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Betty Friedan's "The Feminine
Mystique" (1963): Myth or Reality?

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Heralded as “the opening salvo in the most far-reaching social revolution of the century”¹, Betty Friedan’s gynocentric polemic *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), articulates “the problem that has no name”². Under the guise “of a reporter on the trail of a story” (1), Friedan investigates the socio-cultural milieu of mid-Twentieth Century America, exposing its subjugating effect on women within the home. It is from within this private interiority that Friedan explores “the feminine mystique” (1), an undiagnosed predicament which “lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women” (5), a myth sold to the masses to eternally shackle women to “Occupation: Housewife” (27). Friedan equates the rise of the feminine mystique with America’s powerful post-World War II social ethos. According to Friedan this cultural campaign indoctrinated women through advertising and magazine articles, as well as transforming girls’ high school and collegiate education. It reinforced Freudian psychology, sex-determined Functionalist sociology, and exaggerated Cold War fears of communism. For Friedan, this socio-cultural metamorphosis “erected barrier after barrier against women as separate selves” (165), usurping their identities, and imprisoning them within the “Comfortable Concentration Camp” (228) of their home. *The Feminine Mystique* challenges the notion of “anatomy is destiny” (108), and encourages women to jump over the barriers of oppression, reject their suburban melancholy, and achieve self-actualisation through a “New Life Plan for Women” (274). Although *The Feminine Mystique* has been widely acknowledged as “one of the seminal and most enduring texts of the second wave of American feminism”³, the grounds upon which Friedan bases her controversial disparagement of the cultural hegemony in 1950s America, are questionable. This essay will discuss Friedan’s presentation of American culture to determine whether the feminine mystique was a myth, or a reality pertinent to all American women. Though the lens of revisionism, it will introduce the critical discussion concerning Friedan’s appropriation of magazine excerpts, to discover the biases of her ideology. Offering a semantic deconstruction of Chapter 12, “Progressive Dehumanization: The Comfortable Concentration Camp”, this essay will analyse the way in which Friedan formulated a literary work which seemingly explained the housewife’s malaise. Finally, it will place *The Feminine Mystique* within its historical context, commenting upon its significance to American thought and culture through

¹ Judith Adler Hennessee. *Betty Friedan: A Biography*. (New York: Random House, 1999), 79.

² Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. (London: Penguin Group, [1963] 2010), 9. (All further references to this text will be indicated in parenthesis).

³ Helen Rappaport. *Encyclopedia of Women Social Reformers*. Volume I. (California: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2001), 234.

Friedan's feminist legacy. It will ultimately determine whether Friedan's notion of the feminine mystique was a myth or reality.

Joanne J. Meyerowitz's investigation into post-World War II women's magazines like *McCalls* and *Ladies Home Journal*, has produced compelling evidence to suggest that Friedan presented a flawed account of their content and style. Whilst Meyerowitz advocates the notion that magazines "reinforced rigid definitions of appropriate female behaviour and sexual expression"⁴, articles also "subverted the notion that women belonged in the home."⁵ By contrast, Friedan asserts that "no articles except those that serviced woman as housewives, or described women as housewives" (35) were printed in the 1950s. However, Meyerowitz establishes that articles:

[H]elped readers, male and female, envision women in positions of public achievement. They tried openly to inspire women to pursue unusual goals, domestic or not, and they sometimes suggested that public service brought more obvious rewards than devotion to family.⁶

Furthermore, with "only 15 percent of the articles on individual women focused primarily on women as mothers and wives"⁷, Friedan's claim is easily refuted. Moskowitz builds upon Meyerowitz's analysis, questioning whether "feminists, including Friedan, suddenly discovered women's unhappiness about which the magazines had supposedly been silent."⁸ Certainly Friedan continually stated that *The Feminine Mystique* emerged ex nihilo. In her 2003 interview with *Dialogue Radio*, she digressively mutters:

It is the same kind of mystery that... *The Feminine Mystique*... it didn't interest me, it didn't interest me at all, I never thought about it, but then I never set out to start a women's movement either. Ah, serendipity, very mysterious.

