

The Ideal Woman

Jennifer Holt

Most everyone is familiar with the storybook image of America in the 1950s. Images are continually popularized of a simpler, happier time emerging from the aftermath of the Second World War. Families moved to the suburbs, fostered a baby boom, and forged a happy life of family togetherness in which everyone had a specified role. Women were considered domestic caregivers, with sole responsibility for the home and child rearing, while men 'brought home the bacon.' "Popular since the 1950s, this tenacious stereotype conjures mythic images of culture icons -- June Cleaver, Donna Reed, Harriet Nelson -- the quintessential white, middle-class housewives who stayed at home to rear children, clean house and bake cookies." (Meyerowitz, 1994) The creation of the "ideal woman" gave a clear picture to women of what they were supposed to emulate as their proper gender role in society. In effect, women began to construct their identities around this image, and may still continue to do so today.

Gender construction is nothing new to American society; nor to any other society, for that matter. In fact, nearly all societies in the world practice some form of structuring based on gender roles. The question commonly posed is whether one is born with innate concepts of gender or whether our gender preferences develop through our experience of social constructions of acceptable gender roles. I believe society plays an immense role in the construction of individual gender roles, and in turn our identity. This is not to say that society has complete control over this construction. Evidence shows that biological sex-linked factors involving hormones like testosterone do contribute to the formation of gender. However, to place this in proper perspective we would need to investigate how the social construction of testosterone as an indicator of aggression has motivated a gender role in which males are expected to be aggressive and rewarded for such behavior, while girls are expected to be very passive and should be discouraged from engaging in similar aggressive behavior (Lippa, 2002).

There is considerable evidence pointing to the view that gender construction is largely accomplished through social factors. For instance, the very term 'gender' refers to "all of the socially defined, learned, or constructed accoutrements of sex." (Lippa, 2002) Furthermore, scholars in the field of both sociology and psychology believe that gender is constructed through the modeling of appropriate behaviors and the use of systematic rewards and punishments. Evidence also shows that many aspects of gender are simply not innate, as evidenced by children who do not exhibit a gender-based preference for such things as friends, clothing or toys when placed in gender-neutral settings. Only after negative reactions from peers, the media, or social institutions like schools do many of these children begin to "like" or take on the gender roles they have come to see as appropriate for them. That which is deemed acceptable in a society is effectively self-socialized to the point where it becomes a construction of one's identity. With supporting evidence, I will show how the "ideal woman" stereotype reflected a political-economic effort to socially construct (and reward women for assimilating to) socially acceptable gender roles in the aftermath of World War II.

There are important reasons for discussing the 1950s in regard to the creation of the stereotype of the ideal woman. But only recently have historians of American culture begun to pay close attention to the socializing experiences of women from 1945 to 1960 (often referred to as the "post-war" era). Before this change, historians considered these years fairly insignificant for women, often seeing them merely as a passive link between women workers in World War II and the political activists of the 1960s. In truth, however, the ideological and institutional constraints of 1950s American society had a significant impact on the construction of women's identities during this time period.

The formulation of these constraints can be attributed to the end of World War II and the emergence of the Cold War. World War II and the propaganda of Rosie the Riveter had provided an opportunity for many women to participate in the

workforce. At the close of the war, employers reestablished the prewar sexual division of labor. To justify the discriminatory practices against women, popular culture began to create the concept of the proper role for women. "Studies of postwar culture found that government propaganda, popular magazines, and films reinforced traditional concepts of femininity and instructed women to subordinate their interests to those of returning male veterans" (Meyerowitz, 1994). In fact, women had achieved perhaps too much economic independence during World War II, which makes the oppressive qualities of the domestic ideal of the 1950s all the more harmful to the construction of women's identities.

