Betty Friedan

The Feminine Mystique

"Changed the world so comprehensively that it's hard to remember how much change was called for." —NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

With an Introduction by

Anna Quindlen
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 that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. 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 Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—“Is this all?”

For over fifteen years there was no word of this yearning in the millions of words written about women, for women, in all the columns, books and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers. Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training, how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and build a swimming pool with their own hands; how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting; how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents. They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. Some women, in their forties and fifties, still remembered painfully giving up those dreams, but most of the younger women no longer even thought about them. A thousand expert voices applauded their femininity, their adjustment, their new maturity. All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children.

By the end of the nineteen-fifties, the average marriage age of
women in America dropped to 20, and was still dropping, into the
teens. Fourteen million girls were engaged by 17. The proportion of
women attending college in comparison with men dropped from 47
per cent in 1920 to 35 per cent in 1958. A century earlier, women
had fought for higher education; now girls went to college to get a
husband. By the mid-fifties, 60 per cent dropped out of college to
marry, or because they were afraid too much education would be a
marriage bar. Colleges built dormitories for “married students,” but
the students were almost always the husbands. A new degree was
instituted for the wives—“Ph. T.” (Putting Husband Through).

Then American girls began getting married in high school. And
the women’s magazines, deplored the unhappy statistics about these
young marriages, urged that courses on marriage, and marriage
counselors, be installed in the high schools. Girls started going
steady at twelve and thirteen, in junior high. Manufacturers put out
brassieres with false bosoms of foam rubber for little girls of ten.
And an advertisement for a child’s dress, sizes 3–6x, in the New York
Times in the fall of 1960, said: “She Too Can Join the Man-Trap
Set.”

By the end of the fifties, the United States birthrate was overtaking
India’s. The birth-control movement, renamed Planned Parenthood,
was asked to find a method whereby women who had been advised
that a third or fourth baby would be born dead or defective might
have it anyhow. Statisticians were especially astounded at the
fantastic increase in the number of babies among college women.
Where once they had two children, now they had four, five, six.
Women who had once wanted careers were now making careers out
of having babies. So rejoiced Life magazine in a 1956 paean to the
movement of American women back to the home.

In a New York hospital, a woman had a nervous breakdown when
she found she could not breastfeed her baby. In other hospitals,
women dying of cancer refused a drug which research had proved
might save their lives: its side effects were said to be unfeminine. “If
I have only one life, let me live it as a blonde,” a larger-than-life-
sized picture of a pretty, vacuous woman proclaimed from
newspaper, magazine, and drugstore ads. And across America, three
out of every ten women dyed their hair blonde. They ate a chalk
called Metrecal, instead of food, to shrink to the size of the thin young
models. Department-store buyers reported that American women,
since 1939, had become three and four sizes smaller. “Women are
out to fit the clothes, instead of vice-versa,” one buyer said.

Interior decorators were designing kitchens with mosaic murals and original paintings, for kitchens were once again the center of women’s lives. Home sewing became a million-dollar industry. Many women no longer left their homes, except to shop, chauffeur their children, or attend a social engagement with their husbands. Girls were growing up in America without ever having jobs outside the home. In the late fifties, a sociological phenomenon was suddenly remarked: a third of American women now worked, but most were no longer young and very few were pursuing careers. They were married women who held part-time jobs, selling or secretarial, to put their husbands through school, their sons through college, or to help pay the mortgage. Or they were widows supporting families. Fewer and fewer women were entering professional work. The shortages in the nursing, social work, and teaching professions caused crises in almost every American city. Concerned over the Soviet Union’s lead in the space race, scientists noted that America’s greatest source of unused brainpower was women. But girls would not study physics: it was “unfeminine.” A girl refused a science fellowship at Johns Hopkins to take a job in a real-estate office. All she wanted, she said, was what every other American girl wanted—to get married, have four children and live in a nice house in a nice suburb.

The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American woman and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife—freed by science and labor-saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth and the illnesses of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment. As a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world. She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of.

In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture. Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands goodbye in front of the picture window, depositing their stationwagonsful of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless kitchen floor. They baked their own bread, sewed their own and their
children’s clothes, kept their new washing machines and dryers running all day. They changed the sheets on the beds twice a week instead of once, took the rug-hooking class in adult education, and pitied their poor frustrated mothers, who had dreamed of having a career. Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. They had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home; they wanted the men to make the major decisions. They gloried in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: “Occupation: housewife.”

For over fifteen years, the words written for women, and the words women used when they talked to each other, while their husbands sat on the other side of the room and talked shop or politics or septic tanks, were about problems with their children, or how to keep their husbands happy, or improve their children’s school, or cook chicken or make slipcovers. Nobody argued whether women were inferior or superior to men; they were simply different. Words like “emancipation” and “career” sounded strange and embarrassing; no one had used them for years. When a Frenchwoman named Simone de Beauvoir wrote a book called *The Second Sex*, an American critic commented that she obviously “didn’t know what life was all about,” and besides, she was talking about French women. The “woman problem” in America no longer existed.

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. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of a woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor? 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 what she was talking about. She did not really understand it herself. For over fifteen years women in America found it harder to talk about this problem than about sex. Even the psychoanalysts had no name for it. When a woman went to a psychiatrist for help, as many women did, she would say, “I’m so ashamed,” or “I must be hopelessly neurotic.” “I don’t know what’s wrong with women today,” a suburban psychiatrist said uneasily. “I only know something is wrong because most of my patients happen to be women. And their problem isn’t sexual.” Most women with this problem did not go to see a
psychoanalyst, however. “There’s nothing wrong really,” they kept telling themselves. “There isn’t any problem.”

But on an April morning in 1959, I heard a mother of four, having coffee with four other mothers in a suburban development fifteen miles from New York, say in a tone of quiet desperation, “the problem.” And the others knew, without words, that she was not talking about a problem with her husband, or her children, or her home. Suddenly they realized they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name. They began, hesitantly, to talk about it. Later, after they had picked up their children at nursery school and taken them home to nap, two of the women cried, in sheer relief, just to know they were not alone.

Gradually I came to realize that the problem that has no name was shared by countless women in America. As a magazine writer I often interviewed women about problems with their children, or their marriages, or their houses, or their communities. But after a while I began to recognize the telltale signs of this other problem. I saw the same signs in suburban ranch houses and split-levels on Long Island and in New Jersey and Westchester County; in colonial houses in a small Massachusetts town; on patios in Memphis; in suburban and city apartments; in living rooms in the Midwest. Sometimes I sensed the problem, not as a reporter, but as a suburban housewife, for during this time I was also bringing up my own three children in Rockland County, New York. I heard echoes of the problem in college dormitories and semiprivate maternity wards, at PTA meetings and luncheons of the League of Women Voters, at suburban cocktail parties, in station wagons waiting for trains, and in snatches of conversation overheard at Schrafft’s. The groping words I heard from other women, on quiet afternoons when children were at school or on quiet evenings when husbands worked late, I think I understood first as a woman long before I understood their larger social and psychological implications.

Just what was this problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say “I feel empty somehow...incomplete.” Or she would say, “I feel as if I don’t exist.” Sometimes she blotted out the feeling with a tranquilizer. Sometimes she thought the problem was with her husband, or her children, or that what she really needed was to redecorate her house, or move to a better neighborhood, or have an
affair, or another baby. 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 without any reason.” (A Cleveland doctor called it “the housewife’s syndrome.”) A number of women told me about great bleeding blisters that break out on their hands and arms. “I call it the housewife’s blight,” said a family doctor in Pennsylvania. “I see it so often lately in these young women with four, five and six children who bury themselves in their dishpans. But it isn’t caused by detergent and it isn’t cured by cortisone.”

Sometimes a woman would tell me that the feeling gets so strong she runs out of the house and walks through the streets. Or she stays inside her house and cries. Or her children tell her a joke, and she doesn’t laugh because she doesn’t hear it. I talked to women who had spent years on the analyst’s couch, working out their “adjustment to the feminine role,” their blocks to “fulfillment as a wife and mother.” But the desperate tone in these women’s voices, and the look in their eyes, was the same as the tone and the look of other women, who were sure they had no problem, even though they did have a strange feeling of desperation.

A mother of four who left college at nineteen to get married told me:

I’ve tried everything women are supposed to do—hobbies, gardening, pickling, canning, being very social with my neighbors, joining committees, running PTA teas. I can do it all, and I like it, but it doesn’t leave you anything to think about—any feeling of who you are. I never had any career ambitions. All I wanted was to get married and have four children. I love the kids and Bob and my home. There’s no problem you can even put a name to. But I’m desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality. I’m a server of food and a putter-on of pants and a bedmaker, somebody who can be called on when you want something. But who am I?

A twenty-three-year-old mother in blue jeans said:

I ask myself why I’m so dissatisfied. I’ve got my health, fine
children, a lovely new home, enough money. My husband has a real future as an electronics engineer. He doesn’t have any of these feelings. He says maybe I need a vacation, let’s go to New York for a weekend. But that isn’t it. I always had this idea we should do everything together. I can’t sit down and read a book alone. If the children are napping and I have one hour to myself I just walk through the house waiting for them to wake up. I don’t make a move until I know where the rest of the crowd is going. It’s as if ever since you were a little girl, there’s always been somebody or something that will take care of your life: your parents, or college, or falling in love, or having a child, or moving to a new house. Then you wake up one morning and there’s nothing to look forward to.