⁴ Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1994), 237.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 234.

⁸ Daniel Horowitz. *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, The Cold War and Modern Feminism*. (USA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 183.

Ah, I was absolutely in a state of denial, in a state of denial as anybody else in America.⁹

She is similarly muted on the plurality of content in women's magazines. She does not even acknowledge her own articles published in mass-circulatory magazines prior to *The Feminine Mystique*, where she "offered a critique [...] of the stereotyping and conformity of suburban life in the 1950s."¹⁰ Rather, Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* is constructed from specifically selected excerpts from women's magazines, a biased bricolage, used to engineer her very own "discrepancy from reality" (21), and provide prevaricated evidence to support her argument. Johnson and Lloyd advocate this notion, astutely arguing that:

Rather than simply articulating the suppressed voice of women, Friedan was constituting what has become a central shibboleth of the feminist part in reinterpreting the women's magazines of the post-war period. The 'happy housewife myth' was not a product of popular culture but itself a myth – a myth of a myth – conjured up by feminism in the attempt to construct a narrative that would make sense of and dispel the sense of contradiction and tension women felt between public achievement and femininity.¹¹

Revisionist historian Stephanie Coontz reinforces this argument, clarifying that although most "people don't believe this [...] the 40s and 50s were a time when the housewives were not glorified and romanticised"¹². Simultaneously Findling and Thackeray note that "many women did not agree with Friedan's characterization of their lives as unsatisfying"¹³ and that a large proportion of women were happy in their roles as housewives. Friedan's diagnosis

⁹ Betty Friedan. "The Fountain of Age". *Dialogue Radio*. Program 282. (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, November 10-16 2003) [Available at: http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=dialogue.thismonth&dialogue_id=38365] [Accessed on 23 March 2011].

¹⁰ Daniel Horowitz. *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, The Cold War and Modern Feminism*, 181.

¹¹ Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd. *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife*. (Oxford, New York: Berg), 11.

¹² Stephanie Coontz. "Stirring Up 'The Feminine Mystique' 47 Years Later" *Fresh Air from WHYY* (National Public Radio, January 26, 2011). [Available at: <http://www.npr.org/2011/01/26/132931581/stirring-up-the-feminine-mystique-47-years-later>] [Accessed on: 24 March 2011]

¹³ John E. Findling, and Frank W. Thackeray. *What Happened: An Encyclopedia of Events That Changed America Forever*. (California: ABC-CLIO, LLC., 2011), 268.

accounts for the tensions which some women felt, but her argument did not dispel the conflicting paradigm between domesticity and female employment; rather it magnified them out of proportion.

Expanding upon the notion of Johnson and Lloyd, it is arguable that although Friedan critiques the polarity between public achievement and femininity, her own ideology adheres to this dualism. For example, Friedan criticises male magazine editors for categorising women diametrically, presenting the image of the happy housewife as antithetical to the “frustrated [...] masculinized” (41) career woman. However, Friedan is also guilty of portraying polarised stereotypes of women. Whereas Friedan’s housewife is a neurotic, desperate, “over-dominant mother who won’t let her sons grow up”¹⁴; her version of the career woman is “bright, well-educated, ambitious, attractive; she makes about the same amount of money as her husband”. (41) Although Friedan inverts the stereotypes “created by the women’s magazines” (21), she simultaneously adheres to “the image of [the] American woman [which] seems to have suffered a schizophrenic split” (31). Friedan’s fixation upon binary opposites reflects her reductionism, and inability to transcend her own exaggerated construction. Her model of ‘woman’ is ambivalently dissected to purposefully challenge the depiction of the career woman in the form of “Mephistopheles: the devil” (31). However, Friedan’s linguistic dependence upon hyperbole, emphatic metaphor and satirical sensationalism, detracts from the verisimilitude, and thus the authenticity of her argument. In the *Feminist Review* Bowlby supports this notion, stating that “Friedan has human playing feminine as genuine plays trivial, artificial.”¹⁵

