DEMYSTIFYING *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE*: BETTY FRIEDAN'S BESTSELLER IN CONTEXT OF THE POSTWAR AMERICAN PARADOXES

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Known as the "Women's Emancipation Proclamation," Betty Friedan's bestseller *The Feminine Mystique* has long had the reputation of reviving feminism in the culturally repressive post-WWII period of the United States.[1] Published in 1963, *The Feminine Mystique* presented Friedan's indictment of the postwar cultural climate that convinced middle-class women they could find complete fulfillment through domesticity. Media and scholars often credit the book for resurrecting feminism and single-handedly starting the second-wave feminist movement. Scholar Katherine Macklem wrote on March 15, 2004, "It's been 40 years since Betty Friedan and her seminal *The Feminine Mystique* unleashed the women's movement."[2] The *Los Angeles Times* said on February 7, 2006, "*The Feminine Mystique* revived an American feminism then thought to be extinct and unnecessary."[3] Scholar Margalit Fox stated in the same year, "[Betty Friedan's] searing first book, *The Feminine Mystique,* ignited the contemporary women's movement in 1963 and as a result permanently transformed the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world."[4] Friedan herself also contributed to this perception, stressing in *The Feminine Mystique* the death of feminism in the postwar period. "The fact is that to women born after 1920, feminism was dead history," Friedan asserted, "It ended as a vital movement in America with the winning of that final right: the vote."[5] Along the

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[1] Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (London: Picador, 1999), 295.

[2] Katherine Macklem, "Kids vs Career. (Cover story)." *Maclean's* 117, no. 11 (March 15, 2004): 24. MasterFILE Premier, EBSCOhost, accessed May 11, 2016.

[3] Susan Jacoby, "Keep the 'Mystique' Alive," *Los Angeles Times,* February 7, 2006, accessed May 10, 2016, http://search.proquest.com/docview/422076295/FE4CB1C7864A4530PQ/90?accountid=36348.

[4] Margalit Fox, "Betty Friedan, Who Ignited a Movement With 'The Feminine Mystique,' Dies at 85: [Obituary]." *New York Times,* February 6, 2006, accessed May 10, 2016, http://search.proquest.com/docview/433291147/fulltext/FE4CB1C7864A4530PQ/1?accountid=36348.

[5] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 100.

same lines, Friedan implied the absence of feminist progress in previous women's studies, reporting that these studies all perceived women in terms of the idealized image of peaceful and content housewives.[6] Subsequently, Friedan suggested the revolutionary influence of the book in 1983 in the *New York Times*, "It is 20 years now since *The Feminine Mystique* was published. I am still awed by the revolution that the book helped spark. Even now, women—and men—stop me on the street to reminisce about where they were when they read it."[7] Although Friedan was more measured in her word choice "helped spark," her emphasis was on "spark." In fact, the editors' bolded and italicized introduction to her article in the *New York Times* praised Friedan as "the author of the landmark book that became a catalyst for the women's movement."[8] The editors' lauding manner implied that Friedan's humble tone was her calculated strategy to promote her book and convey its revolutionary influence.

Although the popular culture lauded *The Feminine Mystique* for resurrecting feminism and igniting the second-wave feminist movement, some scholars took a more critical stance. In 1998, historian Daniel Horowitz noted that Friedan failed to acknowledge the substantial debt her book owed to thinkers such as Thorstein Veblen, Simone de Beauvoir, and Friedrich Engel.[9] Two years later, scholar Jessica Weiss challenged Friedan's historical account of America's postwar period, revealing that the postwar families were not stagnant and fixated on traditional values.[10] Most recently, historian Stephanie Coontz criticized in 2011 that crediting the book for launching the second-wave feminist movement neglected the rich history of female resistance, especially the women's suffrage movement in the 1920s.[11] Although *The Feminine Mystique* did contribute tremendously to the

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[6] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique,* 10.

[7] Betty Friedan, "Twenty Years After the Feminine Mystique," *New York Times*, February 27, 1983, accessed May 11, 2016, http://search.proquest.com/docview/122221956/72E9B0D5C53949FCPQ/2?accountid=36348.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 200-201.

[10] Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 16.

[11] Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 139.

feminist movement, people's common perception overestimated the book's value. *The Feminine Mystique* was the timely product of preceding feminism, particularly the ongoing feminist developments in the late 1940s and the 1950s. In fact, surveys and articles point to how suburban women were experiencing forms of feminism in their marriages. The real impact of *The Feminine Mystique* lay in its success in giving voices to a group of young, middle-class, primarily white housewives living in suburbia, trapped and silenced in the postwar American paradoxes, and empowering them to regain their confidence and independence.