The beginnings of the Cold War also provided an impetus for constraints placed on women in the post war era. Elaine Tyler May targets the reasoning behind this in her classic work, *Homeward Bound*, which discusses white, middle class families in the 1950s. In the midst of our Cold War instability and anxiety,

(t)he family seemed to offer a psychological fortress, a buffer against both internal and foreign threats. In this ideological climate, independent women threatened the social order. Under cultural pressure and with limited options for work outside the home, women, contained and constrained, donned their domestic harness (Meyerowitz, 1994).

While media popularized this ideal, it is clear that institutional pressures restricted a woman's ability to act in opposition to the domestic, caregiver model.

The period immediately following the 1950s is also important to the domestic ideal and may provide the most insight into the condition of the domestic ideal among women today. The 1960s are marked by the emergence of the Women's Movement; a time of liberating experiences. For the better part of a decade, women actively generated a mass movement in the public realm, paying special attention to work force issues. Significantly, this mass movement did not occur overnight. Despite the reinforcement of the domestic ideal, women aspired to continue working after the post-war era. This reveals what might be the dominant paradox connecting the cultural domestic ideal to the reality of women's lives. "In an era marked by the quiescence of organized feminism and the celebration of domesticity by public figures and

popular culture, increasing numbers of women were seeking employment outside the home" (Meyerowitz, 1994). The culture was simply not portraying a lifestyle women wanted: indeed, studies indicate as many as 80% of post-war women felt working outside of the home would lead to a more satisfied life (Renzetti & Curran, 2004). Moreover, women were educated during the 1960s at a higher rate than in any previous time, many of them in fields not traditionally thought to be accessible to women. Birth control also became readily available during this time, which increased the sexual independence and professional career options of women.

The 1960s, with its increase in women workforce participation, increased education and availability of birth control, appears to be the antithesis of the "ideal woman" of the 1950s. However, most studies indicate that while women triumphed in these other areas, they still felt it necessary to adhere to the domestic ideal as much as possible in order to maintain their identity as a "good woman, mother, and wife." So while women in effect achieved great leaps of liberation during the 1960s they were still bound by the oppression of the domestic ideal, much like the problem that working women of today face.

Throughout almost every source discussing the domestic ideal there is a consensus that media, primarily magazines and film, were the primary methods of which this model was transmitted to women, in effect the social construction agent. Women's magazines played an extremely important role in this transmission because there was a significantly large readership. For example, "By the end of the 1950s, the 'Seven Sisters' alone (Better Homes & Gardens, Family Circle, Good Housekeeping, Ladies' Home Journal, McCall's, Redbook and Woman's Day) reached over 34 million consumers."

Secondly, women's magazines spread a very uniform picture of women as household-family orientated consumers. For the purpose of this content analysis, magazine advertisements will be the specific focus of my attention. Two significant studies were conducted regarding the roles portrayed, or perhaps even created, by the advertisements in women's magazines of the 1950s. The first study I will discuss was conducted in the 1960s by Betty Friedan regarding the advertising content of popular

women's magazines, in her classic study *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan was perhaps the first to identify what is now referred to as the stereotype of the "ideal woman." She revealed how the feminine mystique

held that women could find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love. It denied women a career or any commitment outside the home and narrowed woman's world down to the home, cut her role back to housewife (Friedan, 1963).

Friedan alleged that magazines did not passively participate in enforcing these gender roles, but were in fact an active force behind the creation of what she termed the "feminine monster." She claimed that the manufacturing sector "had decided to make women better consumers of home products by reinforcing and rewarding the concept of women's total fulfillment through the role of housewife and mother" (Friedan, 1963). She was greatly alarmed at how advertising had become such a powerful force in shaping the social fabric (i.e. pressuring women to stay at home); she was also alarmed by how decisively these advertisements shaped the creation of a woman's identity in terms of this ideal model.