Like Bowlby, Horowitz condemns Friedan’s linguistic artifice, identifying her concept of the “comfortable concentration camp” (228) in Chapter 12, as “problematic,” “trivializing,” “careless and exaggerated”¹⁶. Through the lens of revisionism, Friedan’s controversial metaphor deviates from contemporary models of politically correct discourse. Mass criticism led her to admit in her memoir *Life So Far* (2000): “I am ashamed of that

¹⁴ Rachel Bowlby. “‘The Problem with No Name’: Rereading Friedan’s ‘The Feminine Mystique’” *Feminist Review*, No. 27, (Autumn, 1987) (61-75): 66. [Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1394811>] [Accessed on 17 March 2011]

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (USA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 205.

analogy... The American suburb was no concentration camp.”¹⁷ Although Friedan has been castigated for her “gross insult to the victims of the Holocaust”¹⁸, Kermaglich’s research indicates that “between 1959 and 1967, a significant cohort of American-born Jewish Writers, academics, and artists [...] used Hitler, Nazis, and concentration camps as analogues for American society in their popular influential works”.¹⁹ Analogies with concentration camps cannot therefore be considered as alien to 1950s readership. Thus the sensationalism of *The Feminine Mystique* rests upon Friedan’s narratological appeal, regardless of her offensive metaphors. Her “most infamous chapter”²⁰, is therefore ideal to analyse in order to understand why her alliterated analogy resonated so strongly with her readership despite its gross exaggeration in literal terms.

In Chapter 12, Friedan draws a heinous parallel between the suburban housewives and the victims of Nazi concentration camps. Adapting Bruno Bettelheim’s research into the progressive dehumanization of concentration camp inmates, Friedan merges Bettelheim’s discovery of psychological deindividuation with her notion of the feminine mystique. Friedan linguistically mirrors Bettelheim’s assertion that the SS would “break the prisoners as individuals, and [...] change them into a docile mass”²¹, with the notion that “American women have walked into, or have been talked into [...] turn[ing] away from individual identity to become an anonymous biological robot in a docile mass.” (248) This semantic mirroring, acts however, as a mirage. Whilst it seemingly borrows the empirical authenticity from Bettelheim, “one of the preeminent experts on the concentration camps in the United States since 1943”²², Friedan’s account is speculative. It must be considered as a metaphorical trope, designed to initiate action, and even to boost sales.²³ Certainly, the alliterated “comfortable concentration camp” reads prosodically like a provocative mantra.

¹⁷ Betty Friedan, *Life So Far* (New York: Simon & Schuster Ltd., 2000), 132.

¹⁸ Anthony Synnott. *Re-thinking Men: Heroes, Villains and Victims*. (England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2009), 142.

¹⁹ Kirsan L. Kermaglich. “The Significance of Nazi Imagery in Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)” *American Jewish History*. 91:2. June 2003, (205-232), 219. [Available at: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ajh/summary/v091/91.2fermaglich.html>] [Accessed on: 27 March 2011]

²⁰ Anthony Synnott. *Re-thinking Men: Heroes, Villains and Victims*, 142.

²¹ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age* (New York: The Free Press, 1960), 109.

²² Kirsan L. Kermaglich. “The Significance of Nazi Imagery in Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)”:210.

²³ According to Lynne E. Ford, “the controversial book sold 3 million copies in three years and initiated a nationwide debate”. See Lynne E. Ford. *Encyclopedia of Women and American politics*. (New York: Facts On File Inc., 2008), 182.