A young wife in a Long Island development said:

I seem to sleep so much. I don’t know why I should be so tired. This house isn’t nearly so hard to clean as the cold-water flat we had when I was working. The children are at school all day. It’s not the work. I just don’t feel alive.

In 1960, the problem that has no name burst like a boil through the image of the happy American housewife. In the television commercials the pretty housewives still beamed over their foaming dishpans and Time’s cover story on “The Suburban Wife, an American Phenomenon” protested: “Having too good a time…to believe that they should be unhappy.” But the actual unhappiness of the American housewife was suddenly being reported—from the New York Times and Newsweek to Good Housekeeping and CBS Television (“The Trapped Housewife”), although almost everybody who talked about it found some superficial reason to dismiss it. It was attributed to incompetent appliance repairmen (New York Times), or the distances children must be chauffeured in the suburbs (Time), or too much PTA (Redbook). Some said it was the old problem—education: more and more women had education, which naturally made them unhappy in their role as housewives. “The road from Freud to Frigidaire, from Sophocles to Spock, has turned out to be a bumpy one,” reported the New York Times (June 28, 1960).
“Many young women—certainly not all—whose education plunged them into a world of ideas feel stifled in their homes. They find their routine lives out of joint with their training. Like shut-ins, they feel left out. In the last year, the problem of the educated housewife has provided the meat of dozens of speeches made by troubled presidents of women’s colleges who maintain, in the face of complaints, that sixteen years of academic training is realistic preparation for wifehood and motherhood.”

There was much sympathy for the educated housewife. (“Like a two-headed schizophrenic…once she wrote a paper on the Graveyard poets; now she writes notes to the milkman. Once she determined the boiling point of sulphuric acid; now she determines her boiling point with the overdue repairman…. The housewife often is reduced to screams and tears…. No one, it seems, is appreciative, least of all herself, of the kind of person she becomes in the process of turning from poetess into shrew.”)

Home economists suggested more realistic preparation for housewives, such as high-school workshops in home appliances. College educators suggested more discussion groups on home management and the family, to prepare women for the adjustment to domestic life. A spate of articles appeared in the mass magazines offering “Fifty-eight Ways to Make Your Marriage More Exciting.” No month went by without a new book by a psychiatrist or sexologist offering technical advice on finding greater fulfillment through sex.

A male humorist joked in Harper’s Bazaar (July, 1960) that the problem could be solved by taking away woman’s right to vote. (“In the pre-19th Amendment era, the American woman was placid, sheltered and sure of her role in American society. She left all the political decisions to her husband and he, in turn, left all the family decisions to her. Today a woman has to make both the family and the political decisions, and it’s too much for her.”)

A number of educators suggested seriously that women no longer be admitted to the four-year colleges and universities: in the growing college crisis, the education which girls could not use as housewives was more urgently needed than ever by boys to do the work of the atomic age.

The problem was also dismissed with drastic solutions no one could take seriously. (A woman writer proposed in Harper’s that women be drafted for compulsory service as nurses’ aides and babysitters.) And it was smoothed over with the age-old panaceas: “love
is their answer,” “the only answer is inner help,” “the secret of completeness—children,” “a private means of intellectual fulfillment,” “to cure this toothache of the spirit—the simple formula of handing one’s self and one’s will over to God.”\textsuperscript{1}

The problem was dismissed by telling the housewife she doesn’t realize how lucky she is—her own boss, no time clock, no junior executive gunning for her job. What if she isn’t happy—does she think men are happy in this world? Does she really, secretly, still want to be a man? Doesn’t she know yet how lucky she is to be a woman?

The problem was also, and finally, dismissed by shrugging that there are no solutions: this is what being a woman means, and what is wrong with American women that they can’t accept their role gracefully? As \textit{Newsweek} put it (March 7, 1960):

She is dissatisfied with a lot that women of other lands can only dream of. Her discontent is deep, pervasive, and impervious to the superficial remedies which are offered at every hand…. An army of professional explorers have already charted the major sources of trouble…. From the beginning of time, the female cycle has defined and confined woman’s role. As Freud was credited with saying: “Anatomy is destiny.” Though no group of women has ever pushed these natural restrictions as far as the American wife, it seems that she still cannot accept them with good grace…. A young mother with a beautiful family, charm, talent and brains is apt to dismiss her role apologetically. “What do I do?” you hear her say. “Why nothing. I’m just a housewife.” A good education, it seems, has given this paragon among women an understanding of the value of everything except her own worth…

And so she must accept the fact that “American women’s unhappiness is merely the most recently won of women’s rights,” and adjust and say with the happy housewife found by \textit{Newsweek}: “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…. My mother was never included in my father’s business affairs…she couldn’t get
out of the house and away from us children. But I am an equal to my husband; I can go along with him on business trips and to social business affairs.”

The alternative offered was a choice that few women would contemplate. In the sympathetic words of the New York Times: “All admit to being deeply frustrated at times by the lack of privacy, the physical burden, the routine of family life, the confinement of it. However, none would give up her home and family if she had the choice to make again.” 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.”

The year American women’s discontent boiled over, it was also reported (Look) that the more than 21,000,000 American women who are single, widowed, or divorced do not cease even after fifty their frenzied, desperate search for a man. And the search begins early—for seventy per cent of all American women now marry before they are twenty-four. A pretty twenty-five-year-old secretary took thirty-five different jobs in six months in the futile hope of finding a husband. Women were moving from one political club to another, taking evening courses in accounting or sailing, learning to play golf or ski, joining a number of churches in succession, going to bars alone, in their ceaseless search for a man.

Of the growing thousands of women currently getting private psychiatric help in the United States, the married ones were reported dissatisfied with their marriages, the unmarried ones suffering from anxiety and, finally, depression. Strangely, a number of psychiatrists stated that, in their experience, unmarried women patients were happier than married ones. So the door of all those pretty suburban houses opened a crack to permit a glimpse of uncounted thousands of American housewives who suffered alone from a problem that suddenly everyone was talking about, and beginning to take for granted, as one of those unreal problems in American life that can never be solved—like the hydrogen bomb. By 1962 the plight of the trapped American housewife had become a national parlor game. Whole issues of magazines, newspaper columns, books learned and frivolous, educational conferences and television panels were devoted to the problem.

Even so, most men, and some women, still did not know that this problem was real. But those who had faced it honestly knew that all
the superficial remedies, the sympathetic advice, the scolding words and the cheering words were somehow drowning the problem in unreality. A bitter laugh was beginning to be heard from American women. They were admired, envied, pitied, theorized over until they were sick of it, offered drastic solutions or silly choices that no one could take seriously. They got all kinds of advice from the growing armies of marriage and child-guidance counselors, psychotherapists, and armchair psychologists, on how to adjust to their role as housewives. No other road to fulfillment was offered to American women in the middle of the twentieth century. Most adjusted to their role and suffered or ignored the problem that has no name. It can be less painful, for a woman, not to hear the strange, dissatisfied voice stirring within her.

It is no longer possible to ignore that voice, to dismiss the desperation of so many American women. This is not what being a woman means, no matter what the experts say. For human suffering there is a reason; perhaps the reason has not been found because the right questions have not been asked, or pressed far enough. I do not accept the answer that there is no problem because American women have luxuries that women in other times and lands never dreamed of; part of the strange newness of the problem is that it cannot be understood in terms of the age-old material problems of man: poverty, sickness, hunger, cold. The women who suffer this problem have a hunger that food cannot fill. It persists in women whose husbands are struggling internes and law clerks, or prosperous doctors and lawyers; in wives of workers and executives who make $5,000 a year or $50,000. It is not caused by lack of material advantages; it may not even be felt by women preoccupied with desperate problems of hunger, poverty or illness. And women who think it will be solved by more money, a bigger house, a second car, moving to a better suburb, often discover it gets worse.

It is no longer possible today to blame the problem on loss of femininity: to say that education and independence and equality with men have made American women unfeminine. I have heard so many women try to deny this dissatisfied voice within themselves because it does not fit the pretty picture of femininity the experts have given them. I think, in fact, that this is the first clue to the mystery: the problem cannot be understood in the generally accepted terms by which scientists have studied women, doctors have treated them,
counselors have advised them, and writers have written about them. Women who suffer this problem, in whom this voice is stirring, have lived their whole lives in the pursuit of feminine fulfillment. They are not career women (although career women may have other problems); they are women whose greatest ambition has been marriage and children. For the oldest of these women, these daughters of the American middle class, no other dream was possible. The ones in their forties and fifties who once had other dreams gave them up and threw themselves joyously into life as housewives. For the youngest, the new wives and mothers, this was the only dream. They are the ones who quit high school and college to marry, or marked time in some job in which they had no real interest until they married. These women are very “feminine” in the usual sense, and yet they still suffer the problem.

Are the women who finished college, the women who once had dreams beyond housewifery, the ones who suffer the most? According to the experts they are, but listen to these four women:

My days are all busy, and dull, too. All I ever do is mess around. I get up at eight—I make breakfast, so I do the dishes, have lunch, do some more dishes and some laundry and cleaning in the afternoon. Then it’s supper dishes and I get to sit down a few minutes before the children have to be sent to bed…. That’s all there is to my day. It’s just like any other wife’s day. Humdrum. The biggest time, I am chasing kids.

