has been largely created by writers and editors who are men... the deciding voice on most of these magazines is cast by men.”⁶³ She also includes “our readers are housewives, full time. They're not interested in the broad public issues of the day... national or international affairs...they aren't interested in politics, unless it's related to the home,”⁶⁴ quoting male magazine writers speaking on their beliefs of women's interests.

Friedan writes “when [we, the eventual women of the 1950s,] were growing up, many of us could not see ourselves beyond the age of twenty-one. We had no image of our own future, of ourselves as women.”⁶⁵ Any sense of direction for women was crushed under the weight of the “feminine mystique.” Despite a century of increased female involvement in the workforce, by the time Friedan was writing, women were not taking jobs that supported full careers as much, instead opting for secretarial and clerical jobs. She writes “an American woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be” therefore causing “a terrifying blank which makes them unable to see themselves after twenty-one.”⁶⁶ This brought on girls that “were so terrified of becoming like their mothers that they could not see themselves at all...

⁶⁰ “Bruce and Beatrice Blackmar Gould Correspondence.” *Special Collections*. The Trustees of Princeton University. 2022.

⁶¹ “Otis Lee Wiese, Former Editor of *McCall's Magazine*, Is Dead.” *New York Times*. March 3rd, 1972. P. 42.

⁶² “John O'Connell, Executive Editor of Hearst Newspapers, Dies at 61.” *New York Times*. September 3rd, 1982. P. D14.

⁶³ Friedan P. 49

⁶⁴ Friedan P. 68

⁶⁵ Friedan P. 67

⁶⁶ Friedan P. 70

[they denied] what was best in themselves out of fear of femininity as they saw it in their mothers.”⁶⁷ The picture perfect role of wife and mother constantly hung over the heads of young girls in the media, holding a specific type of femininity that represented isolation. The lack of any stimulation, intellectual or professional, left a gap in their lives after marriage and children. She quotes young women who had bought into the stereotypes, stating “pretty soon, all my differences will be smoothed out and I’ll be the kind of girl who could be a housewife” and “I can’t see myself as being married and having children. It’s as if I wouldn’t have any personality myself. My mother’s like a rock that’s been smothered by the waves... perhaps I’ll turn out like my mother after all...that terrifies me.”⁶⁸

After providing examples to explain how the mystique works in society, Friedan dives into the theory behind how it was developed in Chapter 5. She begins with the teachings of Sigmund Freud, claiming that “the feminine mystique derived its power from Freudian thought.”⁶⁹ In order to support this claim, she uses the research of Freud himself. She holds a strong focus on his belief in a theory deemed ‘penis envy’, quoting “[it’s] started by the sight of the genital organs of the other sex... she feels herself at a great disadvantage, and often declares that she would like to have something like that too and fails victim to penis envy.”⁷⁰

This lack of professional opportunity, academic stimulation, and private identity results in a lack of privilege, or of maleness, he argues. Friedan also includes the line “the feminine situation is, however, only established when the wish for the penis is replaced by the wish for a child - the child taking the place of the penis.”⁷¹ Because women are unable to gain power or privilege in society due to their inability to become men, they instead place this energy into

⁶⁷ Friedan P. 72

⁶⁸ Friedan PP. 72-73

⁶⁹ Friedan P. 110

⁷⁰ Friedan PP. 125-126

⁷¹ Friedan PP. 126-127

childbearing, he argues. Friedan is blatantly blaming Freud for the foundation of sexism in society. Much like Freud, the mystique does not allow a space for women to create an identity outside of men, nor does it allow an identity outside motherhood. She connects the two to show that with this ideology, women are being guided to grow into an existence that will never fulfill her psychological needs.