Chapter 12 is replete with rhetorical questions and resonates with feminist political agency, for example: “Have women who live in the image of the feminine mystique trapped themselves within the narrow walls of their homes?” (248) Although such questions encourage reader response, they are simultaneously problematic when clarifying Friedan’s argument, and thus its authenticity. Is Friedan indicating that women are the propagators of their own suffering, the victims, or, that there is a symbiotic oscillation between the two poles? Bowlby also questions this ideological tension, stating that “[t]here is a hesitation as to victimization or agency in relation to which [...] Friedan sometimes privileges one side and sometimes the other.”²⁴ Similarly Cole notes that it is at this point where Friedan undermines her analogy by concluding that women become “their own victims”²⁵. Cole goes further, stating that Friedan begins to indicate that women are “not the victims of men or any institution.”²⁶ However, this is a moot point when taking into account Friedan’s concluding intertextual appropriation of Bettelheim. Bettelheim reflects upon his “unforgettable experience in a real concentration camp” (249) whereby he describes a female prisoner who is ordered to dance for an SS officer: “As she danced, she approached him, seized his gun and shot him down.” (249) Friedan responds to Bettelheim’s recollection, urging women to escape from their “trap” (249) and “like the dancer, finally exercise their human freedom, and recapture their sense of self.” (249) By re-contextualising Bettelheim’s experience, Friedan implies that women must reject their passive roles and become active by shooting down men in order to achieve emancipation. According to Synnott, Friedan’s metaphor transformed the concept of Fathers who were “once defined primarily as providers for, and protectors of, their families”²⁷. She subverts this image “redefin[ing] [them] as Nazi concentration camp guards”.²⁸ Again, Friedan delivers concepts in binary terms through “the *moral* polarization of men and women”²⁹, an ideological strand which Kate Millett, later picked up on in *Sexual Politics* (1970).³⁰

²⁴ Rachel Bowlby. “‘The Problem with No Name’: Rereading Friedan’s ‘The Feminine Mystique’”, 69.

²⁵ Alyson M. Cole. *The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror*. (California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 65.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Anthony Synnott. *Re-thinking Men: Heroes, Villains and Victims*, 143.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Kate Millett. *Sexual Politics*. (USA: First Illinois Paperback, [1969] 2000), 164.

Beyond the criticisms levelled at Friedan from scholars of masculine studies, Friedan's feminist contemporaries, Germaine Greer and bell hooks, condemn her terminology and inaccurate portrayal of American society. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks attests that Chapter 12 typifies Friedan's "narcissism, insensitivity, sentimentality, and self-indulgence"³¹; character traits which Greer also describes in an article responding to Friedan's obituary, following her death in 2006.³² Re-evaluating Friedan's argument, Greer completely "disagree[s] with its basic premise. Betty's Zeitgeist was not [hers]."³³ Greer maintains that "[w]hat Betty saw as sexuality, [she] saw as the denial and repression of female sexuality."³⁴ Like Greer, hooks annihilates Friedan's argument. Highlighting Friedan's ideological incongruity, hooks states: "She made her plight and the plight of white women like herself synonymous with a condition affecting all American Women. In so doing, she deflected attention away from her classism, her racism, her sexist attitudes towards the masses of American women."³⁵ Indeed, within the historiographic parameters of white feminist discourse, the bias is firmly white and middle-class. Friedan replicates the ethnocentric elitist individualism of her own predecessors, evolving the social philosophies of Charlotte Perkins Gilman³⁶ who argued for the implementation of a professionalised domestic service, in order to free white middle-class women to enter the work force. Whereas Friedan visualises the housewife as melancholic, hook recollects that "many women longed to be housewives [but] only women with leisure time and money could actually shape their identities on the model of the feminine mystique."³⁷ Certainly, Friedan's notion of feminine mystique could not have affected the one-third³⁸ of American women who were employed. Furthermore, the experiences of black female students were negated by Friedan because she did not include them in her study. Thus Friedan's bias is indicated by her use of opportunity samples rather than random or stratified samples which would have taken social class and race into account. In addition, Friedan notes that "only thirty-seven percent" (129)

³¹ bell hooks. *Feminist Theory: From Margin the Center*. (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 3

³² Germaine Greer, "The Betty I knew". *The Guardian*. G2 section (7 February 2006), 6 [Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/feb/07/gender.bookscomment>] [Accessed on 29 March 2011]

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ bell hooks. *Feminist Theory: From Margin the Center*, 2.