Ye Gods, what do I do with my time? Well, I get up at six. I get my son dressed and then give him breakfast. After that I wash dishes and bathe and feed the baby. Then I get lunch and while the children nap, I sew or mend or iron and do all the other things I can’t get done before noon. Then I cook supper for the family and my husband watches TV while I do the dishes. After I get the children to bed, I set my hair and then I go to bed.

The problem is always being the children’s mommy, or the
A film made of any typical morning in my house would look like an old Marx Brothers’ comedy. I wash the dishes, rush the older children off to school, dash out in the yard to cultivate the chrysanthemums, run back in to make a phone call about a committee meeting, help the youngest child build a blockhouse, spend fifteen minutes skimming the newspapers so I can be well-informed, then scamper down to the washing machines where my thrice-weekly laundry includes enough clothes to keep a primitive village going for an entire year. By noon I’m ready for a padded cell. Very little of what I’ve done has been really necessary or important. Outside pressures lash me through the day. Yet I look upon myself as one of the more relaxed housewives in the neighborhood. Many of my friends are even more frantic. In the past sixty years we have come full circle and the American housewife is once again trapped in a squirrel cage. If the cage is now a modern plate-glass-and-broadloom ranch house or a convenient modern apartment, the situation is no less painful than when her grandmother sat over an embroidery hoop in her gilt-and-plush parlor and muttered angrily about women’s rights.

The first two women never went to college. They live in developments in Levittown, New Jersey, and Tacoma, Washington, and were interviewed by a team of sociologists studying workingmen’s wives. The third, a minister’s wife, wrote on the fifteenth reunion questionnaire of her college that she never had any career ambitions, but wishes now she had. The fourth, who has a Ph.D. in anthropology, is today a Nebraska housewife with three children. Their words seem to indicate that housewives of all educational levels suffer the same feeling of desperation.

The fact is that no one today is muttering angrily about “women’s rights,” even though more and more women have gone to college. In a recent study of all the classes that have graduated from Barnard College, a significant minority of earlier graduates blamed their
education for making them want “rights,” later classes blamed their education for giving them career dreams, but recent graduates blamed the college for making them feel it was not enough simply to be a housewife and mother; they did not want to feel guilty if they did not read books or take part in community activities. But if education is not the cause of the problem, the fact that education somehow festers in these women may be a clue.

If the secret of feminine fulfillment is having children, never have so many women, with the freedom to choose, had so many children, in so few years, so willingly. If the answer is love, never have women searched for love with such determination. And yet there is a growing suspicion that the problem may not be sexual, though it must somehow be related to sex. I have heard from many doctors evidence of new sexual problems between man and wife—sexual hunger in wives so great their husbands cannot satisfy it. “We have made woman a sex creature,” said a psychiatrist at the Margaret Sanger marriage counseling clinic. “She has no identity except as a wife and mother. She does not know who she is herself. She waits all day for her husband to come home at night to make her feel alive. And now it is the husband who is not interested. It is terrible for the women, to lie there, night after night, waiting for her husband to make her feel alive.” Why is there such a market for books and articles offering sexual advice? The kind of sexual orgasm which Kinsey found in statistical plenitude in the recent generations of American women does not seem to make this problem go away.

On the contrary, new neuroses are being seen among women—and problems as yet unnamed as neuroses—which Freud and his followers did not predict, with physical symptoms, anxieties, and defense mechanisms equal to those caused by sexual repression. And strange new problems are being reported in the growing generations of children whose mothers were always there, driving them around, helping them with their homework—an inability to endure pain or discipline or pursue any self-sustained goal of any sort, a devastating boredom with life. Educators are increasingly uneasy about the dependence, the lack of self-reliance, of the boys and girls who are entering college today. “We fight a continual battle to make our students assume manhood,” said a Columbia dean.

A White House conference was held on the physical and muscular deterioration of American children: were they being over-nurtured? Sociologists noted the astounding organization of suburban children’s
lives: the lessons, parties, entertainments, play and study groups organized for them. A suburban housewife in Portland, Oregon, wondered why the children “need” Brownies and Boy Scouts out here. “This is not the slums. The kids out here have the great outdoors. I think people are so bored, they organize the children, and then try to hook everyone else on it. And the poor kids have no time left just to lie on their beds and daydream.”

Can the problem that has no name be somehow related to the domestic routine of the housewife? When a woman tries to put the problem into words, she often merely describes the daily life she leads. What is there in this recital of comfortable domestic detail that could possibly cause such a feeling of desperation? Is she trapped simply by the enormous demands of her role as modern housewife: wife, mistress, mother, nurse, consumer, cook, chauffeur; expert on interior decoration, child care, appliance repair, furniture refinishing, nutrition, and education? Her day is fragmented as she rushes from dishwasher to washing machine to telephone to dryer to station wagon to supermarket, and delivers Johnny to the Little League field, takes Janey to dancing class, gets the lawnmower fixed and meets the 6:45. She can never spend more than 15 minutes on any one thing; she has no time to read books, only magazines; even if she had time, she has lost the power to concentrate. At the end of the day, she is so terribly tired that sometimes her husband has to take over and put the children to bed.

This terrible tiredness took so many women to doctors in the 1950’s that one decided to investigate it. He found, surprisingly, that his patients suffering from “housewife’s fatigue” slept more than an adult needed to sleep—as much as ten hours a day—and that the actual energy they expended on housework did not tax their capacity. The real problem must be something else, he decided—perhaps boredom. Some doctors told their women patients they must get out of the house for a day, treat themselves to a movie in town. Others prescribed tranquilizers. Many suburban housewives were taking tranquilizers like cough drops. “You wake up in the morning, and you feel as if there’s no point in going on another day like this. So you take a tranquilizer because it makes you not care so much that it’s pointless.”

It is easy to see the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife, the continual demands on her time. But the chains that bind her in her trap are chains in her own mind and spirit. They are
chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices. They are not easily seen and not easily shaken off.

How can any woman see the whole truth within the bounds of her own life? How can she believe that voice inside herself, when it denies the conventional, accepted truths by which she has been living? And yet the women I have talked to, who are finally listening to that inner voice, seem in some incredible way to be groping through to a truth that has defied the experts.

I think the experts in a great many fields have been holding pieces of that truth under their microscopes for a long time without realizing it. I found pieces of it in certain new research and theoretical developments in psychological, social and biological science whose implications for women seem never to have been examined. I found many clues by talking to suburban doctors, gynecologists, obstetricians, child-guidance clinicians, pediatricians, high-school guidance counselors, college professors, marriage counselors, psychiatrists and ministers—questioning them not on their theories, but on their actual experience in treating American women. I became aware of a growing body of evidence, much of which has not been reported publicly because it does not fit current modes of thought about women—evidence which throws into question the standards of feminine normality, feminine adjustment, feminine fulfillment, and feminine maturity by which most women are still trying to live.

I began to see in a strange new light the American return to early marriage and the large families that are causing the population explosion; the recent movement to natural childbirth and breastfeeding; suburban conformity, and the new neuroses, character pathologies and sexual problems being reported by the doctors. I began to see new dimensions to old problems that have long been taken for granted among women: menstrual difficulties, sexual frigidity, promiscuity, pregnancy fears, childbirth depression, the high incidence of emotional breakdown and suicide among women in their twenties and thirties, the menopause crises, the so-called passivity and immaturity of American men, the discrepancy between women’s tested intellectual abilities in childhood and their adult achievement, the changing incidence of adult sexual orgasm in American women, and persistent problems in psychotherapy and in women’s education.

If I am right, the problem that has no name stirring in the minds of
so many American women today is not a matter of loss of femininity or too much education, or the demands of domesticity. It is far more important than anyone recognizes. It is the key to these other new and old problems which have been torturing women and their husbands and children, and puzzling their doctors and educators for years. It may well be the key to our future as a nation and a culture. We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.”
Why have so many American wives suffered this nameless aching dissatisfaction for so many years, each one thinking she was alone? “I’ve got tears in my eyes with sheer relief that my own inner turmoil is shared with other women,” a young Connecticut mother wrote me when I first began to put this problem into words. A woman from a town in Ohio wrote: “The times when I felt that the only answer was to consult a psychiatrist, times of anger, bitterness and general frustration too numerous to even mention, I had no idea that hundreds of other women were feeling the same way. I felt so completely alone.” A Houston, Texas, housewife wrote: “It has been the feeling of being almost alone with my problem that has made it so hard. I thank God for my family, home and the chance to care for them, but my life couldn’t stop there. It is an awakening to know that I’m not an oddity and can stop being ashamed of wanting something more.”

That painful guilty silence, and that tremendous relief when a feeling is finally out in the open, are familiar psychological signs. What need, what part of themselves, could so many women today be repressing? In this age after Freud, sex is immediately suspect. But this new stirring in women does not seem to be sex; it is, in fact, much harder for women to talk about than sex. Could there be another need, a part of themselves they have buried as deeply as the Victorian women buried sex?

If there is, a woman might not know what it was, any more than the Victorian woman knew she had sexual needs. The image of a good woman by which Victorian ladies lived simply left out sex. Does the image by which modern American women live also leave something out, the proud and public image of the high-school girl going steady, the college girl in love, the suburban housewife with an up-and-coming husband and a station wagon full of children? This image—created by the women’s magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment and by
the popularizers of sociology and psychoanalysis—shapes women’s lives today and mirrors their dreams. It may give a clue to the problem that has no name, as a dream gives a clue to a wish unnamed by the dreamer. In the mind’s ear, a geiger counter clicks when the image shows too sharp a discrepancy from reality. A geiger counter clicked in my own inner ear when I could not fit the quiet desperation of so many women into the picture of the modern American housewife that I myself was helping to create, writing for the women’s magazines. What is missing from the image which shapes the American woman’s pursuit of fulfillment as a wife and mother? What is missing from the image that mirrors and creates the identity of women in America today?