Friedan expands on Freud's theories in Chapter 6. She examines the functionalist theory as “the idea of studying institutions as if they were muscles or bones, in terms of their ‘structure’ and ‘function’ within the social body.”⁷² Those who believed in this theory believed that a woman must fill her role as a housewife as a full time job. She includes a line from a marriage textbook from the 1950s to emphasize this, reading “the sexes are complementary... each must be judged in terms of its own functions. Together they form a functioning unit.”⁷³

The true goal of functionalism, as this quote reveals, was to keep men and women within the social positions that they were biologically designed for. Apart from the claimed scientific need for gender roles, Friedan also brings up the social theory behind functionalism. She quotes a study concerning the social standing of the functionalist relationship, reading “only in very exceptional cases can an adult man be genuinely self-respecting and enjoy a respected status in the eyes of others if he does not ‘earn a living’ in an approved occupational role... the women's fundamental status is that of her husband’s wife, the mother of his children,”⁷⁴ suggesting that a woman who is not a wife or mother cannot be respectable in society, that this is the only goal to strive for. This also connects to what Friedan calls the “feminine protest,” a concept described as “a means of protecting women from the dangers inherent in assuming true equality with men.”⁷⁵

⁷² Friedan P. 140

⁷³ Friedan P. 142

⁷⁴ Friedan P. 145

⁷⁵ Friedan P. 141

This concept is included to represent the unspoken fear that undermined the heart of these studies, that femininity would be lost with equality.

Friedan also examines the work of Margaret Mead, an important figure within the debate around femininity and a world-famous anthropologist. Friedan says she contradicts the functionalist ideas that women would not survive in the professional world. Aware of Mead's importance in the research of societal gender roles, Friedan includes a quote that reads "[my work] suggests that we may say that many, if not all, of the personality traits which we have called masculine or feminine are as lightly linked to sex, as are the clothing, the manners, and the form of head-dress that a society at a given period assigns to either sex." While Friedan considers work like this "a truly revolutionary vision of women,"⁷⁶ Mead begins to blur the lines between progressive thinking and fundamentalist rhetoric, she claims. She uses lines from Mead's work to show examples of this, quoting "the human body, its entrances and exits, originally shaped the growing individual's view of the world" and "women, it is true, make human beings, but only men can make men."⁷⁷ So, while Mead in herself was proof of the failure of fundamentalist theory, she still spread its ideology along with other psychologists, showing that even those who have stepped outside of a mystique controlled society cannot help but push its rules onto others.

Friedan provides more examples of the ever-expanding mystique through the study of the connection between gender and education in Chapter 7. Once again focusing on the fear of defeminization, she argues that educators have been focusing on a girls' biological duty rather than the importance of their education. She states that "even when it is virtually certain that most women will no longer spend their lives as full-time housewives, the sex-directed educators have

⁷⁶ Friedan P. 153

⁷⁷ Friedan PP. 157, 160

told them not to plan for a career for fear of hampering their sexual adjustment,”⁷⁸ presenting the idea that much of women's education has decreased in value due to the fear they will become men through intellect.

The influence of Freudian theory and social scientists began to bleed into the academic curriculum, causing a stronger focus on the importance of family than of the development of the student herself. From a study of the female students of Vassar College, she concludes “interest in men and marriage is a kind of defense against intellectual development” and “being less ‘feminine’ is closely related to being more educated and more mature.”⁷⁹ Because these women are influenced by the mystique early through schooling and social pressures, they never found a need to develop their own identity. Instead, they simply began their lives as housewives, often before even finishing college. Friedan supports this by pointing out “of the brightest forty percent of U.S. high-school graduates, only half went on to college: of the half who stopped, two out of three were girls”⁸⁰ and “the average age of first marriage, in the last fifteen years [since 1963], has dropped to the youngest in the history of [America].”⁸¹ So, while women were dropping out of college at a faster rate, they were also getting married earlier and earlier. With these statistics, Friedan argues that the mystique successfully encouraged by many sex-directed educators caused great harm on women's chances at becoming a full self.

While opportunities for women within the professional shrank, their roles within the household grew. In chapter 9, Friedan takes a deeper look into advertisements for household appliances and other merchandise that caused many women to fall deeper into the domestic sphere. She first explains the strategy used by appliance companies to target housewives,

⁷⁸ Friedan PP. 192-193

⁷⁹ Friedan PP. 202-203

⁸⁰ Friedan PP. 185-186

⁸¹ Friedan P. 187

separating them into three sections titled “‘the true house wife type’, ‘the career woman’, and ‘the balanced homemaker.’”⁸² Each of these classifications had an aspect to overcome, such as a “‘reluctance’ to accept devices” or being a woman who “[does] not believe that a woman's place is primarily in the home,”⁸³ placing their consumer targets into categories before selling to them. This plan of action is a strong indicator of mystique ideology, as these companies are choosing an identity for these women, much like the mystique concept of forced conformity.

