

**“Coming Together or Coming Apart: Europe and the United States in the 1960s”**

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**Feminist role models in the 1960s**

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# Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Background.....	4
2.1. You Tell Them, Mr. Freud! .....	4
2.2. The Woman of the Fifties .....	5
3. The Feminists.....	8
3.1. Friedan, the Mother .....	8
3.2. Steinem, the Activist .....	10
3.3. Morgan, the Radical .....	12
4. Conclusions.....	14
References .....	15

## 1. Introduction

The 1960s was probably the most turbulent decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The era, among other things, was marked by the black struggle for equality culminating in the Civil Rights Movement, many demonstrations against the US involvement in the Vietnam war or other social protests. The last years of the decade, however, are commonly referred to as the most salient and were marked by assassination of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, various student anti-war protests, Nixon's succession as the President of the United States, Woodstock Festival, or the Stonewall Riots that sparked on the streets of New York City after the police stormed the Stonewall Inn the popular gay club in Greenwich Village. Yet, despite the chaos and mayhem of the decade, or perhaps because of it, the 1960s are viewed as greatly significant and invaluable for future generations.

For the improvement of the woman's position particularly important was the feminist movement and its leaders such as Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem or Robin Morgan. Some of them adopted a moderate but still firm approach to the issue of women being discriminated and even ostracized by men. Others advocated more radical changes. But women of the 1950s and 60s knew their worth and even though society forced them to stay at home and take care of the household and family most of them would refuse to sing along with Peggy Lee:

I can wash out 44 pairs of socks and have 'em hangin out on the line  
I can starch & iron 2 dozens shirts 'fore you can count from 1 to 9  
I can scoop up a great big dipper full of lard from the drippins can  
Throw it in the skillet, go out & do my shopping, be back before it melts in the pan  
'Cause I'm a woman! W-O-M-A-N, I'll say it again (STLyrics)

Surely the woman of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was not proud of being able to iron her husband's shirts within a couple of seconds. She yearned for something more. She frequently asked herself: Does this really mean to be a women?

Another burning issue that concerned women was phallocentrism, which Jacque Derrida defined as "privileging of the masculine ["phallus"] over the feminine" (Wallace 2009, 155), and the patriarchal world order. These notions became highly visible and unpleasantly palpable for women of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. That is why the battle began. The following paper revolves around three major feminists of the 1960s and describes their main ideas, with which they struggled gender inequality. The focus will be placed on two major texts: Friedan's *The Feminine*

*Mystique*, Morgan's "Goodbye to All That," and Steinem's 1970 speech to the United States Congress. However, it is impossible to write about the feminists of the Sixties and their writings without any understanding of Sigmund Freud's theories on female sexuality and its legacies. For the same reason the overall scene of the 1950s and 1960s and the social situation of women in the United States will be viewed.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1. You tell them, Mr. Freud!**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century famous Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud, wrote a couple of essays that touch upon the issue of sexuality. Since then there has been a constant debate on Freud's opinions and notions. A hundred years later, the father of psychoanalysis is still much talked about even though some of his notions appear simply ridiculous today. One of such theories that wreaked most indignation was his idea of female sexuality.

Estelle Roith in her book *The Riddle of Freud* analyses certain aspects of the theory. For instance, she points out that, according to Freud, little girls until they reach puberty cannot properly identify their gender because they are simply unconscious of their female sex. Moreover, a girl is able to recognize only her maleness and not femaleness for it is the clitoris and not the vagina that bears certain similarities to the penis. Simply put, clitoris is more masculine than vagina. Already at this stage, Freud recognized the male as the one who is superior and maleness/masculinity as the most desirable human traits. Freud continues his train of thought by stating that young girls are surprisingly similar to young boys and that a girl is actually a castrated man. This similarity however, vanishes as soon as the girl reaches the stage of puberty. All of her maleness is then repressed and that is how she is able to develop her femaleness. The girl's sex consciousness also changes. She is now, as Roith noticed in Freud, able to recognize herself as a woman and, in addition, her erogenous zone shifts from clitoris to vagina (14-26).

