Alternatives to the “Feminine Mystique”

As I sifted through journals and books researching this paper one thing quickly became apparent, each and every one of them in some way referenced the “Feminine Mystique”. It was the one common denominator. Betty Friedan’s book is almost certainly the most famous work on feminist theory in the world. Everyone has heard of those two little words, whether they know what they mean or not, even if they do not even have the faintest idea that there was a feminist movement. Often the Mystique is taken at verbatim because it serves as the only reference for many, and although Friedan’s strong words are valid and absolutely intrinsic to any postwar feminist study they are not the only view.

Undoubtedly American women faced obstacles in the postwar period; sexism was built into the system. However, the differences among these articles and books do not rise with whether women faced discrimination but with how they felt about it. Did they reach for more or were they content in the home? Were outlets available or not? Did they think a woman’s place really was in the home? These authors all have different ideas about everything pertaining to the subject. But a few main themes are the roles of sex, writing, cinema, and of course the role of the domestic goddess, the homemaker.

Sex as a topic is still today taboo in many social circles and conversations but that does not begin to touch on the issues it created in Post-WWII America. Certainly at the time there
was a type of sexual revolution. Women were now being urged to find sexual satisfaction within their marriages and to embrace it and even single women were encouraged to use their sexuality. However, single women were encouraged to use it to grab a man, but never to actually follow through. As a result women spent half of their time trying to fit into this new idea of sensuality and the other half refusing the offers that confirmed their success. (Scheiner)

Regardless, women were trying to use sexuality to gain some power, within their marriages at least. (Kaledin)

On the other hand, at the same time female sexuality was seen as dangerous. Elaine May stresses the ties made between their sexuality and the Cold War. Through the lens of the Cold War she argues that women were seen as very dodgy. They were actively encouraged to fill their expected roles in the family as wife and mother lest they use those energies for other more nefarious activities. She does not expressly explain what these activities might be but she certainly alludes to them being quite sexual in nature. She explains how there were even new pop culture terms created that signify this such as calling a woman a ‘bombshell’ or even why the new two piece swim suits were called bikinis. It is surely odd to most people now to think of female sexuality being so scary that equating it to atomic power was absolutely normal and understood, but for some that was the case.

Ms. Friedan’s basis is the idea that women did not know what was wrong; they were just experiencing intense unhappiness and guilt and had no idea where it was coming from. Nancy Walker with her “Funny Feminism” agreed. She wrote very thoughtfully on this unnamed feeling (now named feminine mystique) and one way in which women dealt with it. Writing is a common theme in most of these works, whether their main ideas disagree or not they all find a
commonality in the belief that women found solace in this particular art form. Kaledin devotes a lot of space to expressing that this was an area that was open to women. Maybe they could not rise in the company or buy birth control without facing harsh stigma, but they could have their own column in the New York Times or comic strip in Redbook. Through this women could find release. Of course not every woman had the talent or ability to do these things, some people just are not creative writers and admittedly one has to know people to get into periodicals such as the New York Times. But every woman in America had the ability to buy that newspaper or magazine. Reading these articles was as therapeutic as writing them. It was a sort of validation and created a camaraderie that argues directly against Friedan’s thoughts of isolation and confusion. Whether the article was an aid in getting through the day sane and celebrated the frustration with husbands’ socks lying littered across the floor or whether it was a call for action and feminist movement the idea at the base was the same, for women to understand that they were not the only one.

Cinema is probably one of the most contested and most common themes in all of the resources I looked at. How often does one look at Doris Day and see her as a hotly argued embodiment of an era? Not very often, but I assure you such is now the case. Kaledin offers Day as a fabulous role model and as a barrier breaker. She was one of a handful of stars that had sought divorces in the 1950s and yet continued to be beloved by the nation, to carry on and become more and more successful with each passing year. However, Dennis Bingham carries a somewhat opposite connotation of her. He does of course mention that she did tend to play women that had good jobs and that there are a group of people that see her as a very positive figure. After all, Day almost always had a good job and lived on her own, or almost on
her own. Another plus was that the majority of her on-screen relationships were fairly egalitarian whether it was with a friend or a man. Rarely did the man hold power over her, in fact, more often than not she held a type of power over him, however this power was generally achieved because the man was a bit smitten with her...

On the opposite side however, Bingham shows his true beliefs. With a little more feeming he argues that Doris Day was merely a sad reinforcement of everything women were told they should stand for. When all is said and done Day was the epitome of perfect. She was always dressed too the max in the best clothes available and her beautiful little blonde bob never had a hair out of place. He very much feels that she served as the perfect example of what a man wanted from a woman pertaining to marriage and motherhood.