Within these categories, companies are able to play into a housewife’s “‘sense of achievement’”⁸⁴ Friedan argues, “[encouraging] them to be ‘modern’ housewives” with shiny new household appliances a “[manipulating] her need for a ‘feeling of creativeness’ into the buying of [the] product.”⁸⁵ By doing this, she continues, they are able to convince these women that their work within the home is just as important as the work they were missing outside of the home. Friedan points out that manufacturers aren’t creating products to improve the home or the family, like they may be claiming. Instead, these appliances or home goods are simply to encourage women to stay within the home and ignore the yearning for a professional life. She comments on the absurdity of this selling tactic by stating “one gasps in admiration at the ingenuity of it all- the housewife can participate in science itself just by buying something new.”⁸⁶ With constant advertising of new life changing products, corporations are convincing women that homemaking has all the same benefits of work outside the home. A private identity is not needed when the feminine gap can be filled with household investment.

Of course, the rush of a new appliance can only last for so long. In chapter 10, Friedan examines how housewives use these new purchases and home improvements as an escape from

⁸² Friedan PP. 245-246

⁸³ Friedan P. 246

⁸⁴ Friedan P. 253

⁸⁵ Friedan PP. 247, 251

⁸⁶ Friedan P. 254

the true issue at hand. She first brings attention to the paradox of housework for the 1950's housewife. Even with this influx of new appliances, a day of housework for the homemaker seemed to continue to get longer and longer, Friedan explains. As the role of house wife expanded with the popularity of the mystique, the amount of work expanded with it. She states "the feminine mystique... [glorified] the woman's role as housewife at the very moment when the barriers to her full participation in society were lowered, at the very moment when science and education and her own ingenuity made it possible for a woman to be both wife and mother and take an active part in the world outside the home,"⁸⁷ naming this phenomenon "Occupation: housewife."⁸⁸

Because many women lacked stimulation outside of homemaking, burnout was inevitable. She explains that "many frantically busy full-time housewives were amazed to find that they could polish off in one hour the housework that used to take them six... as soon as they started studying or working, or had some other serious interest outside the home."⁸⁹ By having a career or any type of work outside the home, women had something to place their energy into besides their house and family, creating a healthy balance. If the housework could be done within a short amount of time, she explains, then housewives would be left with a whole day of nothing to do without activity outside the home. Therefore, filling their time with frivolous work concerning the home and family allows them to ignore their need for an identity outside of the domestic sphere and sink further into the confines of the mystique.

This wasn't the only way housewives filled their time. In Chapter 11, Friedan examines the strained sense of sexuality among housewives of the 1950s in the context of the feminine mystique. She opens this section with questions like "are [housewives] using sex or sexual

⁸⁷ Friedan P. 284

⁸⁸ Friedan P. 278

⁸⁹ Friedan P. 283

phantasy to fill the needs that are not sexual... are they driven to this never-satisfied sexual seeking because, in their marriages, they have not found the sexual fulfillment which the feminine mystique promises? Or is that feeling of personal identity, or fulfillment, they seek in sex something that sex alone cannot give?"⁹⁰ Friedan introduces the major issue at hand: the use of sex as a vehicle for the fulfillment of identity. This section contains endless stories of unfaithful housewives, searching for something that sex couldn't give them, alongside stories of husbands unhappy with their wives for pulling them into the mystique through sexual escapades. When a man is constantly asked to be his wife's main source of gratification, Friedan explains, he is "being drawn away from the large world of reality into the stunted world of sexual phantasy in which their daughters, wives, mothers have been forced to look for fulfillment."⁹¹ Of course, Friedan is not blaming the women for this, but alternatively the mystique they are continually trapped by. She argues that "for the woman who lives according to the feminine mystique, there is no road to achievement, or status, or identity except for the sexual one: the achievement of sexual conquest, status as a desirable sex object, identity as a sexually successful wife and mother,"⁹² combining this research with the work done in the chapter before. After being told their whole lives to work towards motherhood, to raise a family, to put their whole lives into the home, it is only natural for sex to become their main source of worth. Much like the endless purchasing of home appliances, their empty time is filled with sexual phantasy so their true problems can be ignored.