According to Freud, the repression of the (ostensibly) original maleness is, as Roith notices, the woman's greater proneness to all kinds of neurosis and problems in the later stages of her life. At this point Freud also develops the idea of "penis envy." Since he argues that a woman is a castrated man, the logical consequence is her desire for the lost penis. Half a century later the

same concept would be commonly used in various writings, for instance, in *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* written by Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham. But the authors explained that the notion of penis envy could also have another background.

Ginette Castro summarized it that when Copernicus discovered that the Earth, or in other words the man, was no longer in the centre of the solar system he began to search for power so he could at least control the Earth. But people soon realized that the male is from the very beginning endowed by a “divine” source of power i.e. the penis. Shortly, women became jealous and the desire for the penis as well as the envy began. Lundberg and Farnham also remarked that because of such an explanation the main purpose of the feminist movement is to find a way to deprive a man or castrate him of the penis (11-16). Interestingly, Gatlin notices that the authors claimed “spinsters” to be incomplete females since the woman could only fulfill her societal duty as a mother and wife (18).

But let us go back to Freud for a moment. Roith provides that Freud believed that as the girl develops she becomes more interested in the father figure and her love for the mother weakens. The explanation for this shift is really simple – the father has a penis. Additionally, Freud noticed that the concept of penis envy is closely connected with the female version of the Oedipal complex. The girl blames her mother of infant castration and as she desires her father’s penis she is willing to take her mother’s place. The desire for the penis also undergoes a shift. Later in life it becomes the desire for husband’s penis and lastly son’s (14-26). But according to Lundberg and Farnham, woman’s desire for her son’s penis and control over a man, could be a source of certain abuses and destructive degenerations such as, for instance, being an overprotective or dominating mother. As Castro concludes, such traits in women were considered dangerous to society since “they were said to be making homosexuals of all-American boys” (11).

## **2.2. The woman of the Fifties**

After World War II the position of women noticeably changed and it was not a positive alteration. One can easily behold that during the pre-war period and since the Declaration of Sentiments in 1848 women were gradually gaining (ostensible) equality in society. Moreover, in 1920 the suffragists won the right to vote. The decade of the 1920s was also an important time for

it is notoriously known as the first major sexual revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During that time the woman gained a new image. She became “the flapper.” For the first time women wore mini skirts, applied excessive make-up, smoked cigarettes and talked openly about sex. The first world war is usually referred to as the culprit and the factor that provoked such changes in the social system. It also brought about certain departure from the Victorian decorum. People wanted to forget about the atrocities of the war and so they indulged in excessive drinking (despite the Prohibition) and experimented with sex.

But then the Great Depression struck in 1929 and ten years later another war broke out. It is widely known that women as well as men were actively engaged in the fights on the war front. It seems, however, that this time the war caused people to crave for the long absent societal order. This could be the reason for the devaluation of women’s position in society and return to the so called “cult of true womanhood” from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Barbara Welter provides that there were four virtues that a woman needed to have in order to be regarded as a good and virtuous mother and wife, i.e. piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness. In the 1950s and 1960s society began to extort the same virtues on women once again. It was, as Rochelle Gatlin claims, a revival of the male and female 19<sup>th</sup> century societal roles and the return to thinking that “women are weak and need male protection” (11). Masculinized by the war women were now being re-feminized, for instance, by designers, who were trying to create new and more feminine clothes for women (7).

However, Marge Piercy recalls that all the fashion inventions of the post-WWII scene were extremely uncomfortable and concludes that “before this armory of underwear, flesh was quelled, cowed. [...] We didn’t have bodies then, we had shapes. We were the poor stuff from which this equipment carved the feminine” (122). Piercy wrote that the only choice that stood before the woman of the Fifties was either conformity to the new/old societal rules or exile. In “Through the Cracks” she argues that women were simply sentenced to alienation and isolation. As she refused to play the role of the happy housewife, Piercy confesses that she left her husband, who later accused her of frigidity and neurosis, words so popular in the 1950s. Piercy complains that a woman had to do or live according to certain standards and if she did not acquiesce to them she was declared mad and sick. Furthermore, the author comments that

sick was a cant word of the fifties: if you were unhappy, if you wanted something you couldn't have easily or that other people did not want or wouldn't admit to wanting, if you were angry, if you were different, strange, psychic, emotional, intellectual, political, double-jointed: you were sick, sick, sick. (119-120)