In the early 1960’s McCall’s has been the fastest growing of the women’s magazines. Its contents are a fairly accurate representation of the image of the American woman presented, and in part created, by the large-circulation magazines. Here are the complete editorial contents of a typical issue of McCall’s (July, 1960):

1. A lead article on “increasing baldness in women,” caused by too much brushing and dyeing.
2. A long poem in primer-size type about a child, called “A Boy Is A Boy.”
3. A short story about how a teenager who doesn’t go to college gets a man away from a bright college girl.
4. A short story about the minute sensations of a baby throwing his bottle out of the crib.
5. The first of a two-part intimate “up-to-date” account by the Duke of Windsor on “How the Duchess and I now live and spend our time. The influence of clothes on me and vice versa.”
6. A short story about a nineteen-year-old girl sent to a charm school to learn how to bat her eyelashes and lose at tennis. (“You’re nineteen, and by normal American standards, I now am entitled to have you taken off my hands, legally and financially, by some beardless youth who will spirit you away to a one-and-a-half-room apartment in the Village while he learns the chicanery of selling bonds. And no
beardless youth is going to do that as long as you volley to his backhand.”
7. The story of a honeymoon couple commuting between separate bedrooms after an argument over gambling at Las Vegas.
8. An article on “how to overcome an inferiority complex.”
10. The story of a teenager’s mother who learns how to dance rock-and-roll.
12. Four glamorous pages on “reduce the way the models do.”
13. An article on airline delays.
14. Patterns for home sewing.
15. Patterns with which to make “Folding Screens—Bewitching Magic.”
17. A “barbecue bonanza,” dedicated “to the Great American Mister who stands, chef’s cap on head, fork in hand, on terrace or back porch, in patio or backyard anywhere in the land, watching his roast turning on the spit. And to his wife, without whom (sometimes) the barbecue could never be the smashing summer success it undoubtedly is…”

There were also the regular front-of-the-book “service” columns on new drug and medicine developments, child-care facts, columns by Clare Luce and by Eleanor Roosevelt, and “Pats and Pans,” a column of readers’ letters.

The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home. The magazine surely does not leave out sex; the only passion, the only pursuit, the only goal a woman is permitted is the pursuit of a man. It is crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit? In the magazine image, women do no work except housework and work to keep their bodies beautiful and to get and keep a man.
This was the image of the American woman in the year Castro led a revolution in Cuba and men were trained to travel into outer space; the year that the African continent brought forth new nations, and a plane whose speed is greater than the speed of sound broke up a Summit Conference; the year artists picketed a great museum in protest against the hegemony of abstract art; physicists explored the concept of anti-matter; astronomers, because of new radio telescopes, had to alter their concepts of the expanding universe; biologists made a breakthrough in the fundamental chemistry of life; and Negro youth in Southern schools forced the United States, for the first time since the Civil War, to face a moment of democratic truth. But this magazine, published for over 5,000,000 American women, almost all of whom have been through high school and nearly half to college, contained almost no mention of the world beyond the home. In the second half of the twentieth century in America, woman’s world was confined to her own body and beauty, the charming of man, the bearing of babies, and the physical care and serving of husband, children, and home. And this was no anomaly of a single issue of a single women’s magazine.

I sat one night at a meeting of magazine writers, mostly men, who work for all kinds of magazines, including women’s magazines. The main speaker was a leader of the desegregation battle. Before he spoke, another man outlined the needs of the large women’s magazine he edited:

Our readers are housewives, full time. They’re not interested in the broad public issues of the day. They are not interested in national or international affairs. They are only interested in the family and the home. They aren’t interested in politics, unless it’s related to an immediate need in the home, like the price of coffee. Humor? Has to be gentle, they don’t get satire. Travel? We have almost completely dropped it. Education? That’s a problem. Their own education level is going up. They’ve generally all had a high-school education and many, college. They’re tremendously interested in education for their children —fourth-grade arithmetic. You just can’t write about ideas or broad issues of the day for women. That’s why we’re publishing 90 per cent service now and 10 per cent general interest.
Another editor agreed, adding plaintively: “Can’t you give us something else besides ‘there’s death in your medicine cabinet’? Can’t any of you dream up a new crisis for women? We’re always interested in sex, of course.”

At this point, the writers and editors spent an hour listening to Thurgood Marshall on the inside story of the desegregation battle, and its possible effect on the presidential election. “Too bad I can’t run that story,” one editor said. “But you just can’t link it to woman’s world.”

As I listened to them, a German phrase echoed in my mind—“Kinder, Kuche, Kirche,” the slogan by which the Nazis decreed that women must once again be confined to their biological role. But this was not Nazi Germany. This was America. The whole world lies open to American women. Why, then, does the image deny the world? Why does it limit women to “one passion, one role, one occupation?”

Not long ago, women dreamed and fought for equality, their own place in the world. What happened to their dreams; when did women decide to give up the world and go back home?

A geologist brings up a core of mud from the bottom of the ocean and sees layers of sediment as sharp as a razor blade deposited over the years—clues to changes in the geological evolution of the earth so vast that they would go unnoticed during the lifespan of a single man. I sat for many days in the New York Public Library, going back through bound volumes of American women’s magazines for the last twenty years. I found a change in the image of the American woman, and in the boundaries of the woman’s world, as sharp and puzzling as the changes revealed in cores of ocean sediment.

In 1939, the heroines of women’s magazine stories were not always young, but in a certain sense they were younger than their fictional counterparts today. They were young in the same way that the American hero has always been young: they were New Women, creating with a gay determined spirit a new identity for women—a life of their own. There was an aura about them of becoming, of moving into a future that was going to be different from the past. The majority of heroines in the four major women’s magazines (then Ladies’ Home Journal, McCall’s, Good Housekeeping, Woman’s Home Companion) were career women—happily, proudly, adventurously, attractively career women—who loved and were loved by men. And the spirit, courage, independence, determination
—the strength of character they showed in their work as nurses, teachers, artists, actresses, copywriters, saleswomen—were part of their charm. There was a definite aura that their individuality was something to be admired, not unattractive to men, that men were drawn to them as much for their spirit and character as for their looks.

These were the mass women’s magazines—in their heyday. The stories were conventional: girl-meets-boy or girl-gets-boy. But very often this was not the major theme of the story. These heroines were usually marching toward some goal or vision of their own, struggling with some problem of work or the world, when they found their man. And this New Woman, less fluffily feminine, so independent and determined to find a new life of her own, was the heroine of a different kind of love story. She was less aggressive in pursuit of a man. Her passionate involvement with the world, her own sense of herself as an individual, her self-reliance, gave a different flavor to her relationship with the man.

The heroine and hero of one of these stories meet and fall in love at an ad agency where they both work. “I don’t want to put you in a garden behind a wall,” the hero says. “I want you to walk with me hand in hand, and together we could accomplish whatever we wanted to” (“A Dream to Share,” Redbook, January, 1939).

These New Women were almost never housewives; in fact, the stories usually ended before they had children. They were young because the future was open. But they seemed, in another sense, much older, more mature than the childlike, kittenish young housewife heroines today. One, for example, is a nurse (“Mother-in-Law,” Ladies’ Home Journal, June, 1939). “She was, he thought, very lovely. She hadn’t an ounce of picture book prettiness, but there was strength in her hands, pride in her carriage and nobility in the lift of her chin, in her blue eyes. She had been on her own ever since she left training, nine years ago. She had earned her way, she need consider nothing but her heart.”

One heroine runs away from home when her mother insists she must make her debut instead of going on an expedition as a geologist. Her passionate determination to live her own life does not keep this New Woman from loving a man, but it makes her rebel from her parents; just as the young hero often must leave home to grow up. “You’ve got more courage than any girl I ever saw. You have what it takes,” says the boy who helps her get away (“Have a Good Time,

Often, there was a conflict between some commitment to her work and the man. But the moral, in 1939, was that if she kept her commitment to herself, she did not lose the man, if he was the right man. A young widow (“Between the Dark and the Daylight,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, February, 1939) sits in her office, debating whether to stay and correct the important mistake she has made on the job, or keep her date with a man. She thinks back on her marriage, her baby, her husband’s death...“the time afterward which held the struggle for clear judgment, not being afraid of new and better jobs, of having confidence in one’s decisions.” How can the boss expect her to give up her date! But she stays on the job. “They’d put their life’s blood into this campaign. She couldn’t let him down.” She finds her man, too—the boss!

These stories may not have been great literature. But the identity of their heroines seemed to say something about the housewives who, then as now, read the women’s magazines. These magazines were not written for career women. The New Woman heroines were the ideal of yesterday’s housewives; they reflected the dreams, mirrored the yearning for identity and the sense of possibility that existed for women then. And if women could not have these dreams for themselves, they wanted their daughters to have them. They wanted their daughters to be more than housewives, to go out in the world that had been denied them.

It is like remembering a long-forgotten dream, to recapture the memory of what a career meant to women before “career woman” became a dirty word in America. Jobs meant money, of course, at the end of the depression. But the readers of these magazines were not the women who got the jobs; career meant more than job. It seemed to mean doing something, being somebody yourself, not just existing in and through others.