Admittedly, the postwar era witnessed the staggering resurgence of domestic ideology in American society, partially as a backlash against the women's suffrage movement in the 1920s. While the women suffragists succeeded in winning women's right to vote and expanded women's sphere beyond the home, popular culture in the postwar era increasingly stressed that a domestic life embodied true womanhood. The domestic ideology specifically applied to the expanding group of young, middle-class women living in suburbia. As Friedan elaborated, "The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American women…She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, home. She had found true feminine fulfillment."[12] Such was the image that the popular culture disseminated, assuring middle-class women that they would find ultimate fulfillment in no place other than home. The image was so prevalent and powerful that consequently, many suburban women internalized this view and endeavored to conform to the image of the happy housewives, an image Friedan named "the feminine mystique."[13] [14]

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[12] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 18.

[13] Ibid., 9.

[14] The rise of the feminist mystique had various causes. In addition to being a backlash against the women's suffragist movement, the resurgence of domesticity was also caused by the rise of Freudian psychoanalysis that defined true womanhood as female passivity, blamed working women for "establishing a she-tyranny" over American men, and diagnosed women who deviated from the traditional female values as neurotic. Further perpetuating the domestic ideology, the white, middle-class American families in turn embraced family life as the source of stability after years of social upheaval from the Great Depression to WWII. The prevailing consumerism also contributed to women's retreat to home by defining housework and purchase for household needs as women's way to express individual creativity. The impending nuclear threat of the Cold War further enforced the concept of home as a safe haven and of women as the center of home. Sara M. Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of*

However, Friedan was wrong in inferring from the resurgence of domestic ideology the death of feminism. In fact, revolutionary feminist developments took place in the postwar era that distinguished the era from previous ones. Most strikingly, American families became more egalitarian in the late 1940s and the 1950s. In a *Fortune* magazine poll in 1946, to the question "who do you think is most often to blame when a marriage isn't a success, the man or the woman," an overwhelming majority of men (64%) and women (62.6%) chose "both equally."[15] Such results signaled a significant step towards an egalitarian marriage from the traditional notion that blamed women entirely for a failed marriage. In 1955, a college textbook titled *Making the Most of Marriage* was published, in which author Paul H. Landis urged couples to discard old-fashioned ideas and embrace a marriage of equals.[16] A 1956 issue of *LIFE* magazine featured an article titled "Changing Roles in Modern Marriage," in which author Robert Coughlan said, "With mutual respect based on understanding he can dry the dishes or tuck the children in, she can paint the fence or write the checks, without any loss whatever of prestige or emotional confidence."[17] Coughlan's support for moderate blurring of the division between men and women in marriage represented the new flexibility in gender roles. In fact, the postwar call of domesticity among the middle-class families extended beyond mothers, to fathers as well. As M. Robert Gomberg, columnist for the *New York Times Magazine*, wrote, "Advised, often demanded by experts in the field of family living, the change [in fifties marriage included] father's more mature willingness to share more of family life, including routine chores and day-to-day details of childrearing."[18] As historian Jessica Weisse summarized, "[Fifties marriages were not] based on a contentedly traditional division of labor. Rather, they were… a site of nascent struggle for a more

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Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (New York: Knopf, 1979), 12; Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 28, 37, 69.

[15] Editors of Fortune Magazine, "Fortune Survey: Women in America," *Fortune*, August 1946, 14.

[16] Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 20.

[17] Robert Coughlan, "Changing Roles in Modern Marriage," *LIFE*, December 24, 1956, accessed May 12, 2016, https://books.google.com/books?id=00EEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA3&vq=peter%20marshall&pg=PA50%23v=onepage&q=woman&f=false#v=snippet&q=changing%20roles.

[18] M. Robert Gomberg, "Father as Family Man," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 6, 1953, 34; quoted in Weiss, *To Have and To Hold*, 87.

egalitarian reality in middle-class marriage."[19] American couples' new flexibility in their marital roles laid the foundation for the upcoming crusade for women's equality in the next decade.