Not all is lost within this mess of obsessive gender roles, feminine marketing, and unrecognized self-destruction. Friedan finishes her manifesto with a call to women to look to the future. Chapter 14 begins with pages of women who have struggled within the mystique before

⁹⁰ Friedan P. 309

⁹¹ Friedan P. 327

⁹² Friedan P. 316

finding a way out through academic or creative work on the outside of the domestic sphere. Within one interview with a housewife who found her identity through music, she states, while speaking about playing the violin, “the universe suddenly becomes real, and you're a part of it. You feel as if you really exist.”⁹³ While this is a great start, Friedan says, it is simply a subgenre of mystique ideology. Real identity can be found within the professional sphere, or as stated by the author, “the amateur or dilettante whose own work is not good enough for anyone to want to pay to hear or see or read does not gain real status in society, or real personal identity. These are reserved for those who have made an effort, acquired the knowledge and expertise to become professionals.”⁹⁴

So, although a hobby can help with the first steps of escaping the mystique, the true identity is found within “a non-nonsense nine-to-five job, with a clear division between professional work and housework.”⁹⁵ Within this new type of work, she continues, many changes will begin to happen around many housewives as they begin to stand their ground. Because of her experience outside the home, as well as a decreased obsession of the domestic sphere and the family, the woman living a post-housewife life is able to achieve more than she ever had before, both within herself and within society. Friedan describes “the sense of the identity that the woman achieved from her work may have made her less willing to accept the destructiveness [of her life within the feminine mystique]... but it also made her more able to survive it.”⁹⁶ After encouraging women to work past the limitations of the mystique, Friedan wraps up her final chapter by re-analyzing the research included in the earlier chapters. Statistics and psychological quotes fill the remaining pages, covering all of the topics already mentioned. Though this is just

⁹³ Friedan P. 413

⁹⁴ Friedan P. 421

⁹⁵ Friedan P. 423

⁹⁶ Friedan P. 427

a recap, she makes sure to expand her work as much as she can, seemingly adding information that did not fit into her work before. She finishes her chapter with a hopeful outlook on the current female position, believing that bringing awareness towards the feminine mystique and its harm will allow women to rise out of the hole they find themselves in.

Through strong analysis of the female self, Friedan is able to bring many strong arguments to the table. By first picking apart 1950s and 60s womanhood, Friedan is able to create an image of female perfection during this time period through the use of magazine media, before knocking it down with various facts and statistics. She continues this as she brings in the use of theory, both modern and classic, to bring recognition to the ridiculousness of the mystique, as well as show how much it had bled into many aspects of society. This theory, she claims, found its way into high school and college education, further damaging the minds of young women. Her final section of analysis is able to examine how, even with the endless badgering of mystique ideals, women are unable to thrive within the home under these circumstances, instead benefiting from the professional sphere. Much of this novel tackled the main problem facing many upper class, married American women: the idea that women would be satisfied by house work, sexual passivity, marriage, and motherhood alone. Friedan is able to bring forward a narrative not yet explored during this time, and because of this, she changes the lives of many women living in the dark, isolated world of the feminist mystique.