³⁶ Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*. (London: G. P Putnam's Sons, 1899).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Suzanne M. Bianchi, Daphne Spain, National Committee for Research on the 1980 Census. *American Women in Transition*. (USA: Russell Sage Foundation, 1986), 242.

of white female students graduated in the 1950s, however, hooks highlights that “nine out of ten black women college students completed their degrees”³⁹ and entered into employment. It is therefore reductionist of Friedan to assume that her findings reflected the reality for all American women, particularly African American women for whom racism also intersected with sexism. Yet why did her schism resonate with so many?

From the confident, albeit rather fabricated identification of culture as the locus of the feminine mystique, to the hyperbolic, dramatic and politically persuasive lexicon of Friedan’s narrative, *The Feminine Mystique* laid the groundwork for a mass feminist movement headed by the National Organization for Women, founded by Friedan in 1966. Friedan labelled a variety of conflicting currents in women’s lives, telling “the story of her discoveries in captivity in order to appeal to white, middle-class women.”⁴⁰ Certainly Friedan articulated a mystique; a plausible story which ironed out many of the contradictions in women’s lives and provided her target demographic with an explicit solution to their problems. The majority of reviewers praised Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. One anonymous reviewer from *Clinical Psychology* referred to it as “brilliant and original”⁴¹. Similarly, Anne Scott from the *South Atlantic Quarterly* found it highly “stimulating”⁴². However, a plethora of women who read *McCalls* and the *Ladies Home Journal*, magazines which were subjected to Friedan’s critique, attacked her portrayal of women as victims. Housewife, Helena Mont wrote to *McCalls*, expressing: “Strange, I don’t feel the brick wall or the devastating shackles of my frustration.”⁴³ More damningly, Lucy Freeman boldly pronounced: “The fault, dear Mrs Friedan, is not in our culture, but in ourselves.”⁴⁴ Freeman’s observation accounts for bell hook’s response to *The Feminine Mystique*, and contemporary criticisms of Friedan’s defamation of 1950s magazine culture. Certainly, her ideology was prevaricated to an extent because it was not applicable to all women. By polarising one guiding fiction with another,

³⁹ Rosalind Rosenberg. *Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 147-148.

⁴⁰ Daniel Horowitz. *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, The Cold War and Modern Feminism*. (USA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 245.

⁴¹ Anon, in Kirsten Fermaglich *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957-1965*. (Hanover, London: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 75.

⁴² Anne Scott, *ibid*, 79.

⁴³ Helena Mont, *ibid*.

⁴⁴ Lucy Freeman. “The Feminine Mystique”. *New York Times*. (7 April 1963), 46. [Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1963/04/07/books/friedan-feminine.html>] [Accessed on 29 March 2011]

she mythologised a myth. Nevertheless, Friedan's polemic "was a book that spoke to American women loud and clear"⁴⁵ and it had a significant effect on the social reality of America. It greatly influenced feminists like Germaine Greer, Kate Millett and bell hooks, initiated a worldwide debate between historians, feminists, and masculinists, and helped to unite women in their campaign for equal rights beyond the Equal Pay Act of 1963. *The Feminine Mystique* stimulated post-second wave feminist discourse, encouraging an exploration into the social construction of womanhood and its relationship to myth.

⁴⁵ Germaine Greer, in Bhaskar A. Shukla *Feminism: from Mary Wollstonecraft to Betty Friedan*. (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons: 2007), 114.

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