Contributing to the more egalitarian marriage was the growing acceptance of married women in the workplace, another major change in the postwar American society. Women's employment during World War II loosened cultural barriers against married women employees.[20] Consequently, scholarly voices started challenging women's confinement to domesticity. Sociologist Elizabeth Hawes observed in 1943, "No woman on God's earth wants to have her life swing around a solitary, boring, repetitive business which means exhausting herself washing the same dishes and clothes, cooking food for the same people, seldom seeing a living soul other than a tired husband and her own children…"[21] She went on to assert, "Certainly any woman can be a 'good wife' and a 'good mother' and do other creative work outside her own little love nest."[22] Hawes was pioneering in delineating the monotony of domestic routines and in supporting women's work outside of home. After WWII, scholars defense of working women carried on. In 1956, Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein argued, "The sentimental cult of domestic virtues is the cheapest method at society's disposal of keeping women quiet without seriously considering their grievances or improving their position."[23] Both Hawes's work and Myrdal and Klein's poignant criticism of the domestic ideology helped shape Friedan's arguments.[24] By downplaying and failing to acknowledge their contributions in *The Feminine Mystique,* Friedan made her own work appear more innovative.

Scholars' challenges of women's confinement to domesticity, coupled with the increased acceptance of working women, prompted feminist progress in the postwar era; consequently, voices challenging the feminine mystique and advocating for women's part-time jobs

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[19] Weiss, *To Have and To Hold,* 16.
[20] Ibid., 28.
[21] Elizabeth Hawes. *Why Women Cry: Or, Wenches with Wrenches.* (1998 ed. New York: Reynal & Hitchchock, 1943), xv, accessed May 20, 2016, https://archive.org/details/whywomencryorwen00hawerich.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work.* (1998 ed., London: Routledge, 1956), 146, accessed May 20, 2016, https://books.google.com/books?id=ImrkSJOTSSsC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false.
[24] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 144.

emerged in the general interest magazines and newspapers. For example, a 1947 issue of *LIFE* magazine presented an article titled, "American Woman's Dilemma," which deemed a purely domestic life harmful for the American women. The author observed, "[Many housewives] fall back on numbing rounds of club meetings[,] card playing [,] low-grade fiction[,] and…dream realms of movies and soap operas."[25] To address American housewives' collective boredom, the author advocated for part-time jobs because they would not disturb a mother's child-caring duty.[26] The article proposed that "[a married woman should] combine part-time work with housekeeping while she is young and to use this experience more fully when her children have left home."[27] Similarly, a 1949 *New York Times* article by John Willig suspected that women could not achieve ultimate fulfillment through domesticity. After surveying 784 graduates from the Class of 1934 of the Seven Associated Colleges[28] during their fifteenth reunion, journalist John Willig reported, "[Many graduates] complained about the dullness of the domestic life and the monotony of family routine."[29] He observed, "[Graduates' typical comments included] 'Frustrating drudgery, far from creative…' [and] '…can be very lonely, and if you have intellectual interests, very dull.'"[30] The media's opposition to the happy housewife myth and its support for women's part-time jobs represented the postwar feminist progress that laid the foundation for Friedan's 1963 advocacy that women should stand up against the feminine mystique and combine career with marriage.

As World War II induced the public to look more favorably on married working women, the postwar period also witnessed growing affirmation of married suburban women's contributions to the American society through employment. For instance, a 1953 issue of

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[25] "American Woman's Dilemma," *LIFE* magazine, June 16, 1947, 109, accessed May 15, 2016, https://books.google.com/books?id=mEgEAAAAMBAJ&q=dilemma#v=snippet&q=dilemma&f=false.

[26] Ibid., 110.

[27] Ibid., 101.

[28] The Seven Associated Colleges included Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley.

[29] John Willig, "Class of '34 (Female) Fifteen Years Later: 784 graduates report on themselves," *New York Times*, June 12, 1949, accessed May 9, 2016, http://search.proquest.com/docview/105900720/4F194AECF6FA4F38PQ/3?accountid=36348.

[30] Ibid.

LIFE magazine featured a complimentary article about mothers who worked to improve family life materially, saying, "Married women's employment created much of the affluence postwar families enjoyed."[31] Notably, in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1962, an editorial titled "Some Gentle Observations About Women" expressed confidence in women's intellectual capacities and advocated for women's equal employment opportunities: "The fact is we continue to deny women real equality of opportunity. We have, in the American woman, one of the nation's great neglected resources…because she has brains, time, knowledge, courage, sensitivity, and dedication that are needed in our struggle for survival."[32] With the undertone of Cold War anxiety, the editorial urged that women would join the working force to strengthen the nation in its "struggle for survival" against the Soviet Union. The increased recognition of women's intellectual capability and their contribution to society through employment, as expressed by scholars and mainstream media, signaled monumental progress in women's liberation.