While on the subject, it is worth noting the amount of influence that Walt Disney and his movies had on women, young girls in particular. The effect Disney had on society as a whole is indisputable, but the way his heroines and villains came off to children is very important. When Disney decided to take those Grimm classics and remake them on his own he made a very concrete decision to change the way the female characters were portrayed. Kay Stone explains very clearly how and why the European versions did not fit here. The female leads created by Grimm were passive but they were still proactive. They had something to do with the course of their future. The American versions did almost nothing. Sleeping Beauty, for example, just slept and Snow White was just the same. Hoping to prove her hypothesis Stone interviewed many girls and many women asking them their thoughts about heroines like Cinderella and most of the females interviewed answered that as little girls they thought they had little more to do than wait for their own prince charming to come and find them.
When one thinks of women in the 1950s almost always a vision of domestic servitude is the first to pop up. Certainly that is the role that Betty Friedan was questioning. The role of women in the home and the place they had outside of it is the most controversial. Elaine May offers the conventional voice, it is quite unsurprising that as such The Feminine Mystique is heavily cited and quoted. She shares Friedan’s position that society as a whole was repressive. They pushed women back into the home with the justification that family is the key to real success. She mentions that there was in fact an emphasis on increased emancipation but that women were strongly encouraged to channel those new energies into the home, using them to become an even better wife or mother. Stephanie Koontz also argues this same idea. She seems to argue the complete desperation of the postwar American housewife. Koontz speaks of women staying in the work force only to be looked down upon by her neighbors and experiencing getting pushed to the very bottom of the ladder of success. She speaks of the frustration of getting demoted to lower jobs as it took away the challenge and good paycheck that had made working worthwhile. At the same time as dealing with society’s judgments, psychiatry began to blame mothers more and more for a huge number of mental issues adults might suffer from, generally chalking it up to the mother having been out of the home too much. Both May and Koontz stress very strongly that if a woman was unfulfilled being a wife and mother people truly believed that there must be something wrong with her, women even believed it of themselves!

On the other hand, Eugenia Kaledin and Joanne Meyerowitz, while still recognizing the difficulties women faced, took a different side. They tell a story of the fifties being fairly hopeful and doors opening up all the time. Kaledin is certainly the most optimistic in her research. She
rattles off name after name of influential female leaders, Eleanor Roosevelt being at the top of that list. As mentioned previously she feels very strongly about women writers at the time and using that medium as a soapbox. Certainly by her thoughts, creativity was quickly infiltrated and eventually dominated by women, including poetry, music, and art. She discusses the lack of encouragement for young women to become involved in the workforce and many other ways they were held down. Her argument however is that women maneuvered around these obstacles and developed in spite of them. Being an expert in the household at least gave them a chance to be an expert and a boss in something and they seemed to delight in this separation from the male sphere. She even suggests that perhaps we have been wrong in the way we measure a woman’s success as one of Kaledin’s main arguments is that women have their own timeline and roles to fill that are separate from men’s.

Meyerowitz’s title, “Beyond the Feminine Mystique”, asserts her position from the very beginning. She does not believe that Betty Friedan did a thorough enough job, that she used biased works that gave her incomplete conclusions. Meyerowitz does her best to correct these mistakes. She questions the average notion that women were shuffled back to the kitchen once the boys came back from the war. She argues against this saying that more women were employed than ever. She does recognize how women certainly did still have a role they were expected to fill. The thought that nondomestic roles could be held jointly with domestic roles was fairly new but also she says, generally welcomed. Women could be both as long as they remained feminine. Unlike many voices Meyerowitz argues that women were encouraged to be politically active and told that getting involved politically would help the Cold War and indeed it did.
Finally, William Chafe offers a bit of a median. He explains the period as being a time of confusion. Once the war was over women did not know what their place was, no one knew what their place was. People waited with baited breath to see if they would stay in the factories or come flooding home. Most women did stay in the work force. He offers interesting polls taken by high school girls in the 50s asking if they wanted to hold jobs as adults or remain stay at home mothers showing that most young women planned on entering the work force. However, with this number rising he makes sure to explain that the prejudice against them did not decrease and it was never anything less than a bitter struggle to improve their lot. Much of society painted feminists and women in the work force as crazy. However, even with these outspoken women, statistics seem to show that women were still working and that husbands were picking up the slack at home. Home and motherhood was certainly the main focus in a woman’s life but it was no longer the only focus. Perhaps, Chafe’s position as a man gives him a different insight, and allows him to reduce bias to an all time low.

Of course, each of these articles stops to recognize the walls and ceilings facing women. It would be ridiculous to consider women without any boundaries because it simply was not the case in postwar America. However, there are many other ideas out there that are different from the extreme views of Betty Friedan and her “Feminist Mystique”. These ideas all conflict with each other but the point is that they are out there and they deserve just as much notice. It is only through understanding both sides that one can truly understand the topic.
Bibliography

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