I found the last clear note of the passionate search for individual identity that a career seems to have symbolized in the pre-1950 decades in a story called “Sarah and the Seaplane” (*Ladies’ Home Journal*, February, 1949). Sarah, who for nineteen years has played the part of docile daughter, is secretly learning to fly. She misses her flying lesson to accompany her mother on a round of social calls. An elderly doctor houseguest says: “My dear Sarah, every day, all the time, you are committing suicide. It’s a greater crime than not pleasing others, not doing justice to yourself.” Sensing some secret,
he asks if she is in love. “She found it difficult to answer. In love? In love with the good-natured, the beautiful Henry [the flying teacher]? In love with the flashing water and the lift of wings at the instant of freedom, and the vision of the smiling, limitless world? ‘Yes,’ she answered, ‘I think I am.’”

The next morning, Sarah solos. Henry “stepped away, slamming the cabin door shut, and swung the ship about for her. She was alone. There was a heady moment when everything she had learned left her, when she had to adjust herself to be alone, entirely alone in the familiar cabin. Then she drew a deep breath and suddenly a wonderful sense of competence made her sit erect and smiling. She was alone! She was answerable to herself alone, and she was sufficient.

“I can do it!” she told herself aloud…. The wind flew back from the floats in glittering streaks, and then effortlessly the ship lifted itself free and soared.” Even her mother can’t stop her now from getting her flying license. She is not “afraid of discovering my own way of life.” In bed that night she smiles sleepily, remembering how Henry had said, “You’re my girl.”

“Henry’s girl! She smiled. No, she was not Henry’s girl. She was Sarah. And that was sufficient. And with such a late start it would be some time before she got to know herself. Half in a dream now, she wondered if at the end of that time she would need someone else and who it would be.”

And then suddenly the image blurs. The New Woman, soaring free, hesitates in midflight, shivers in all that blue sunlight and rushes back to the cozy walls of home. In the same year that Sarah soloed, the *Ladies’ Home Journal* printed the prototype of the innumerable paens to “Occupation: housewife” that started to appear in the women’s magazines, paens that resounded throughout the fifties. They usually begin with a woman complaining that when she has to write “housewife” on the census blank, she gets an inferiority complex. (“When I write it I realize that here I am, a middle-aged woman, with a university education, and I’ve never made anything out of my life. I’m just a housewife.”) Then the author of the paean, who somehow never is a housewife (in this case, Dorothy Thompson, newspaper woman, foreign correspondent, famous columnist, in *Ladies’ Home Journal*, March, 1949), roars with laughter. The trouble with you, she scolds, is you don’t realize you are expert in a
dozen careers, simultaneously. “You might write: business manager, cook, nurse, chauffeur, dressmaker, interior decorator, accountant, caterer, teacher, private secretary—or just put down philanthropist. …All your life you have been giving away your energies, your skills, your talents, your services, for love.” But still, the housewife complains, I’m nearly fifty and I’ve never done what I hoped to do in my youth—music—I’ve wasted my college education.

Ho-ho, laughs Miss Thompson, aren’t your children musical because of you, and all those struggling years while your husband was finishing his great work, didn’t you keep a charming home on $3,000 a year, and make all your children’s clothes and your own, and paper the living room yourself, and watch the markets like a hawk for bargains? And in time off, didn’t you type and proofread your husband’s manuscripts, plan festivals to make up the church deficit, play piano duets with the children to make practicing more fun, read their books in high school to follow their study? “But all this vicarious living—through others,” the housewife sighs. “As vicarious as Napoleon Bonaparte,” Miss Thompson scoffs, “or a Queen. I simply refuse to share your self-pity. You are one of the most successful women I know.”

As for not earning any money, the argument goes, let the housewife compute the cost of her services. Women can save more money by their managerial talents inside the home than they can bring into it by outside work. As for woman’s spirit being broken by the boredom of household tasks, maybe the genius of some women has been thwarted, but “a world full of feminine genius, but poor in children, would come rapidly to an end….Great men have great mothers.”

And the American housewife is reminded that Catholic countries in the Middle Ages “elevated the gentle and inconspicuous Mary into the Queen of Heaven, and built their loveliest cathedrals to ‘Notre Dame—Our Lady.’…The homemaker, the nurturer, the creator of children’s environment is the constant recreator of culture, civilization, and virtue. Assuming that she is doing well that great managerial task and creative activity, let her write her occupation proudly: ‘housewife.’”

In 1949, the Ladies’ Home Journal also ran Margaret Mead’s Male and Female. All the magazines were echoing Farnham and Lundberg’s Modern Woman: The Lost Sex, which came out in 1942, with its warning that careers and higher education were leading to the
"masculinization of women with enormously dangerous consequences to the home, the children dependent on it and to the ability of the woman, as well as her husband, to obtain sexual gratification."

And so the feminine mystique began to spread through the land, grafted onto old prejudices and comfortable conventions which so easily give the past a stranglehold on the future. Behind the new mystique were concepts and theories deceptive in their sophistication and their assumption of accepted truth. These theories were supposedly so complex that they were inaccessible to all but a few initiates, and therefore irrefutable. It will be necessary to break through this wall of mystery and look more closely at these complex concepts, these accepted truths, to understand fully what has happened to American women.

The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity. It says that the great mistake of Western culture, through most of its history, has been the undervaluation of this femininity. It says this femininity is so mysterious and intuitive and close to the creation and origin of life that man-made science may never be able to understand it. But however special and different, it is in no way inferior to the nature of man; it may even in certain respects be superior. The mistake, says the mystique, the root of women’s troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love.

But the new image this mystique gives to American women is the old image: “Occupation: housewife.” The new mystique makes the housewife-mothers, who never had a chance to be anything else, the model for all women; it presupposes that history has reached a final and glorious end in the here and now, as far as women are concerned. Beneath the sophisticated trappings, it simply makes certain concrete, finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence—as it was lived by women whose lives were confined, by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children—into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity.

Fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949—the housewife-mother. As swiftly as in a dream, the image of the American woman as a changing, growing individual in a changing world was shattered. Her solo flight to find her own identity was forgotten in the rush for the security of togetherness. Her
limitless world shrunk to the cozy walls of home.

The transformation, reflected in the pages of the women’s magazines, was sharply visible in 1949 and progressive through the fifties. “Femininity Begins at Home,” “It’s a Man’s World Maybe,” “Have Babies While You’re Young,” “How to Snare a Male,” “Should I Stop Work When We Marry?” “Are You Training Your Daughter to Be a Wife?” “Careers at Home,” “Do Women Have to Talk So Much?” “Why GI’s Prefer Those German Girls,” “What Women Can Learn from Mother Eve,” “Really a Man’s World, Politics,” “How to Hold On to a Happy Marriage,” “Don’t Be Afraid to Marry Young,” “The Doctor Talks about Breast-Feeding,” “Our Baby was Born at Home,” “Cooking to Me Is Poetry,” “The Business of Running a Home.”

By the end of 1949, only one out of three heroines in the women’s magazines was a career woman—and she was shown in the act of renouncing her career and discovering that what she really wanted to be was a housewife. In 1958, and again in 1959, I went through issue after issue of the three major women’s magazines (the fourth, Woman’s Home Companion, had died) without finding a single heroine who had a career, a commitment to any work, art, profession, or mission in the world, other than “Occupation: housewife.” Only one in a hundred heroines had a job; even the young unmarried heroines no longer worked except at snaring a husband.²

These new happy housewife heroines seem strangely younger than the spirited career girls of the thirties and forties. They seem to get younger all the time—in looks, and a childlike kind of dependence. They have no vision of the future, except to have a baby. The only active growing figure in their world is the child. The housewife heroines are forever young, because their own image ends in childbirth. Like Peter Pan, they must remain young while their children grow up with the world. They must keep on having babies, because the feminine mystique says there is no other way for a woman to be a heroine. Here is a typical specimen from a story called “The Sandwich Maker” (Ladies’ Home Journal, April, 1959). She took home economics in college, learned how to cook, never held a job, and still plays the child bride, though she now has three children of her own. Her problem is money. “Oh, nothing boring, like taxes or reciprocal trade agreements, or foreign aid programs. I leave all that economic jazz to my constitutionally elected representative in Washington, heaven help him.”
The problem is her $42.10 allowance. She hates having to ask her husband for money every time she needs a pair of shoes, but he won’t trust her with a charge account. “Oh, how I yearned for a little money of my own! Not much, really. A few hundred a year would have done it. Just enough to meet a friend for lunch occasionally, to indulge in extravagantly colored stockings, a few small items, without having to appeal to Charley. But, alas, Charley was right. I had never earned a dollar in my life, and had no idea of how money was made. So all I did for a long time was brood, as I continued with my cooking, cleaning, cooking, washing, ironing, cooking.”

At last the solution comes—she will take orders for sandwiches from other men at her husband’s plant. She earns $52.50 a week, except that she forgets to count costs, and she doesn’t remember what a gross is so she has to hide 8,640 sandwich bags behind the furnace. Charley says she’s making the sandwiches too fancy. She explains: “If it’s only ham on rye, then I’m just a sandwich maker, and I’m not interested. But the extras, the special touches—well, they make it sort of creative.” So she chops, wraps, peels, seals, spreads bread, starting at dawn and never finished, for $9.00 net, until she is disgusted by the smell of food, and finally staggers downstairs after a sleepless night to slice a salami for the eight gaping lunch boxes. “It was too much. Charley came down just then, and after one quick look at me, ran for a glass of water.” She realizes that she is going to have another baby.