As the women's suffrage movement and World War II left indelible marks on the postwar American society, the postwar era featured feminist ideas emerging within the suburban families and circulating among the media, scholars, and activists. By downplaying the debt that *The Feminine Mystique* owed to the broader historical context, Friedan impressed her readers with a more revolutionary value of her book than it truly had. Instead of the pioneer that blazed the untraveled trail, *The Feminine Mystique* was the bursting blossom of the budding feminism in the postwar era, echoing and synthesizing a strain of feminist ideas that paved its way. Yet without exaggeration, the real power of *The Feminine Mystique* remained historic and extraordinary, for the book helped an immense group of young suburban women find their voices at the crucial time of their life in an era of disorienting societal changes.

Although feminist ideas already started circulating in the postwar period, the majority of suburban housewives could not access them due to the strong influence of women's magazines. Not only did major women's magazines constitute a large portion of what suburban women read in the 1950s, but their readers also formed more than half

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[31] Weiss, *To Have and To Hold,* 48.

[32] "SOME GENTLE OBSERVATIONS ABOUT WOMEN," *Saturday Evening Post,* March 17, 1962.: 110, MasterFILE Premier, EBSCOhost, accessed May 12, 2016.

of the total female population.[33] These magazines were largely responsible for disseminating the concept that all women who willingly gave up their career ambitions would find fulfillment in being a homemaker. As Friedan reported in *The Feminine Mystique*, "[In 1958 and 1959], I went through issue after issue of the three major women's magazines without finding a single heroine who had a career…other than 'Occupation: housewife.'"[34] While Friedan may have exaggerated her case on the absence of feminist voices in the women's magazines, more objective research came from sociologist Francesca Cancian, who investigated two major women's magazines, *Ladies' Home Journal* and *McCall's.* She found that in the 1950s, these magazines contained more emphasis on housewives delighted to sacrifice work for home than in any other decade since the 1900s.[35] When Friedan attempted to publish *The Feminine Mystique* in *Redbook,* another major woman's magazine, *Redbook* rejected, saying, "If we put something like this in the magazine, it sounds as if we think it's true, which isn't so. It's distinctly an individual point of view…"[36] *Redbook*'s rejection represented women's magazines' traditionalist stance in the 1950s, shielding suburban women from voices opposing the feminine mystique.

Strengthening the influence of women's magazines was the sense of isolation encompassing suburban women. As postwar middle-class families shrank in size, giving rise to more nuclear families, housewives became increasingly shut in their individual families from the outside world. As a woman named Carol Sears narrated, "I find I now depend on [my husband] for fun, excitement and diversion. He prefers young people, I really feel best with people my own age and older. But I have grown away or shy away from people and never invite them in for an evening as he will be bored with them or just not like them."[37] Sears' narration represented many suburban women who conformed to the feminine mystique and lost their independence as well as their social connections. This sense of alienation prevented

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[33] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring,* 65.
[34] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique,* 44.
[35] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring,* 67.
[36] Redbook rejection, 1962. (Betty Friedan Papers, MC 575, Box 154, Folder 1937)," *Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University,* accessed May 13, 2016, https://schlesingerlibrary.omeka.net/items/show/46.
[37] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 184.

women from recognizing that they were not alone when they could not feel as delighted as the housewives in the women's magazines. In a letter to Friedan, a reader of *The Feminine Mystique* recalled her loneliness: "I was expecting a book that was going to discuss aspects of being a woman that I didn't fully realize yet. I fully expected you to develop a thesis that would state quite clearly how it was that so many women find true fulfillment in being homemakers. Even though I had never been able to do so, I thought that most women were."[38] Consequently, the suburban housewives internalized the feminine mystique and endeavored to muffle feelings other than joy and contentment with their role.

While the ignorance of opposition to the feminine mystique led many suburban women to feel forced to conform to the image, paradoxical societal changes of the postwar era further discouraged these women from leading a life of more than domesticity. The suburban women in the late 1940s and the 1950s faced a disorienting mixture of societal messages on womanhood. Contrasting the feminine mystique, the media celebrated successful career women. In a 1947 issue of *LIFE* magazine, an article titled "Full-time Career" praised married women who worked as factory workers, business women, and lawyers.[39] However, the author added that working was a good plan only if these married women were successful and were able to provide their children with secure and well-run homes. Similarly, in a 1956 issue of *LIFE* magazine, an article titled "A Lawmaking Homemaker" featured a woman elected to her fourth term in the Minnesota House of Representatives. The article stated in a commanding tone, "Combing a political career with a home is no easy task for a housewife, but Mrs. Sally Luther, 38, of Minneapolis, carries it off to the satisfaction of both her constituents and her family."[40] Underlying this paradox was the assumption that although some women could indeed combine marriage and career, these were the few and gifted. Although media's

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[38] "Letter from reader in Needham Heights, Massachusetts, March 22, 1964 (page 1). (Betty Friedan Papers, MC 575, Box 59, Folder 723)," Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, accessed May 12, 2016, https://schlesingerlibrary.omeka.net/items/show/68.