Let us go back to other issues concerning femininity in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1950s, according to Gatlin, nonconformity and feminism were seen as political subvention and were compared to communism, of which people were so afraid. Moreover, the feminist movement was considered as a means of destruction of the family since feminists did not conform to the roles society wanted them to perform. But as Castro and Gatlin both notice this really political propaganda could have steamed from the fear of demasculinization of men. Gatlin points out to the importance of the absence of the Western frontier in the US where courageous men struggled with wild nature or fought with savage natives. Since then “men turned to sports and revived the Wild West in fiction, film and television searching for the pure models of competition, aggressiveness and skill” (8-9). At the same time they stayed away from home and family leaving “unmanly” duties such as cooking or cleaning to women.

Society required women to behave and live according to certain standards. But it also managed to develop, as Gatlin provides, the need in a woman to compete for a man as if the male was the ultimate “prize” and the assurance of a good life. In turn, this new woman's need provided economy with a new market niche and a source of profit. Furthermore, entertainment suppliers such as television and radio were producing shows particularly aimed at women and their problems. Ultimately, they were unconsciously manipulated and tricked into being what society really wanted them to be (14-15).

Ginette Castro in her book on American feminism emphasizes another important aspect that was commonly criticized in the 1950s – woman's education. According to *Modern Woman*, having a good educational background was the only cause of woman's frigidity in relationships with men. That is, Gatlin suggests, the reason why men and women were provided with separate education. While men could study politics or philosophy women were mostly taught home economics – how to sew or cook (16). Castro, on the other hand, notices that Lundberg and Farnham were strongly against woman's access to higher education simply because they thought that it is a psychological detriment to them. They claimed that “the more educated the woman is, the greater chance there is of sexual disorder” (Castro 1990, 12). As Castro subsequently

develops the sexual disorder meant sexual freedom, which was obviously reserved for men only. They thought that the male predominated in coitus as his role was active (the penetrator, the giver) and the female role was passive (as the penetrated, the receiver).

The occupation of the 1950s women was mainly “housewifery.” Or as Ann Sexton suggests in her poem “Housewife,” being the wife of a house (Jackson 2007, 77-8). Every year thousands of American women were deceived, manipulated and forced to give up their careers and education and instead take care of home and family. But suddenly they all started to share the same symptoms of the disease. The disease, or in other words the Housewife Syndrome, caused all kinds of neuroses such as “migraines, hypertension, pain, gastric upset, constipation, sexual troubles” (Castro 1990,11). Society claimed that the only remedy to this ostensible wound was to give new value and meaning to motherhood and femininity. On the other hand, women argued that the feminist movement was the only solution and the cure to the disease. These women were, among others, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem and Robin Morgan.

### **3. The feminists**

#### **3.1. Friedan, the Mother**

It is probably true to say that Betty Friedan was the mother of the contemporary feminist movement. Born in 1921, Friedan and her activism are said to have brought hope that the problem of women of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century would eventually be noticed. But she is also credited for something even more important. It is widely thought that Friedan’s first book, which was published in 1963, provided the feminist movement with the real impetus for action advocating and proclaiming the struggle for women’s rights. The book was titled *The Feminine Mystique*.