“Charley’s first coherent words were ‘I’ll cancel your lunch orders. You’re a mother. That’s your job. You don’t have to earn money, too.’ It was all so beautifully simple! ‘Yes, boss,’ I murmured obediently, frankly relieved.” That night he brings her home a checkbook; he will trust her with a joint account. So she decides just to keep quiet about the 8,640 sandwich bags. Anyhow, she’ll have used them up, making sandwiches for four children to take to school, by the time the youngest is ready for college.

The road from Sarah and the seaplane to the sandwich maker was traveled in only ten years. In those ten years, the image of American woman seems to have suffered a schizophrenic split. And the split in the image goes much further than the savage obliteration of career from women’s dreams.

In an earlier time, the image of woman was also split in two—the good, pure woman on the pedestal, and the whore of the desires of
the flesh. The split in the new image opens a different fissure—the feminine woman, whose goodness includes the desires of the flesh, and the career woman, whose evil includes every desire of the separate self. The new feminine morality story is the exorcising of the forbidden career dream, the heroine’s victory over Mephistopheles: the devil, first in the form of a career woman, who threatens to take away the heroine’s husband or child, and finally, the devil inside the heroine herself, the dream of independence, the discontent of spirit, and even the feeling of a separate identity that must be exorcised to win or keep the love of husband and child.

In a story in *Redbook* (“A Man Who Acted Like a Husband,” November, 1957) the child-bride heroine, “a little freckle-faced brunette” whose nickname is “Junior,” is visited by her old college roommate. The roommate Kay is “a man’s girl, really, with a good head for business…she wore her polished mahogany hair in a high chignon, speared with two chopstick affairs.” Kay is not only divorced, but she has also left her child with his grandmother while she works in television. This career-woman-devil tempts Junior with the lure of a job to keep her from breast-feeding her baby. She even restrains the young mother from going to her baby when he cries at 2 A.M. But she gets her comeuppance when George, the husband, discovers the crying baby uncovered, in a freezing wind from an open window, with blood running down its cheek. Kay, reformed and repentant, plays hookey from her job to go get her own child and start life anew. And Junior, gloating at the 2 A.M. feeding—“I’m glad, glad, glad I’m just a housewife”—starts to dream about the baby, growing up to be a housewife, too.

With the career woman out of the way, the housewife with interests in the community becomes the devil to be exorcised. Even PTA takes on a suspect connotation, not to mention interest in some international cause (see “Almost a Love Affair,” *McCall’s*, November, 1955). The housewife who simply has a mind of her own is the next to go. The heroine of “I Didn’t Want to Tell You” (*McCall’s*, January, 1958) is shown balancing the checkbook by herself and arguing with her husband about a small domestic detail. It develops that she is losing her husband to a “helpless little widow” whose main appeal is that she can’t “think straight” about an insurance policy or mortgage. The betrayed wife says: “She must have sex appeal and what weapon has a wife against that?” But her best friend tells her: “You’re making this too simple. You’re
forgetting how helpless Tania can be, and how grateful to the man who helps her…”

“I couldn’t be a clinging vine if I tried,” the wife says. “I had a better than average job after I left college and I was always a pretty independent person. I’m not a helpless little woman and I can’t pretend to be.” But she learns, that night. She hears a noise that might be a burglar; even though she knows it’s only a mouse, she calls helplessly to her husband, and wins him back. As he comforts her pretended panic, she murmurs that, of course, he was right in their argument that morning. “She lay still in the soft bed, smiling in sweet, secret satisfaction, scarcely touched with guilt.”

The end of the road, in an almost literal sense, is the disappearance of the heroine altogether, as a separate self and the subject of her own story. The end of the road is togetherness, where the woman has no independent self to hide even in guilt; she exists only for and through her husband and children.

Coined by the publishers of *McCall’s* in 1954, the concept “togetherness” was seized upon avidly as a movement of spiritual significance by advertisers, ministers, newspaper editors. For a time, it was elevated into virtually a national purpose. But very quickly there was sharp social criticism, and bitter jokes about “togetherness” as a substitute for larger human goals—for men. Women were taken to task for making their husbands do housework, instead of letting them pioneer in the nation and the world. Why, it was asked, should men with the capacities of statesmen, anthropologists, physicists, poets, have to wash dishes and diaper babies on weekday evenings or Saturday mornings when they might use those extra hours to fulfill larger commitments to their society?

Significantly, critics resented only that men were being asked to share “woman’s world.” Few questioned the boundaries of this world for women. No one seemed to remember that women were once thought to have the capacity and vision of statesmen, poets, and physicists. Few saw the big lie of togetherness for women.

Consider the Easter 1954 issue of *McCall’s* which announced the new era of togetherness, sounding the requiem for the days when women fought for and won political equality, and the women’s magazines “helped you to carve out large areas of living formerly forbidden to your sex.” The new way of life in which “men and women in ever-increasing numbers are marrying at an earlier age, having children at an earlier age, rearing larger families and gaining
their deepest satisfaction” from their own homes, is one which “men, women and children are achieving together…not as women alone, or men alone, isolated from one another, but as a family, sharing a common experience.”

The picture essay detailing that way of life is called “a man’s place is in the home.” It describes, as the new image and ideal, a New Jersey couple with three children in a gray-shingle split-level house. Ed and Carol have “centered their lives almost completely around their children and their home.” They are shown shopping at the supermarket, carpentering, dressing the children, making breakfast together. “Then Ed joins the members of his car pool and heads for the office.”

Ed, the husband, chooses the color scheme for the house and makes the major decorating decisions. The chores Ed likes are listed: putter around the house, make things, paint, select furniture, rugs and draperies, dry dishes, read to the children and put them to bed, work in the garden, feed and dress and bathe the children, attend PTA meetings, cook, buy clothes for his wife, buy groceries.

Ed doesn’t like these chores: dusting, vacuuming, finishing jobs he’s started, hanging draperies, washing pots and pans and dishes, picking up after the children, shoveling snow or mowing the lawn, changing diapers, taking the baby-sitter home, doing the laundry, ironing. Ed, of course, does not do these chores.

For the sake of every member of the family, the family needs a head. This means Father, not Mother…. Children of both sexes need to learn, recognize and respect the abilities and functions of each sex…. He is not just a substitute mother, even though he’s ready and willing to do his share of bathing, feeding, comforting, playing. He is a link with the outside world he works in. If in that world he is interested, courageous, tolerant, constructive, he will pass on these values to his children.

There were many agonized editorial sessions, in those days at McCall’s. “Suddenly, everybody was looking for this spiritual significance in togetherness, expecting us to make some mysterious religious movement out of the life everyone had been leading for the last five years—crawling into the home, turning their backs on the world—but we never could find a way of showing it that wasn’t a
monstrosity of dullness,” a former *McCall’s* editor reminisces. “It always boiled down to, goody, goody, goody, Daddy is out there in the garden barbecuing. We put men in the fashion pictures and the food pictures, and even the perfume pictures. But we were stifled by it editorially.

“We had articles by psychiatrists that we couldn’t use because they would have blown it wide open: all those couples propping their whole weight on their kids. But what else could you do with togetherness but child care? We were pathetically grateful to find anything else where we could show father photographed with mother. Sometimes, we used to wonder what would happen to women, with men taking over the decorating, child care, cooking, all the things that used to be hers alone. But we couldn’t show women getting out of the home and having a career. The irony is, what we meant to do was to stop editing for women as women, and edit for the men and women together. We wanted to edit for people, not women.”

But forbidden to join man in the world, can women be people? Forbidden independence, they finally are swallowed in an image of such passive dependence that they want men to make the decisions, even in the home. The frantic illusion that togetherness can impart a spiritual content to the dullness of domestic routine, the need for a religious movement to make up for the lack of identity, betrays the measure of women’s loss and the emptiness of the image. Could making men share the housework compensate women for their loss of the world? Could vacuuming the living-room floor together give the housewife some mysterious new purpose in life?

In 1956, at the peak of togetherness, the bored editors of *McCall’s* ran a little article called “The Mother Who Ran Away.” To their amazement, it brought the highest readership of any article they had ever run. “It was our moment of truth,” said a former editor. “We suddenly realized that all those women at home with their three and a half children were miserably unhappy.”

But by then the new image of American woman, “Occupation: housewife,” had hardened into a mystique, unquestioned and permitting no questions, shaping the very reality it distorted.

By the time I started writing for women’s magazines, in the fifties, it was simply taken for granted by editors, and accepted as an immutable fact of life by writers, that women were not interested in politics, life outside the United States, national issues, art, science, ideas, adventure, education, or even their own communities, except
where they could be sold through their emotions as wives and mothers.

Politics, for women, became Mamie’s clothes and the Nixons’ home life. Out of conscience, a sense of duty, the Ladies’ Home Journal might run a series like “Political Pilgrim’s Progress,” showing women trying to improve their children’s schools and playgrounds. But even approaching politics through mother love did not really interest women, it was thought in the trade. Everyone knew those readership percentages. An editor of Redbook ingeniously tried to bring the bomb down to the feminine level by showing the emotions of a wife whose husband sailed into a contaminated area.