Reviews and Renewal

The 1960s were an era of social change. Civil rights activists fought hard for the rights of those discriminated against based on race and gender. One of the first strides towards women's liberation was the introduction of the birth control pill in 1960. Women's rights activist Margaret Sanger worked closely with researcher Gregory Pincus to develop the oral contraceptive in the late 1950s, and the final product was produced a few years later, providing women with almost foolproof reproductive freedom for the first time in history.⁹⁷

Discrimination on the basis of sex was also a large issue at this time, one that caught the attention of the federal government. In 1962, President John F. Kennedy created the President's Commission on the Status of Women, making former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt its chairman. Proposed originally by Esther Peterson, the then head of the Women's Bureau and assistant secretary of labor, this commission worked to retain the women's vote, and later worked towards passing the ERA. Their mission towards the act proved unsuccessful, but from it grew new opportunities. Near the end of 1963, the Equal Pay Act was passed by President Kennedy. This act was the first federal law that fought against sex discrimination and provided federal funds for day care, which had been ignored since WWII. Along with this, the Citizens' Advisory Council on the Status of Women was formed as a watchdog agency in the protection of women's rights.⁹⁸

Some important writings that captured moments like these included *Notes from the First Year* in 1968 and *Notes from the Second Year* in 1970 that collected feminist essays and writings, as well as publications like *Rat* that focused on more radicalized ideology. Groups outside of the

⁹⁷ Debra Michals. "Margaret Sanger." National Women's History Museum. 2017. www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/margaret-sanger

⁹⁸ Nancy Woloch. "Turning Points: The Early 60s." *Women and the American Experience*. The McGraw-Hill Companies. 2006. P. 492-493

mainstream Women's Liberation Movement also formed, such as the *Students for a Democratic Society*, *Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (W.I.T.C.H.)*, and the *Sisterhood*.⁹⁹

The fight against racial discrimination also held strong during this time. Anne Moody, then a college student at Tougaloo College in Mississippi, worked with the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)* and the *Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)* during the 1963 Woolworth lunch counter sit-in. Facing both verbal and physical abuse from surrounding white patrons, Moody and other protesters stood their ground for 3 hours, later needing escort out of the small diner to avoid further abuse.¹⁰⁰ Though the movement towards racial equality did not gain immediate success after this presentation, it brought national attention to the fight and expanded its influence.

To top it off, the Vietnam War raged in the background of the fight for liberation. America entered the war with Vietnam in 1965, sending over 58 thousand men to fight overseas.¹⁰¹ Anti-war activism grew as a response to this, mostly supported by the New Left, as historian Todd Gitlin names, made up mainly by college student groups like the *Students for a Democratic Society*.¹⁰² These movements helped to create a divided America, those who supported American nationalism and those who supported more left leaning politics.

Following the 1963 release of *The Feminine Mystique*, many journalists, academics, and housewives alike found themselves within the grasps of Friedan's gender ideology. All around the country, they were influenced by her progressive outlook. With each read, new ideas were pulled from Friedan's feminist concepts, and with each review, readers reimagined and expanded these ideas towards new strides in the fight for gender equality.

⁹⁹ Todd Gitlin. "Women: The Revolution in the Revolution." *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. Bantam Books. 1987. PP. 374-371

¹⁰⁰ Woloch PP. 482-486

¹⁰¹ "Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics." National Archives. The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. 2018. <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics>

¹⁰² Gitlin P.127

As the movement developed over the years alongside other causes, many opinions around Friedan's work developed with it. New spaces were created for voices from different communities, and it was argued that because Friedan excluded many sources that did not fit her rhetoric, her work comes across as dated and insensitive. Many reviewers took apart Friedan's work in order to analyze topics like these, as well as attach new feminist outlooks.

Many early reviewers praised Friedan on her social awareness. While there was no new observational research, Friedan did bring up new commentary on what was already happening in the lives of her survey respondents. In her book *It Changed My Life*, Friedan reflects on the countless letters she received after the book's release in 1963 claiming that she put words to the housewife experience. One woman wrote "the discovery that I am a person with abilities and a desire to contribute to the world something more than a biological function is heady stuff."¹⁰³ Another desperately claimed "I am grateful because you have dispelled some of the loneliness I have felt in a lifetime of struggle for knowledge and achievement. And given me an incentive to continue, for one begins to think it is time to lie quietly in the grave when clods of dirt keep plopping you in the face."¹⁰⁴ A third, after realizing her worth, wrote "Thank God someone had the insight and courage to write it. It struck the center of my being. I am finally confident of myself and my desire to launch my career I've wanted for so long. The last of the cobwebs of guilt have been swept away and what a marvelous free feeling!"¹⁰⁵