In her collection of the most essential feminist writing since WWII Miriam Schneir informs that the book was at the very beginning a questionnaire that Friedan run among her high school colleagues during the fifteenth graduation anniversary in 1957. The questionnaire asked about the problems with which the graduates, especially women, had faced since leaving the school. While analyzing the answers Friedan came to the realization that there existed a certain ideology that was to convince women that the only way through which they could find happiness and fulfillment was marriage and motherhood. She called it “the feminine mystique” and accused the already powerful media of disseminating of the idea. She also pointed out that the feminine



mystique was good for the economy since it encouraged women (and their husbands) to buy new home appliances such as toasters, vacuum cleaners, etc. (48-9). Castro, on the other hand, notices that it was with these kitchen tools that the woman established a certain relationship and also endeavored to create her identity (15) and the image of a happy homemaker. Friedan also mentioned Freud's theories on women and its later advocates such as Lundberg and Farnham. She finally commented that:

Freud was interpreted to American woman in such curiously literal terms that the concept of penis envy acquired a mystical life of its own, as if it existed quite independent of the women in whom it had been observed. The real injustices life held for women a century ago, compared to men, were dismissed as mere rationalizations of penis envy. And the real opportunities life offered to women now, compared to women then, were forbidden in the name of penis envy. (Friedan 1971, 110)

Rochelle Gatlin provides another interesting information as the background to Friedan's book. In 1960, one magazine published the article titled "Why Young Women Feel Trapped." The article met an enormous amount of reply from thousands of American housewives. Most of the female responders pointed out to a peculiar problem they could not name. They also complained that they had enough of taking care of the household and that they would like to work outside the home (49). However, the rest of society was constantly reminding women that the only place where they could find fulfillment and contentment was precisely home.

*The Feminine Mystique*, as Castro claims, really demystified the problem of American women and proved that they were not alone in their suffering. It also properly diagnosed the popular disease, the Housewife Syndrome, as the identity crisis:

It is my thesis that the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity—a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique. It is my thesis that as the Victorian culture did not permit women to accept or gratify their basic sexual needs, our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role. (Friedan, 69)

The symptoms of the disease, however, i.e. the neuroses, were, according to Friedan, proper reactions to the harmful system (Castro 1990, 16). The author's solution to "the problem that has no name" was simply to give the woman a fair and a well paid job so that she could achieve some sort of individual prestige she yearned for. Additionally, Friedan noticed that the patriarchal system favored men in most of professional backgrounds, which was also connected with the

ever present thinking of the man as a strong brute, provider of nourishment, and the woman as a weakling that needs male protection (Castro 1990, 51 and 117).

Apart from publishing an enormously influential book, Betty Friedan did something even more significant for the contemporary feminist movement. In 1966 she helped to create NOW – National Organization for Women – and served as its first president. The idea behind NOW was to be similar to civil rights organizations for African Americans since the feminists noticed that there is no such thing as, for instance, NAACP for women. In NOW's statement of purpose Friedan criticized three major facets. The first one was unequal employment opportunities for men and women as well as unequal pay distribution for the same tasks performed. The second was access to education or rather non-existence of such an access. Lastly, Friedan refused to recognize that the woman had to choose either a career or a family (Friedan in Schneir 1987, 96-102).

Friedan was also (in)famous for her initial critique of lesbians in the feminist movement. During one of NOW's conventions she called them "Lavender Menace." Gatlin suggests that since lesbians were viewed as the advocates of anti-family and anti-motherhood views, including their issues would pose a great threat to the very existence of the movement (190). Nevertheless, Betty Friedan has since become known as the mother of the contemporary feminist movement and the role model characterized by firm and well grounded opposition to the female discrimination. Her death in 2006 sparked a lot of emotion not only in the US but also in other parts of the world. She became an inspiration and gave hope to women that their "problem" would be solved.

### **3.2. Steinem, the Activist**

Gloria Steinem was another significant and influential feminist of the Sixties but her views on the movement were slightly different from those of the mother. For instance, she criticized Friedan and NOW for refusing to recognize and include the problems of the Negro women and making lesbian issues even less important. Steinem however, loved the idea of sisterhood that Friedan seemed to promote in *The Feminine Mystique*, the idea of sharing the same problems and sufferings. In one of her articles to *Ms.* magazine Steinem wrote: both [hetero and homosexual or white and black women] often realized that they shared problems as women, and they needed to support each other to have any power at all" (Steinem in Schneir 1987, 412) because "women

finally discovered that all of [them] were endangered when one group was denied” (413). In 1969, she wrote the article titled “After Black Power, Women’s liberation,” in which she advocated the alliance between black and feminist activists for she argued that together the two movements would definitely achieve more in terms of civil rights.