[39] "American Woman's Dilemma," *LIFE*, June 16, 1947, 102, accessed May 15, 2016, https://books.google.com/books?id=mEgEAAAAMBAJ&q=dilemma#v=snippet&q=dilemma&f=false.

[40] "A Lawmaking Homemaker," *LIFE*, December 1956, 50, accessed May 12, 2016, https://books.google.com/books?id=00EEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA3&vq=peter%20marshall&pg=PA50#v=onepage&q=woman&f=false.

celebration of successful career women was progressive, such progress was limited. In reality, the social expectation of career women about homemaking did not diminish. Additionally, these women received little support with housework and child care.[41] As career women had no relief from domestic duties, in committing themselves to their career they chose to create more work and pressure for themselves. Consequently, the high demand of combining career and marriage either intimidated or inhibited the majority of American women to take on the task, making married working women only a rare exception to the social norm.

Adding on to the pressure that married working women faced, the popular culture defined truly successful women as traditionally feminine and completely devoted to domesticity. As *Redbook* commented, "Few women would want to thumb their noses at husbands, children and community and go off on their own. Those who do may be talented individuals, but they rarely are successful women."[42] The condemnation of working women as unfeminine stemmed from the rise of Freudian psychoanalysis in the postwar era. The Freudian theory popular in the mainstream culture defined true womanhood as female passivity and advocated for "castrating" working women.[43] While most people held a less extreme view, they still considered domesticity as women's first priority, and believed that a career would detract women from their domestic duties. Journalist Dorothy Thompson exemplified this opinion by warning her readers in *Ladies Home Journal* that before a woman attempted a career, she should make sure she was a "genius," because if she ended up doing mediocre work, she would be blamed for wasting the chance of raising an outstanding child.[44] Such social attitude made married working women face highly critical judgments on their performances both at work and at home, thus dissuading most married women from venturing to enter the workplace.

Moreover, although part-time jobs became available in the postwar period, which allowed more leeway for married women to work, these jobs were difficult to find. In the aforementioned survey of

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[41] "Primary and Secondary Contradictions in Seattle: 1967-1969," in *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Barr Snitow (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 224.
[42] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 25.
[43] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 69.
[44] Ibid., xxii.

784 members of the Class of 1934 during their fifteenth reunion, many women reported, "To find part-time jobs, even in teaching, where the need is supposed to be great, is extremely difficult."[45] Out of the 23 million white female population in 1950, only 6 million had part-time employment, with 3 million only employed part-time for less than a third of a year.[46] The lack of part-time work, coupled with society's oblique discouragement of female working women, forced the majority of the young suburban women to refrain from combining work with marriage.

For the women who knew no alternative to domesticity, the ugly reality of leading a domestic life did not change, belying the pretty promises of the feminine mystique. "There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique," Friedan observed.[47] To arrive at this observation, Friedan first gathered from her 200 Smith college classmates their answers to her questionnaire during their fifteenth reunion in 1957. She then interviewed eighty other women spanning the age range from high school to forty years old. Her research convinced her of the prevalence of suburban housewives' silenced frustration with the domestic life. As Friedan described in the book's famous first paragraph in the chapter "The Problem That Has No Name:"

> The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning…Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Club Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—"Is this All?"[48]

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[45] Willig, "Class of '34 (Female) Fifteen Years Later."
[46] Congress, Statistical Abstract of the United States, H.R. Rep. No. 86th-No. 331, 2d Sess., at 22 (1960); Susan B. Carter, *Part B. Work and Welfare*, millennial ed., vol. 2, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 312.
[47] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 9.
[48] Ibid., 15.