“Women can’t take an idea, an issue, pure,” men who edited the mass women’s magazines agreed. “It has to be translated in terms they can understand as women.” This was so well understood by those who wrote for women’s magazines that a natural childbirth expert submitted an article to a leading woman’s magazine called “How to Have a Baby in an Atom Bomb Shelter.” “The article was not well written,” an editor told me, “or we might have bought it.” According to the mystique, women, in their mysterious femininity, might be interested in the concrete biological details of having a baby in a bomb shelter, but never in the abstract idea of the bomb’s power to destroy the human race.

Such a belief, of course, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. In 1960, a perceptive social psychologist showed me some sad statistics which seemed to prove unmistakably that American women under thirty-five are not interested in politics. “They may have the vote, but they don’t dream about running for office,” he told me. “If you write a political piece, they won’t read it. You have to translate it into issues they can understand—romance, pregnancy, nursing, home furnishings, clothes. Run an article on the economy, or the race question, civil rights, and you’d think that women had never heard of them.”

Maybe they hadn’t heard of them. Ideas are not like instincts of the blood that spring into the mind intact. They are communicated by education, by the printed word. The new young housewives, who leave high school or college to marry, do not read books, the psychological surveys say. They only read magazines. Magazines today assume women are not interested in ideas. But going back to the bound volumes in the library, I found in the thirties and forties that the mass-circulation magazines like Ladies’ Home Journal carried
hundreds of articles about the world outside the home. “The first inside story of American diplomatic relations preceding declared war” “Can the U. S. Have Peace After This War?” by Walter Lippman; “Stalin at Midnight,” by Harold Stassen; “General Stilwell Reports on China” articles about the last days of Czechoslovakia by Vincent Sheean; the persecution of Jews in Germany; the New Deal; Carl Sandburg’s account of Lincoln’s assassination; Faulkner’s stories of Mississippi, and Margaret Sanger’s battle for birth control.

In the 1950’s they printed virtually no articles except those that serviced women as housewives, or described women as housewives, or permitted a purely feminine identification like the Duchess of Windsor or Princess Margaret. “If we get an article about a woman who does anything adventurous, out of the way, something by herself, you know, we figure she must be terribly aggressive, neurotic,” a Ladies’ Home Journal editor told me. Margaret Sanger would never get in today.

In 1960, I saw statistics that showed that women under thirty-five could not identify with a spirited heroine of a story who worked in an ad agency and persuaded the boy to stay and fight for his principles in the big city instead of running home to the security of a family business. Nor could these new young housewives identify with a young minister, acting on his belief in defiance of convention. But they had no trouble at all identifying with a young man paralyzed at eighteen. (“I regained consciousness to discover that I could not move or even speak. I could wiggle only one finger of one hand.” With help from faith and a psychiatrist, “I am now finding reasons to live as fully as possible.”)

Does it say something about the new housewife readers that, as any editor can testify, they can identify completely with the victims of blindness, deafness, physical maiming, cerebral palsy, paralysis, cancer, or approaching death? Such articles about people who cannot see or speak or move have been an enduring staple of the women’s magazines in the era of “Occupation: housewife.” They are told with infinitely realistic detail over and over again, replacing the articles about the nation, the world, ideas, issues, art and science; replacing the stories about adventurous spirited women. And whether the victim is man, woman or child, whether the living death is incurable cancer or creeping paralysis, the housewife reader can identify.

Writing for these magazines, I was continually reminded by editors “that women have to identify.” Once I wanted to write an
article about an artist. So I wrote about her cooking and marketing and falling in love with her husband, and painting a crib for her baby. I had to leave out the hours she spent painting pictures, her serious work—and the way she felt about it. You could sometimes get away with writing about a woman who was not really a housewife, if you made her sound like a housewife, if you left out her commitment to the world outside the home, or the private vision of mind or spirit that she pursued. In February, 1949, the Ladies’ Home Journal ran a feature, “Poet’s Kitchen,” showing Edna St. Vincent Millay cooking. “Now I expect to hear no more about housework’s being beneath anyone, for if one of the greatest poets of our day, and any day, can find beauty in simple household tasks, this is the end of the old controversy.”

The one “career woman” who was always welcome in the pages of the women’s magazines was the actress. But her image also underwent a remarkable change: from a complex individual of fiery temper, inner depth, and a mysterious blend of spirit and sexuality, to a sexual object, a babyface bride, or a housewife. Think of Greta Garbo, for instance, and Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, Rosalind Russell, Katherine Hepburn. Then think of Marilyn Monroe, Debbie Reynolds, Brigitte Bardot, and “I Love Lucy.”

When you wrote about an actress for a women’s magazine, you wrote about her as a housewife. You never showed her doing or enjoying her work as an actress, unless she eventually paid for it by losing her husband or her child, or otherwise admitting failure as a woman. A Redbook profile of Judy Holliday (June, 1957) described how “a brilliant woman begins to find in her work the joy she never found in life.” On the screen, we are told, she plays “with warmth and conviction the part of a mature, intelligent wife and expectant mother, a role unlike anything she had previously attempted.” She must find fulfillment in her career because she is divorced from her husband, has “strong feelings of inadequacy as a woman…. It is a frustrating irony of Judy’s life, that as an actress she has succeeded almost without trying, although, as a woman, she has failed…”

Strangely enough, as the feminine mystique spread, denying women careers or any commitment outside the home, the proportion of American women working outside the home increased to one out of three. True, two out of three were still housewives, but why, at the moment when the doors of the world were finally open to all women, should the mystique deny the very dreams that had stirred women for
a century?

I found a clue one morning, sitting in the office of a women’s magazine editor—a woman who, older than I, remembers the days when the old image was being created, and who had watched it being displaced. The old image of the spirited career girl was largely created by writers and editors who were women, she told me. The new image of woman as housewife-mother has been largely created by writers and editors who are men.

“Most of the material used to come from women writers,” she said, almost nostalgically. “As the young men returned from the war, a great many women writers dropped out of the field. The young women started having a lot of children, and stopped writing. The new writers were all men, back from the war, who had been dreaming about home, and a cozy domestic life.” One by one, the creators of the gay “career girl” heroines of the thirties began to retire. By the end of the forties, the writers who couldn’t get the knack of writing in the new housewife image had left the women’s magazine field. The new magazine pros were men, and a few women who could write comfortably according to the housewife formula. Other people began to assemble backstage at the women’s magazines: there was a new kind of woman writer who lived in the housewife image, or pretended to; and there was a new kind of woman’s editor or publisher, less interested in ideas to reach women’s minds and hearts, than in selling them the things that interest advertisers—appliances, detergents, lipstick. Today, the deciding voice on most of these magazines is cast by men. Women often carry out the formulas, women edit the housewife “service” departments, but the formulas themselves, which have dictated the new housewife image, are the product of men’s minds.

Also during the forties and fifties, serious fiction writers of either sex disappeared from the mass-circulation women’s magazines. In fact, fiction of any quality was almost completely replaced by a different kind of article. No longer the old article about issues or ideas, but the new “service” feature. Sometimes these articles lavished the artistry of a poet and the honesty of a crusading reporter on baking chiffon pies, or buying washing machines, or the miracles paint can do for a living room, or diets, drugs, clothes, and cosmetics to make the body into a vision of physical beauty. Sometimes they dealt with very sophisticated ideas: new developments in psychiatry, child psychology, sex and marriage, medicine. It was assumed that
women readers could take these ideas, which appealed to their needs as wives and mothers, but only if they were boiled down to concrete physical details, spelled out in terms of the daily life of an average housewife with concrete do’s and don’ts. How to keep your husband happy; how to solve your child’s bedwetting; how to keep death out of your medicine cabinet...

But here is a curious thing. Within their narrow range, these women’s magazine articles, whether straight service to the housewife or a documentary report about the housewife, were almost always superior in quality to women’s magazine fiction. They were better written, more honest, more sophisticated. This observation was made over and over again by intelligent readers and puzzled editors, and by writers themselves. “The serious fiction writers have become too internal. They’re inaccessible to our readers, so we’re left with the formula writers,” an editor of Redbook said. And yet, in the old days, serious writers like Nancy Hale, even William Faulkner, wrote for the women’s magazines and were not considered inaccessible. Perhaps the new image of woman did not permit the internal honesty, the depth of perception, and the human truth essential to good fiction.

At the very least, fiction requires a hero or, understandably for women’s magazines, a heroine, who is an “I” in pursuit of some human goal or dream. There is a limit to the number of stories that can be written about a girl in pursuit of a boy, or a housewife in pursuit of a ball of dust under the sofa. Thus the service article takes over, replacing the internal honesty and truth needed in fiction with a richness of honest, objective, concrete, realistic domestic detail—the color of walls or lipstick, the exact temperature of the oven.

Judging from the women’s magazines today, it would seem that the concrete details of women’s lives are more interesting than their thoughts, their ideas, their dreams. Or does the richness and realism of the detail, the careful description of small events, mask the lack of dreams, the vacuum of ideas, the terrible boredom that has settled over the American housewife?

I sat in the office of another old-timer, one of the few women editors left in the women’s magazine world, now so largely dominated by men. She explained her share in creating the feminine mystique. “Many of us were psychoanalyzed,” she recalled. “And we began to feel embarrassed about being career women ourselves. There was this terrible fear that we were losing our femininity. We kept looking
for ways to help women accept their feminine role."