The book received an enormous amount of attention in the press. *The New York Times*, for example, applauded Friedan's ability to recognize the then current issues within the fight for women's rights. One reviewer states that Friedan brings forth a "damning indictment" within her work, claiming that she uncovered "the core of... woman's problem today is not sexual, but a

¹⁰³ Betty Friedan. "Angry Letters, Received Letters." *It Changed My Life*. Random House. 1976. P. 26

¹⁰⁴ Friedan P. 23

¹⁰⁵ Friedan P. 27

problem of identity.”¹⁰⁶ The author never once declares Friedan a revolutionary, but instead spotlights her ability to build an argument on what was already wrong with society’s view of women.

Another *New York Times* review from the same year commended Friedan for her work within deconstructing biologically focused education. The author states that “Ms Friedan says... society’s pressures... play an important part; but educators are guilty of going along with [the mystique], and often even pushing it. Along with the general idea of ‘life adjustment’ education, too many educators have become more concerned with their students’ future capacity for sexual satisfaction than with their future use of trained intelligence.”¹⁰⁷ Here, the reviewer points out that Friedan was able to expand on an already analyzed topic and bring new life to it. The lack of interest within female students was seen in academia, but Friedan explores the phenomenon further, claims *The New York Times*.

Though she was well aware of the woes of 1960s homemaking, she was less aware of how her descriptions would come across to readers as time went on. In another *New York Times* review published 50 years after the book's release, Friedan’s reckless use of language comes into play. The author states “Friedan was hardly without her critics in the movement, who blasted what they saw as... her sometimes over-the-top language, [like] comparing suburbia to ‘a comfortable concentration camp.’” While this may be shocking upon first read, it's important to remember that she was Jewish, and as the article points out “Friedan was hardly the only Jewish thinker of the period to make use of extended Nazi metaphors while saying nothing about Jews.

¹⁰⁶ Lucy Freeman. “Recent Books.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company. 1963, 1999. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/05/09/specials/friedan-mystique.html>

¹⁰⁷ Fred M. Hechinger. “Women ‘Educated’ Out of Careers.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company. 1963, 1998. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/05/09/specials/friedan-educated.html>

[Important Jewish historians, psychiatrists, and psychologists] all used Nazi concentration camps, as much as Friedan did, as a metaphor for mass society's destruction of the individual."¹⁰⁸

Friedan also faced backlash because of the lack of black and lower class representation within her research. Historian Stephanie Coontz examines this in her 2011 recap of Friedan's life and work, titled *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*. Due to different economic and social conventions found in the black community, the research included in Friedan's work did not speak for all women as the book was claiming.

Coontz provides examples and statistics to show just how much Friedan left out, as well as to show how black women could not be lumped into white women statistics. First, she includes

“A woman who married a white high school graduate could generally raise her children on his income alone, and she could most certainly do so if she married a white college graduate... Black male college graduates... earned less than white male high school graduates. So even college-educated African-American women who expected to marry a man with equal education might well need... to work after marriage. As a result, black college women were less likely than their white counterparts to feel there was a contradiction between the professional roles they were being trained for in college and the future roles they would assume as wives.”¹⁰⁹

Coontz argues that many black women were unable to make the ‘mistaken choice’

Friedan focuses on in her research due to unequal pay and financial hardship in black communities.

She adds that “in 1960, almost 60 percent of black middle-class families were two-earner households... and a much higher proportion of black middle class moms with children of preschool age were in the labor force than their white counterparts.”¹¹⁰ These statistics break apart Friedan's idea that women were too engulfed in the mystique to find work outside of the

¹⁰⁸ Jennifer Schuessler. “‘The Feminine Mystique,’ Reassessed After 50 years.” The New York Times. The New York Times Company. 2013.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/19/books/50-years-of-reassessing-the-feminine-mystique.html>

¹⁰⁹ Stephanie Coontz. “African-American Women, Working Class Women, and The Feminine Mystique.” *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*. Basic Books. 2011. P. 121

