

Literary critique of the feminine mystique



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Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* ignited the onset of the second wave of feminism in the United States. This book is a sociological study about the roots of the feminine mystique and how it turned "into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity." Although Friedan does raise good points that sparked an awakening for some women, she also had a very single-sided and close-minded perspective of a woman's role as a housewife, which ended up hurting the validity of her thesis, for there are two sides to every story, and both sides must be kept in mind. One very interesting point that Friedan brought up as part of an explanation as to why the feminine mystique is in place is that the economy needs housewives in order to keep it booming. Friedan states that "the really important role that women serve as housewives is to buy more things for the house. In all the talk of femininity and woman's role, one forgets that the real business of America is business" (299). Friedan proposes the idea that manufacturers and businessmen are among the true beneficiaries of keeping American women as housewives, but more importantly, keeping American women yearning for more, so that their empty voids could be filled with materialistic products. The American economy needed a boost, and they knew that they could do so "by keeping American women housewives—the reservoir that their lack of identity, lack of purpose, creates, to be manipulated into dollars at the point of purchase. Properly manipulated, American housewives can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack—by the buying of things" (301). Not only in regards to appliances that can be used around the home, but also to the extravagance of the woman's materialistic belongings in general, economists knew that an emotionally empty housewife needed "these external trapping to buttress

her emptiness of self, to make her feel like somebody” (379). Through the initiative used from this ideology, the economy certainly did receive its boost through the consumerism of the American housewife. Propaganda was used in order to make women feel as if they were empty, and as if buying certain items could satisfy their hunger. Much thought went into the creation of such propaganda, for these masterminds needed to make the housewife feel the need to spend money on the product so that it would make life easier and make her feel more successful as a housewife, yet at the same time, not too easy to the point where the housewife feels useless. The thought that went into this propaganda was well exemplified in the advertising of X Mix, which allowed housewives to make instant cake from a box. In order to get around the woman’s feeling of guilt for not putting in the effort to make a cake from scratch for her family, the message was conveyed through the advertisement that “ by using X Mix, the woman can prove herself as a wife and mother, not only by baking, but by spending more time with her family” (Friedan 306). It was also emphasized that “ with X Mix in the home, you will be... a happier woman” (306). Masterminds of propaganda knew what they were doing, and they succeeded in luring in the business of the average housewife through emotional appeal. This is a rather oblique perspective that forces readers to see a different angle of the panorama of the feminine mystique, and Friedan did provide solid evidence supporting her claim, so it appears to be true. Another interesting point that Friedan brought up was the dehumanization of the American housewife by conforming to the feminine mystique. In the twelfth chapter, “ Progressive Dehumanization: The Comfortable Concentration Camp,” Friedan compares the victims locked in the concentration camps during the Holocaust to women stuck in their role

as a housewife. It was quite clever how she symbolized the feminine mystique as a concentration camp, and the housewife as a victim locked in the concentration camp. Friedan believed that by conforming to the feminine mystique, housewives were dehumanizing themselves, and she conveyed her message with great clarity by making the comparison to how prisoners of the concentration camps were dehumanized. She stated that housewives and concentration camp prisoners alike “ were forced to spend their days in work, which produced great fatigue—not because it was physically killing, but because it was monotonous, endless, required no mental concentration, gave no hope of advancement or recognition, was sometimes senseless and was controlled by the needs of others or the tempo of machines. It was work that did not emanate from the prisoner’s own personality; it permitted no real initiative, no expression of self, not even a real demarcation of time” (Friedan 424). In this situation, the coping method for a concentration camp prisoner or a housewife (who does not feel fulfilled with her role as a housewife) is to jade herself of the conditions of life, and then deny the simple truth that she is unhappy; by lying to oneself and denying the reality of a situation, one is in the process of dehumanization. Ultimately referring to the housewife, Friedan made the point that “ not the SS but the prisoners themselves became their own worst enemy. Because they could not bear to see their situation as it really was—because they denied the very reality of their problem, and finally ‘ adjusted to the camp itself as if it were the only reality—they were caught in the prison of their own minds” (425). Through the point of view of a housewife’s life, Friedan’s insight on the feminine mystique is indeed true. If the housewife unhappily conformed to her role while yearning to fulfill more of her potential, then this astute ideology is

absolutely accurate; however, if the housewife was happy and satisfied as a wife and mother, then that is a different story. Despite Friedan's making valid points in her argument against conformity to the feminine mystique, the validity of her argument is controversial due to her biased, narrow-minded perspective. There are two sides to every story, and although her points are valid and relevant in regards to one side of the feminine mystique, her close-minded views only exemplify ignorance and stubbornness when looking at the other side of the feminine mystique. Friedan basically attacked the judgment of young, educated women who chose to become housewives, saying, "The girls who would normally go to college but leave or forgo it to marry... are products of the mystique. They give up education with a qualm, truly believing that they will find 'fulfillment' as wives and mothers" (Friedan 270-271). She also deemed it unrealistic and impossible for a woman to be happy as a housewife, stating that "there are aspects of the housewife role that make it almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or 'I' without which a human being, man or woman, is not truly alive... I am convinced there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous... The women who 'adjust' as housewives, who grow up wanting to be 'just a housewife,' are in as much danger as the millions who walked to their own death in the concentration camps—and the millions more who refused to believe that the concentration camps existed" (422-423). That is quite a blunt statement - she is basically stating that if a woman chooses to become a housewife, she can never be genuinely happy, and she is giving up her true self and identity. What gives Friedan the authority to make these judgments and devalue the profound significance of the role of a wife and mother, which happens to be

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essential to any functioning society? She fails to realize that both men and women are human beings who are naturally attracted to each other, so it is not wrong or dehumanizing if a woman happens to fall in love with a man and wants to have a family with him. If she is doing what she truly wants to do, then she is taking initiative on the desires of her own identity. Friedan believes that an intelligent woman can only feel satisfied and fulfilled if she pursued a career, but what if the woman does not want to pursue a career, but would rather stay at home with her family? Friedan's argument against conformity to the feminine mystique is only accurate if the woman conformed to her expected role in society, while she actually yearns to be something more. However, if a woman marries sincerely for love, and her genuine interests are to take care of her family by becoming a housewife, then going down that path would lead to a very fulfilling life indeed, for raising a child is the true passion of any mother who dreamed of becoming one. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* is a riveting sociological study that supported her argument against the conformity of women to the roles that society expected them to be in the twentieth century: wife and mother. She brought up very clever points, such as how masterminds of propaganda urged women to remain in the household so that the economy could profit, and how conforming to society against one's true volition ultimately dehumanized the woman. However, there are two sides to every story, and both sides must be kept in consideration in order to preserve the validity of the argument. In this situation, the side that Friedan's ideologies are relevant to is the side where women feel pressured to conform to their role in society as a housewife, despite how they do not really yearn to be just a housewife. In this case, it is true for the woman that by forcing herself into a

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role in which she does not feel fulfilled, she dehumanizes herself and ultimately gives up her own sense of identity. However, on the other hand, there are women whose genuine interests in life are to get married and raise a family, possibly due to their yearning for the love of a child. If the woman were to marry for love, and if she truly did not have any interests in pursuing a career, then she would be happy and satisfied as a wife and mother; she would be staying true to herself and her dreams, and there is nothing wrong with that, for she has the right to pursue anything she wishes. The Feminine Mystique's flaw is that Friedan fails to acknowledge that some women are actually content with becoming housewives; she thereby attacks and demoralizes the significance of the wife and mother roles. This single-sided view diminishes her argument; nonetheless, *The Feminine Mystique* was a pioneering work whose influence remains powerful today.