Since early 1950s, as Nancy Garhan Attebury provides, Steinem has been an active commentator of the political scene in the United States. But she was also an activist and eagerly “organized protests, recruited supporters, raised money, founded new pressure groups, and made speeches” (Schneir 1987, 408). She became a desirable writer and magazines such as *Esquire*, *New York Magazine* or *Harper’s* willingly included her texts. In 1963, her article “I was a Playboy Bunny” appeared in *Show* and created a great controversy as she admitted to have worked as a hostess/bunny at the Playboy Club in New York City. Nevertheless, she achieved her aim, which was to show the humiliating working conditions women faced, low wages and the abusive treatment they suffered from men (Attebury 2006, 9-12).

As Castro notices, Steinem tried to continue Friedan’s work and further demystify the feminine mystique. In her 1970 speech to the United States Congress she argued that it was high time to erase “deep-seated societal myths about gender” (History Matters). These were, for instance, biological inferiority and dependence on men. Steinem also criticized the idea that women

[...] are perceived as already powerful... there is still the conviction that women exercise some great behind-the-scenes power... We are said to be domineering or castrating... to be matriarchs. All the stereotypes come to mind: there is the pampered housewife, sitting at home in wall-to-wall comfort while her husband works long hours to keep her that way. There are the lazy women getting a free ride on alimony.... There are those figures of American mythology, the rich widows who are supposed to control most of the stock, and travel Europe on the life insurance of some overworked spouse. (Steinem in Castro 1990, 54-5)

In the speech she also pointed out that children need the father as much as they need the mother figure and by claiming that woman’s place is at home men still strengthen the old and outdated 19<sup>th</sup> century ideals. One can say that Steinem also created the idea of “the masculine mystique,” the opposition to Friedan’s notion. But while the feminine mystique literally meant jailing the woman at home, the masculine mystique could depend “on the subjugation of other people” (Steinem in History Matters). Steinem said that because of the mystiques she

[...] have experienced much of the legal and social discrimination reserved for women in [the US]. I have been refused service in public restaurants, ordered out of public gathering places, and turned away from apartment rentals; all for the clearly-stated, sole reason that I am a woman. And all without the legal remedies available to blacks and other minorities. I have been excluded from professional groups, writing assignments on so-called “unfeminine” subjects such as politics, full participation in the Democratic Party, jury duty, and even from such small male privileges as discounts on airline fares. Most important to me, I have been denied a society in which women are encouraged, or even allowed to think of themselves as first-class citizens and responsible human beings. (Steinem in *History Matters*)

In 1972, Steinem was one of the feminists who founded *Ms.* magazine, aimed at women and feminist issues. Through the years the magazine has aggregated an immense significance and remains the most important feminist magazine in the United States to date. Gloria Steinem, on the other hand, has become the feminist role model. She earned her popularity not only because of her active engagement in the feminist movement but more importantly because she was not afraid of accepting “others” such as Negro women, lesbians and radical feminists.

### **3.3. Morgan, the Radical**

The end of the 1960s saw the rise of radical feminism. As it was stated in “The Redstockings Manifesto,” radicals were struggling to achieve freedom from the male supremacy. They also identified “the agents of [women’s] oppression as men” and claimed “all other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) [to be] extensions of male supremacy.” Moreover, they argued that “all men receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy” and that “all men [had] oppressed women” (Schneir 1987, 127). Since 1969 the manifesto has been reprinted and included in various feminist collections and anthologies, for instance, in Robin Morgan’s *Sisterhood is Powerful*.