Courtney and Lockeretz, authors of *A Woman's Place: An Analysis of Roles Portrayed by Women in Print Advertising*, also made significant contributions to the research on the "ideal" woman. Their research focused on the working and nonworking roles of women and men and the various types of products with which they were shown to be associated in the advertisements appearing in women's magazines. In accordance with the norms of the ideal woman, they found that 90% of women were shown in "nonworking roles in the home," which refers to the unpaid labor of housework and child rearing. Women were found to be eleven times more likely to be associated with housework than were men. Furthermore, they concluded that women were more likely to be consumers of cleaning aids, food, clothing and cosmetics; men, on the other hand, were shown purchasing more important and expensive items such as cars, industrial goods and services like banking and insurance. Interestingly enough, women were often shown with a male shadow of guidance

and wisdom even when purchasing such items as cleaning aids and cosmetics.

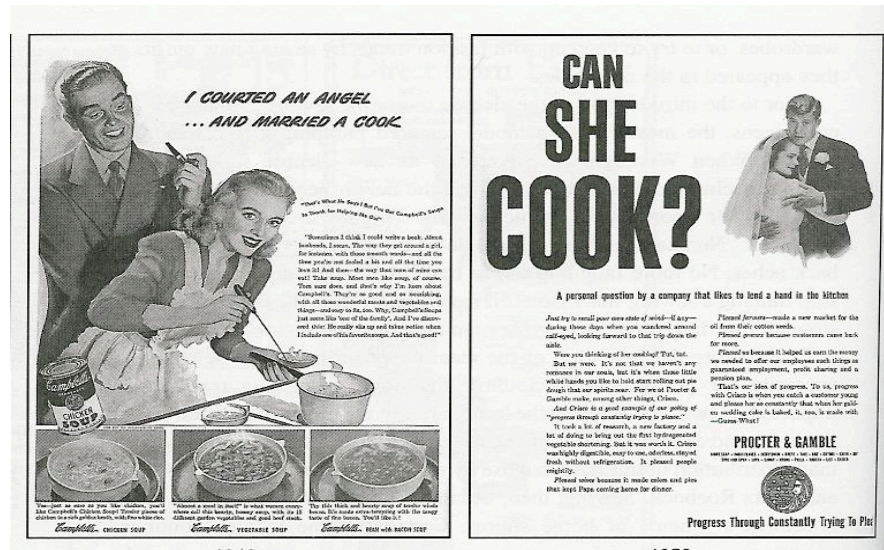
Based on their research, Courtney and Lockeretz concluded there were four stereotypes underlying the ideal woman portrayed in magazine advertisements; significantly, their analysis revealed a common emphasis on projecting male superiority and feminine domesticity. The first stereotype held that a woman's place is in the home with her family: "Motherhood and the care of the home and husband are the ultimate goals of a woman's life and her greatest creative opportunity." This was reflected in the consumerism of such products as cooking and cleaning aids. It was not uncommon for such advertisements to insinuate (at times rather explicitly) that "a good wife and mother would buy this," or "a good wife would want to protect her family."



Family Circle, 1955

The concept of the “ideal woman,” is still with us today through film, advertisements and television shows that reminisce about the happier, simpler times that the 1950s supposedly held. However, the long lasting effect of the construction of the feminine gender role on women’s identities is still having an impact on the women of today. The ideal woman has

now become the concept of the super woman, who is expected to complete all the tasks of an ideal woman of the 1950s while maintaining the career goals of the modern woman. The combination of the two has resulted in an ideal that is perhaps so far above the reality of women’s lives that women themselves will continue to struggle and struggle but never attain it.



Better Homes & Gardens, 1950-1951

References

- Courtney & Lockeretz.. *A Woman’s Place: An Analysis of Roles Portrayed by Women in Print Advertising*, 1967.
- Friedan, B.. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963.
- Lippa, R.. *Gender, Nature, and Nurture*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002.
- Meyerowitz, J. *Not June Cleaver, Women and Gender in Postwar America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.
- Renzetti, C. & Curran, D. *Women, Men and Society*, 5th ed. Boston: Pearson Education, 2004.