¹¹⁰ Coontz P. 125

home. Because of the financial needs of black families, black women were forced to bring in an income along with their husband. It was even seen socially as selfish to be dependent on a man, as Coontz states “white women raised in the 1950s often reported that their mothers and grandmothers criticized them when they chose motherhood with paid employment. But black women raised in that era often faced the opposite when they or their friends considered becoming stay at home mothers in later decades.”¹¹¹

Another writing on the exclusion of black women from this era of the feminist movement comes from the work of Frances Beal in her 1969 essay *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*. She begins her argument with “any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the black women’s struggle.”¹¹² When relating this to *The Feminine Mystique*, it’s clear to see that Friedan had little intent on including middle class black women, or any middle class woman of color. There is little to no discussion of intersectionality (identities along with the identifier woman, causing new combined types of oppression) or the affects racism in America throughout Friedan’s work, therefore excluding the black experience according to Beal. To drive the point home, she states “while it is true male chauvinism has become institutionalized in American society, one must always look for the main enemy- the fundamental cause of the female condition.”¹¹³ Inclusive activism cannot start until issues that face the black community are addressed, argues Beal.

She then addresses why it’s harmful for white feminists to ignore black hardship, stating “very few of these [white] women suffer the extreme economic exploitation that most black women are subjected to day by day. It is not an intellectual persecution alone; the movement is

¹¹¹ Coontz P. 125

¹¹² Frances Beal. “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female.” *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*. Random House. 1969,1970. P. 393

¹¹³ Beal P. 394

not a psychological outburst for us; it is quite real.” Beal is plainly pointing out that on top of the struggles women as a collective are facing, black women face oppression unknown to their white sisters. She continues “if [white women] do not realize that the reasons for their condition lie in the System... then we cannot unite with them around common grievances or even discuss these groups in a serious manner, because they're completely irrelevant to the black struggle.”¹¹⁴

Without a deeper analysis of the oppression women face, there is exclusion. Although Friedan may have focused on middle-class white woman for a number of reasons (lack of black women within the survey pool of her graduating class, lack of black women reading women's magazines, lack of black enrollment within the colleges she was studying, etc), without mentioning the individual struggle of black women, she denies them access to part of the movement.

This brings up how Friedan handled other identities within her research. Early reviewers of her work claimed that Friedan was shaming those who enjoyed living as a homemaker, like in the opinion of *Redbook* magazine editor Robert Stein. He states “it's wrong to try to convince every woman that she will find fulfillment in having babies and baking bread... it's equally wrong to try to convince every woman that she will find fulfillment in practicing a profession or pursuing a career. I believe it's mischievous to suggest to a woman who is happy to stay home and take care of her young children that she has somehow been brainwashed by educators, advertisers, and magazine editors into giving up her birthright.”¹¹⁵ It is important to recognize Stein's role as a magazine editor, a job Friedan's blames for encouraging the feminine mystique. Therefore, when considering his opinion, Friedan's research must be considered side by side. Without these housewives he's defending, there would be practically no audience for women's magazines. The point he makes was fair, but it comes from a strained position.

¹¹⁴ Beal P. 394

¹¹⁵ Isabelle Shelton. “Women Victims of Plot? Debate on.” *The Washington Evening Star*. Time, Inc. 1963.

He also argues that the boredom Friedan describes was felt by both men and women after WW2, claiming “we live in a complex industrial society in which few people... do satisfying and meaningful work... this lack of meaningful work is a serious problem, but it would not contribute to easing the problem to argue that it is primarily the result of a vast conspiracy to keep [people] from discovering their full human identity.”¹¹⁶ Stein argues that the housewife’s problem of a lost identity was felt by everyone in a modern world. He does not consider the societal oppression women face that keep them in the home within these quotes.