This passage captured the systematic silencing of the suburban housewives that isolated these women, lured them to internalize the feminine mystique, and prohibited them from challenging the status quo or vocalizing their true feelings. In the following pages, Friedan elaborated upon this "sense of dissatisfaction" among the suburban wives about domestic routines. "Sometimes, a woman would say, 'I feel empty somehow…incomplete.' Or she would say, 'I feel as if I don't exist,'" Friedan described, for instance. "Sometimes she went to a doctor with symptoms she could hardly describe: 'A tired feeling…I get so angry with the children it scares me…I feel like crying with no reason.'"[49] Friedan further explored the impact on women when they internalized the feminine mystique: "If a woman had a problem in the 1950's and 1960's, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself…She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it. If she tried to tell her husband, he didn't understand…she did not really understand it herself."[50] In this passage, Friedan revealed the self-distrust, shame, isolation, and confusion confronting suburban housewives.

The advancement in women's education contributed to and worsened the housewives' mental suffering. During the 1950s, more girls completed high school than in any previous era, and young white women found that they were twice as likely to go to college as their mothers had been.[51] As many of the educated women graduated and conformed to the feminine mystique, the intellectual training they received made the boredom of domesticity hit them harder. Unlike their counterparts in the first half of the twentieth century, who seldom experienced higher education, this new generation of housewives had expanded their horizons through the progress in women's education but ironically ended up becoming more prone to dissatisfaction. Barbara Winslow's mother, an active civil worker, exemplified this irony. "My mother was, on the surface, the model of an emancipated woman within marriage, [but] I believe my mother was frustrated by her role as a wife and mother," Winslow, a leader of the second-wave feminist movement, recounted. Surprisingly, Winslow's mother's oppression occurred in an open-minded family environment, with male support of female liberation. As Winslow said, "Recently she told me that she

[49] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 20.
[50] Ibid., 19.
[51] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 60-61.

believed my role models were my grandfather…and my father…[because both men] believe strongly in women being independent. Instead, I believe my mother, with all the contradictions in her life, is my role model."[52] Winslow's mother succeeded in nurturing and inspiring a future feminist leader with her brilliant intelligence, making it more shocking to observe the mother's struggle to grapple with the discrepancy between her supposed liberation as an educated woman and her frustration with domesticity.

Indeed, Winslow's mother's experience represented yet another paradox on postwar womanhood: the popular culture perceived that the new emphasis on women's education embodied postwar women's liberation, which was worth celebrating; however, such perception only made many suburban housewives feel guiltier for their discontent when they conformed to domesticity. As Friedan described, "[Suburban women who have internalized the feminine mystique tell themselves that] we ought to salute the wonderful freedom we all have and be proud of our lives today. I have had college and I've worked, but being a housewife is the most rewarding and satisfying role."[53] The feminine mystique played women's education to its benefit, masking its silencing and oppression of women with glorious celebration of women's equality, which caused more confusion and self-doubt among suburban housewives. As a woman named Joan C. described, "It would have been easier if everyone had been…negative…Then you could have gotten indignant. But it was like being enveloped in a big cloud of cotton candy, sweet and sticky. You couldn't punch your way out."[54] Another woman named Anne Parsons expressed even stronger frustration that perhaps hinted at her desperation: "I began to wish that someone would call me names or throw stones or threaten to send me to a concentration camp so that at least I would know for certain the world was against me."[55] Extolling the postwar expansion of women's sphere both in college education and in the workplace, the popular culture disguised and sugarcoated the subtle and unspoken form of women's oppression—the conformity to the feminine mystique—causing more confusion, shame, and self-doubt among the discontented suburban women.

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[52] "Primary and Secondary Contradictions," in *The Feminist Memoir Project*, 224.
[53] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 24.
[54] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 74.
[55] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 75.

For many suburban women, *The Feminine Mystique* was the first voice that affirmed their muffled feelings, and in their letters to Friedan they expressed their struggle before reading the book as well as their shocks of recognition after reading it. For some, internalizing the feminine mystique led to guilt and self-doubt. As a woman named Lillian Rubin said, "[Friedan] called it perfectly. The feeling didn't have a name….So you turned it inward and assumed *you* were the problem. And so did everyone around you."[56] Others suffered from confusion and depression. For instance, a woman named Sally A. wondered whether she should see a psychiatrist because she often cried "for no reason" in the middle of the afternoon; she recalled thinking, after reading *The Feminine Mystique*, "Everything just clicked."[57] For many, leading a domestic life also meant becoming trapped in a sense of unworthiness. One housewife represented this feeling by writing a poem prompted by reading the book: "I'm afraid I'll just vanish./ Like some small thing/ In the ground/ That no one knows/ Even existed."[58] The writings of thousands of suburban housewives revealed the staggering reality that stood in stark contrast to the feminine mystique.