Morgan was one of those feminists, who despised men and wanted the everlasting patriarchal order to be finally destroyed. She simply found it unjust that women were perceived as the weak ones and unable to be self-dependent. Her writing and ideas provided women with inspiration and stimulus for more organized and radical action. In 1968 and 1969, Morgan took part in the so-called “guerilla theatres” organized by various radical feminist groups such as the New York Radical Women, WITCH (Women’s International Conspiracy from Hell) or the New York Radical Feminists (Schneir 1987, 148; Gatlin 1994, 103). Additionally, Gatlin provides Robin Morgan’s commentary of the protest against the Miss America pageant. She wrote that

“the demonstrators mock-auctioned off a dummy of Miss America and flung dishcloths, steno pads, girdles, and bras into a Freedom Trash Can. (This was later translated by the male-controlled media into the totally invented act of ‘bra-burning,’ a nonevent upon which they have fixated constantly ever since, in order to avoid presenting the real reasons for the growing discontent of women.) (Morgan in Gatlin 1994,103).

In the late 1960s Morgan was involved in *Rat* magazine and contributed many articles to its issues. But later, as Schneir informs, she refused to send any texts to, as Morgan claimed, the sexist magazine until it was eventually and completely taken over by women. In February 1970, Morgan wrote the article titled “Goodbye to All That,” which appeared in the new *Rat*.

First of all, the writer expressed her disapproval and critique of pornography for, as she argued, “pornography is the theory, and rape the practice” (Morgan in Gatlin 1994, 134) and prostitution, through which men ostensibly saw and understood women’s “liberation.” In the article Morgan accused men of all the evil in the world and stated that white men control and dominate the world and they even decide who should lead the Women’s Movement. The author claimed that men perceive (consciously or not) women as slaves who provide men with services such as “sex on demand” (Schneir 1987, 151). Furthermore, Morgan saw the sexual revolution of the Sixties very similar to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Reconstruction. She argued that the oppression of blacks in white post-bellum society changed its name only but the very discrimination still continued. The same, she claimed, was happening to women in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. (149-159)

As Betty Friedan and other feminists, Morgan also wanted to be perceived as a revolutionary. However, she soon realized that being a revolutionary really entails being ostracized and feeling humiliated for “to become a true revolutionary one must first become one of the oppressed [...] or realize that you are one of them already” (156). Morgan was also offended by seemingly more rational and tolerant gay men who refused to include lesbians in gay liberation movement. (149-159)

In “Goodbye to All That” one can sense the constant critique of phallocentrism, the supremacy of the masculine or, as Morgan called it, the “cock privilege.” To all of the above mentioned she said “goodbye.” She argued that it was high time women should stand up and show to the whole patriarchal world that it is enough. Enough of humiliation, enough of the abusive treatment, enough of suffering. At this point Morgan was also advocating violence as the strategy of the feminist movement. “We are rising with a fury,” she proclaimed “older and

potentially greater than any force in history, and this time we will be free or no one will survive. Power to all the people or to none.” She ended the article by demanding: “Free our sisters! Free ourselves!” (Morgan in Schneir 1987, 158-159).

#### **4. Conclusions**

The 1960s was the decade that saw great social protests and also changes. Many contemporary civil rights movements derive its roots precisely from the turbulent and fervent era. One can apply this to the feminist movement as well. The Sixties produced some great and influential feminist figures, who inspired later generations of women to stand up for their rights. Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem and Robin Morgan were among these feminists. Through their writing, social and political activism they fought with patriarchal stereotypes of women, their ostensible biological and psychological inferiority and clumsy nature. The women’s protests organized throughout the decade and later in the 1970s were to show society that women did not want to be categorized in the way they had been.

To be a women, the feminists argued, does not mean that one has to be a mother or a perfect housewife. They refused to perform appointed by men social roles of the actual servants. Moreover, women began to openly critique phallogentrism and the patriarchal world order. Why does it always have to be about men?, they would ask. Or more accurately about white men? About white heterosexual men? Why is it the women who has to be submissive or pious? The history shows that it was the women who has always suffered the double standard. But again, why does the “history” always have to tell “his story” and not hers? The story of great men but rarely great women?

In 1963, Peggy Lee might have sung that she “can starch & iron 2 dozens shirts 'fore [her man] can count from 1 to 9” (STLyrics) but a decade later Helen Reddy declared:

I am woman, hear me roar  
In numbers too big to ignore  
And I know too much to go back an' pretend  
'cause I've heard it all before  
And I've been down there on the floor  
No one's ever gonna keep me down again (Lyric Depot)

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