This opinion was shared by many housewives. Along with letters of support, Friedan also received angry messages regarding women’s love for their life within the home. She quotes one as saying “I happen to love the rewards of being completely passive, with just a hint of the aggressor at the right time. I don’t want to compete with my husband... he’s [earning the main income] for me, for the same reason I’m keeping his house nice for him, cooking his meals, and being dependent on him. My whole life isn’t completely centered around my home and family, but you can bet your bottom dollar ninety-five percent of it is, and I love it. I’m sick of having my station in life referred to as trapped.”¹¹⁷ Another wrote “Being a good housewife and mother is a most fulfilling role which God planned for all womankind and for which He especially equipped her with such assets as the ability to be all-loving, self-sacrificing, gentle, feminine... it is reward enough for me to see my husband busy but happy, my children leaders in their school, because I am at home each day making beds, cooking good meals, and ready to listen with a full heart and ear to problems, sorrows, and joys.”¹¹⁸ These letters reflect the opinion of Stein, and represent the opposing half of Friedan’s argument. Just because she decided being a housewife was a doomed outcome does not mean it truly was for every woman.

¹¹⁶ Shelton

¹¹⁷ Friedan P. 23

¹¹⁸ Friedan P. 25

As Friedan discussed her opinions of being a housewife, her own identity came into play. In a more recent review of her piece, *The New York Times* explains that Friedan did not live the homemaker life she described in her research. The author points out that “Friedan was not just the frustrated ‘housewife’ of her official biography... but a former left-wing journalist and activist whose jeremiad appeared in a climate that was more primed to receive it than she might have admitted.... Friedan missed- indeed she contributed to- the frustrations many women felt due to a cultural climate that constantly denigrated mothers and homemakers.”¹¹⁹ Although she accurately studied the lives of many housewives, she could not reach from personal experience. Friedan lived a professional and domestic life, one unrelatable to the housewives she preached to.

Since Friedan did not have the same experience as her subjects, many believed she misplaced her blame. Within that same interview with Stein, he claims that within her magazine research she is “selective to the point where it becomes argument, indictment, special pleading, anything but reasonably objective reporting.”¹²⁰ This is further supported by an early *New York Times* review, which claims “[*The Feminine Mystique*] is superficial to blame the "culture" and its handmaidens, the women's magazines, as [Friedan] does. What is to stop a woman who is interested in national and international affairs from reading magazines that deal with [more intellectual] subjects?” Friedan included magazine articles she thought best represented the mystique for her research, but for some this came across as cherry picking to create her argument. Because of this, there are a lot of “sweeping generalities, in which this book necessarily abounds, may hold a certain amount of truth but often obscure the deeper issues,”¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Schuessler

¹²⁰ Shelton

¹²¹ Freeman

claims *The New York Times*. Critics believed that because Friedan focused so heavily on magazine articles and ads, her arguments have no ground to stand on.

Even with the critics, skeptics and Friedan's mistakes in writing and researching, *The Feminine Mystique* launched her further forward into her role as an activist. The book's undeniable popularity led Friedan to become significant in feminist circles. Because of this, she was able to meet with Dr. Pauli Murray, another influential feminist theorist of the time, and the two began working together. Eventually, they attended *The Third National Conference of Commissions on the Status of Women* where the *National Organization for Women* was formed with the support of the conventions of many feminist thinkers and activists. Friedan served as president from 1966, when the organization was formed, to 1970.¹²²

During these early years of *NOW*, when Friedan became president, the organization set up women's rights task forces and began petitioning for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1966 and adopted a section of the Equal Rights Amendment to include abortion¹²³ as well as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to include discrimination on the basis of sex in 1967,¹²⁴ to name a few accomplishments. Arguably the most unforgettable was *NOW*'s organization of the *Women's Strike for Equality*, a call to arms to women around the country to march for women's rights. Nearly 50,000 women walked through New York's Fifth Avenue in support of *NOW*'s fight for equal rights.¹²⁵ *The Feminine Mystique* undoubtedly contributed to the groundswell of interest in the revived women's movement of the 1960s.

¹²² "Founding." *NOW's History*. National Organization for Women. 2011, 2023. <https://now.org/about/history/founding-2/>

¹²³ "Highlights" *NOW's History*. National Organisation for Women. 2006, 2023. <https://now.org/about/history/highlights/>

¹²⁴ "Women's Rights and the Civil Rights Act of 1964." *National Archives*. The US National Archives and Records Administration. 2022. <https://www.archives.gov/women/1964-civil-rights-act>

¹²⁵ "Highlights"

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