By giving voices to the suburban housewives' discontent, *The Feminine Mystique* helped these women break out of their isolation and recognize their individual grievances as collective. As one woman wrote, "My husband cannot understand why I have suddenly turned miserable after 11 years of a good marriage. I had been unhappily living in the belief that my feelings about marriage were all wrong, that no other woman feels as I do…Now that I know I am not alone in feeling as I do, the future seems quite a bit brighter."[59] Recognition of their shared grievances marked the suburban housewives' first step towards regaining their confidence and standing up to oppose society's systematic silencing of their voices.

In addition to being the unprecedented cohesive force that bonded the suburban housewives, *The Feminine Mystique* was also powerful in legitimizing their frustration with domesticity. Using the recent sociological and psychological findings, including Maslow's

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[56] Ibid., 20.
[57] Ibid., 19.
[58] Pat Andrews, "The Feminine Mystique," *Chicago Tribune*, June 2, 1963, accessed May 5, 2016, http://search.proquest.com/docview/182742816/87B094E3D72B4C8CPQ/1?accountid=36348.
[59] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 26.

hierarchy of needs, Friedan illustrated in the chapter titled "The Forfeited Self" that the need for self-actualization was a defining characteristic of human health.[60] Friedan then analyzed that the feminine mystique, by defining independence and intellectual ambitions as antagonistic to femininity, prohibited women from growing to their full human capacities.[61] As Friedan contended, "A woman cannot find her identity through others—her husband, her children. She cannot find it in the dull routine of housework."[62] To further support her case, Friedan documented women's transformations when they no longer saw marriage and motherhood as the only means to their ultimate fulfillment. As one woman recounted, "When I was putting my whole self into the children, it was as if I was always looking for something through them. I couldn't just enjoy them as I do now…Maybe a woman has to be *by herself* to be really *with* her children."[63] This woman's experience, representing those of many more women, demonstrated the fundamental flaw of the domestic ideology that denied women's independence for supposedly women's own good. Friedan pioneered the translation of complicated scholarly studies into accessible language similar to that of women's magazines, combining academic research results with individual stories, which boosted the book's popularity and expanded its influence.[64]

After presenting a persuasive justification for the housewives' yearning for something more beyond home, Friedan laid out concrete suggestions for social changes in the chapter titled "A New Life Plan for Women." Friedan argued that for women to achieve personal growth, education and applying education to a profession were keys.[65] Friedan further advocated that women should not beat themselves down to be feminine and should look for jobs equal to their actual capacity—jobs that they could take seriously as part of a life plan, in which they can grow as part of society, such as a lifelong commitment to art, science, or politics.[66] For those who approached forty years old and

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[60] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 316.
[61] Ibid., 317.
[62] Ibid., 336.
[63] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 343.
[64] Patricia Bradley, *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 1963-1975.* Jackson, MS, USA: University Press of Mississippi, 2004. ProQuest ebrary: 11, accessed May 8, 2016, http://site.ebrary.com/lib/phillipsexeter/detail.action?docID=10157899.
[65] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 357.
[66] Ibid., 345 & 348.

managed to seize these keys, according to Friedan, they reported, "[Although my] skin looks faded and tired…I have a growing sense of self-realization, inner serenity and strength."[67] In addition to urging women to take up serious commitments besides domesticity, Friedan also appealed for two major policy changes: first, to establish a national education program, similar to the GI bill, that would assist women in completing high education; second, to allow for maternity leaves and sabbaticals and to construct professionally run nurseries that would allow women to combine their commitment to profession with marriage and motherhood.[68] By concrete instructions, Friedan pointed a clear direction for women to take actions both for achieving personal growth and for demanding societal changes. Friedan's instructional writing style, which resembled the popular women's self-help articles, also helped popularize the book and enhanced its power in mobilizing the suburban housewives.[69]

Friedan's encouragement of women to pursue their ambitions and cultivate personal growth played a transformative role in many suburban women's lives. Through letters to Friedan, many expressed their gratitude that the book helped them regain their confidence and motivation. One woman, married eight years with two children, wrote, "Although I stood highest in my high school class and read constantly, none of my ideas were important [to my husband.] [Thank you for] that extra boost I needed to know I am important to myself and my children and not just a diaper changer."[70] Another said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you for your inspiring book, the Feminine Mystique. Yours were the words I needed to put all the pieces together and buckle down to some more serious pursuits—to commitment I have been avoiding for some undetermined reason."[71] Similarly, one reader thanked the book for saving her from misery and empowering her to reclaim her independence and self-esteem. "For years I have wondered what lingering adolescence made me feel that my college years were the happiest of my life when here I was a most fortunate woman with 'everything' a woman could want," she said. "And now I know. It's

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[67] Ibid., 359.
[68] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 370 & 375.
[69] Patricia Bradley, *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism,* 12.
[70] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 28.
[71] "Letter from reader in Concord, Massachusetts, June 18, 1963. (Betty Friedan Papers, MC 575)," *Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University*, accessed May 12, 2016, https://schlesingerlibrary.omeka.net/items/show/59.

because that was the one time in my life when I made my own decisions and was personally responsible for the results…I felt reborn and all-powerful…. I am never going to forget that I am not my husband's other self: I am ME."[72] The aforementioned reader who published a poem in response to *The Feminine Mystique* thanked the book for helping her break out of the myth of the ideal womanhood—being a wife, mother, and a sexual companion to her husband—and regain her own identity and individuality: "I'm standing up;/ Please count me./ I'm not Mrs. So and so/ I'm not mama/ Or honey."[73] Thus *The Feminine Mystique* was revolutionary in raising an immense group of young suburban housewives out of self-deprecation and empowering them to reclaim their independence. The book's success in uplifting this group of women laid tremendous foundation for the second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s.

Contrary to popular perception and Friedan's own portrayal, *The Feminine Mystique* did not single-handedly trigger the second-wave feminist movement, nor did it resurrect feminism that vanished in the postwar resurgence of the domestic ideology. To say otherwise is to neglect the ongoing revolutionary developments in the late 1940s and the 1950s that distinguished this time period from the previous ones. The arguments in *The Feminine Mystique* echoed a strain of feminist ideas prior to the book's publication, marking the book a timely offspring born of the budding feminism in its era. Nevertheless, the real power of *The Feminine Mystique* remained monumental. The book gave voices to a generation of young, middle-class women silenced and isolated in the trap of the feminine mystique. The popular culture told these women that they were lucky to receive college educations and have working experience, but their ultimate fulfillment would and only could come from full-time commitment to marriage and womanhood. When these women felt frustrated with the boredom of the domestic routines and yearned for something more beyond home, they had little support to help them resist the cultural insistence that their yearning was abnormal. As a result, these women experienced mental sufferings ranging from confusion and loneliness to shame, self-doubt, and desperation. Historian Stephanie Coontz offered a memorable

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[72] "Letter from reader in Suffern, New York, November 8, 1964. (Betty Friedan Papers, MC 575)," *Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University*, accessed May 11, 2016, https://schlesingerlibrary.omeka.net/items/show/69.

[73] Andrews, "The Feminine Mystique."

characterization of this generation of women and *The Feminine Mystique*'s impact on these women:

> They were…like the farm boys from World War I who passed through New York City on the way to the killing fields of France and then, when the war was over, couldn't go back to the farm. We understood and accepted those soldiers who didn't return to the farm.
>
> But it took Friedan to help us understand that there were women who, through their education, saw glimpses of the world of work and then didn't want to go back to being housewives. Or they went back under enormous pressure from everyone, but spent the next years of their lives with their noses pressed against the proverbial glass—looking in at a world that they would never be part of.[74]

Indeed, *The Feminine Mystique* was extraordinary due to its success in deconstructing the paradox and hypocrisy of the postwar era and putting a tremendous and resonating dent in, if not shattering, the "glass" that was the feminine mystique. Most remarkably, the book pioneered in communicating complex scholarly studies in an accessible fashion by using individual stories and the language of women's magazines familiar to suburban women. Consequently, *The Feminine Mystique* reached a generation of women who were previously isolated from the existing feminism, empowering them to regain their voices, break the confinement of domesticity, and demand for social changes. As Coontz continued, "[*The Feminine Mystique* electrified the] women who might otherwise have been lost entirely to themselves and to the women's movement."[75] Forty three years after the book's publication, Marlene Sanders, founding chair of Women's eNews and Friedan's lifelong close friend, recounted, "Friedan had wakened a sleeping generation of women, and millions of them would educate themselves and enter the workforce with all the energy of an eruption from Etna."[76]

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[74] Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 118 & 119.
[75] Ibid., 161.
[76] Marlene Sanders, "Betty Friedan Work Women From Mystique of Sleep," *Women's eNews*, February 7, 2006, accessed May 9, 2016. http://womensenews.org/2006/02/betty-friedan-woke-women-mystique-sleep/.

When the second-wave feminist movement took off in the late 1960s, these women would join in the fight with reclaimed independence and self-esteem and become an immense part of a crusade that would transform women's place in the American society.