If the real women editors were not, somehow, able to give up their own careers, all the more reason to “help” other women fulfill themselves as wives and mothers. The few women who still sit in editorial conferences do not bow to the feminine mystique in their own lives. But such is the power of the image they have helped create that many of them feel guilty. And if they have missed out somewhere on love or children, they wonder if their careers were to blame.

Behind her cluttered desk, a *Mademoiselle* editor said uneasily, “The girls we bring in now as college guest editors seem almost to pity us. Because we are career women, I suppose. At a luncheon session with the last bunch, we asked them to go round the table, telling us their own career plans. Not one of the twenty raised her hand. When I remember how I worked to learn this job and loved it—were we all crazy then?”

Coupled with the women editors who sold themselves their own bill of goods, a new breed of women writers began to write about themselves as if they were “just housewives,” reveling in a comic world of children’s pranks and eccentric washing machines and Parents’ Night at the PTA. “After making the bed of a twelve-year-old boy week after week, climbing Mount Everest would seem a laughable anticlimax,” writes Shirley Jackson (*McCall’s*, April, 1956). When Shirley Jackson, who all her adult life has been an extremely capable writer, pursuing a craft far more demanding than bedmaking, and Jean Kerr, who is a playwright, and Phyllis McGinley, who is a poet, picture themselves as housewives, they may or may not overlook the housekeeper or maid who really makes the beds. But they implicitly deny the vision, and the satisfying hard work involved in their stories, poems, and plays. They deny the lives they lead, not as housewives, but as individuals.

They are good craftsmen, the best of these Housewife Writers. And some of their work is funny. The things that happen with children, a twelve-year-old boy’s first cigarette, the Little League and the kindergarten rhythm band are often funny; they happen in real life to women who are writers as well as women who are just housewives. But there is something about Housewife Writers that isn’t funny—like Uncle Tom, or Amos and Andy. “Laugh,” the Housewife Writers tell the real housewife, “if you are feeling desperate, empty, bored, trapped in the bedmaking, chauffeuring and dishwashing details. Isn’t it funny? We’re all in the same trap.” Do
real housewives then dissipate in laughter their dreams and their sense of desperation? Do they think their frustrated abilities and their limited lives are a joke? Shirley Jackson makes the beds, loves and laughs at her son—and writes another book. Jean Kerr’s plays are produced on Broadway. The joke is not on them.

Some of the new Housewife Writers live the image; Redbook tells us that the author of an article on “Breast-Feeding,” a woman named Betty Ann Countrywoman, “had planned to be a doctor. But just before her graduation from Radcliffe cum laude, she shrank from the thought that such a dedication might shut her off from what she really wanted, which was to marry and have a large family. She enrolled in the Yale University School of Nursing and then became engaged to a young psychiatrist on their first date. Now they have six children, ranging in age from 2 to 13, and Mrs. Countrywoman is instructor in breast-feeding at the Maternity League of Indianapolis” (Redbook, June, 1960). She says:

For the mother, breast-feeding becomes a complement to the act of creation. It gives her a heightened sense of fulfillment and allows her to participate in a relationship as close to perfection as any that a woman can hope to achieve…. The simple fact of giving birth, however, does not of itself fulfill this need and longing…. Motherliness is a way of life. It enables a woman to express her total self with the tender feelings, the protective attitudes, the encompassing love of the motherly woman.

When motherhood, a fulfillment held sacred down the ages, is defined as a total way of life, must women themselves deny the world and the future open to them? Or does the denial of that world force them to make motherhood a total way of life? The line between mystique and reality dissolves; real women embody the split in the image. In the spectacular Christmas 1956 issue of Life, devoted in full to the “new” American woman, we see, not as women’s-magazine villain, but as documentary fact, the typical “career woman—that fatal error that feminism propagated”—seeking “help” from a psychiatrist. She is bright, well-educated, ambitious, attractive; she makes about the same money as her husband; but she is pictured here as “frustrated,” so “masculinized” by her career that her castrated, impotent, passive husband is indifferent to her sexually. He refuses to
take responsibility and drowns his destroyed masculinity in alcoholism.

Then there is the discontented suburban wife who raises hell at the PTA; morbidly depressed, she destroys her children and dominates her husband whom she envies for going out into the business world. “The wife, having worked before marriage, or at least having been educated for some kind of intellectual work, finds herself in the lamentable position of being ‘just a housewife.’ …In her disgruntlement she can work as much damage on the lives of her husband and children (and her own life) as if she were a career woman, and indeed, sometimes more.”

And finally, in bright and smiling contrast, are the new housewife-mothers, who cherish their “differentness,” their “unique femininity,” the “receptivity and passivity implicit in their sexual nature.” Devoted to their own beauty and their ability to bear and nurture children, they are “feminine women, with truly feminine attitudes, admired by men for their miraculous, God-given, sensationally unique ability to wear skirts, with all the implications of that fact.” Rejoicing in “the reappearance of the old-fashioned three-to-five-child family in an astonishing quarter, the upper-and upper-middle class suburbs,” Life says:

Here, among women who might be best qualified for “careers,” there is an increasing emphasis on the nurturing and homemaking values. One might guess…that because these women are better informed and more mature than the average, they have been the first to comprehend the penalties of “feminism” and to react against them…. Styles in ideas as well as in dress and decoration tend to seep down from such places to the broader population…. This is the countertrend which may eventually demolish the dominant and disruptive trend and make marriage what it should be: a true partnership in which…men are men, women are women, and both are quietly, pleasantly, securely confident of which they are—and absolutely delighted to find themselves married to someone of the opposite sex.

Look glowed at about the same time (October 16, 1956):
The American woman is winning the battle of the sexes. Like a teenager, she is growing up and confounding her critics.... No longer a psychological immigrant to man’s world, she works, rather casually, as a third of the U. S. labor force, less towards a “big career” than as a way of filling a hope chest or buying a new home freezer. She gracefully concedes the top jobs to men. This wondrous creature also marries younger than ever, bears more babies and looks and acts far more feminine than the “emancipated” girl of the 1920’s or even ’30’s. Steelworker’s wife and Junior Leaguer alike do their own housework.... Today, if she makes an old-fashioned choice and lovingly tends a garden and a bumper crop of children, she rates louder hosannas than ever before.

In the new America, fact is more important than fiction. The documentary *Life* and *Look* images of real women who devote their lives to children and home are played back as the ideal, the way women should be: this is powerful stuff, not to be shrugged off like the heroines of women’s magazine fiction. When a mystique is strong, it makes its own fiction of fact. It feeds on the very facts which might contradict it, and seeps into every corner of the culture, bemusing even the social critics.

Adlai Stevenson, in a commencement address at Smith College in 1955, reprinted in *Woman’s Home Companion* (September, 1955), dismissed the desire of educated women to play their own political part in “the crises of the age.” Modern woman’s participation in politics is through her role as wife and mother, said the spokesman of democratic liberalism: “Women, especially educated women, have a unique opportunity to influence us, man and boy.” The only problem is woman’s failure to appreciate that her true part in the political crisis is as wife and mother.

Once immersed in the very pressing and particular problems of domesticity, many women feel frustrated and far apart from the great issues and stirring debate for which their education has given them understanding and relish. Once they wrote poetry. Now it’s the laundry list. Once they discussed art and philosophy until late in the night. Now they are so tired they fall asleep as soon as the dishes are finished. There is, often, a sense
of contraction, of closing horizons and lost opportunities. They had hoped to play their part in the crises of the age. But what they do is wash the diapers.

The point is that whether we talk of Africa, Islam or Asia, women “never had it so good” as you. In short, far from the vocation of marriage and motherhood leading you away from the great issues of our day, it brings you back to their very center and places upon you an infinitely deeper and more intimate responsibility than that borne by the majority of those who hit the headlines and make the news and live in such a turmoil of great issues that they end by being totally unable to distinguish which issues are really great.

Woman’s political job is to “inspire in her home a vision of the meaning of life and freedom...to help her husband find values that will give purpose to his specialized daily chores...to teach her children the uniqueness of each individual human being.”

This assignment for you, as wives and mothers, you can do in the living room with a baby in your lap or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hand. If you’re clever, maybe you can even practice your saving arts on that unsuspecting man while he’s watching television. I think there is much you can do about our crisis in the humble role of housewife. I could wish you no better vocation than that.

Thus the logic of the feminine mystique redefined the very nature of woman’s problem. When woman was seen as a human being of limitless human potential, equal to man, anything that kept her from realizing her full potential was a problem to be solved: barriers to higher education and political participation, discrimination or prejudice in law or morality. But now that woman is seen only in terms of her sexual role, the barriers to the realization of her full potential, the prejudices which deny her full participation in the world, are no longer problems. The only problems now are those that might disturb her adjustment as a housewife. So career is a problem, education is a problem, political interest, even the very admission of women’s intelligence and individuality is a problem. And finally
there is the problem that has no name, a vague undefined wish for “something more” than washing dishes, ironing, punishing and praising the children. In the women’s magazines, it is solved either by dyeing one’s hair blonde or by having another baby. “Remember, when we were all children, how we all planned to ‘be something’?” says a young housewife in the Ladies’ Home Journal (February, 1960). Boasting that she has worn out six copies of Dr. Spock’s baby-care book in seven years, she cries, “I’m lucky! Lucky! I’M SO GLAD TO BE A WOMAN!”

In one of these stories (“Holiday,” Mademoiselle, August, 1949) a desperate young wife is ordered by her doctor to get out of the house one day a week. She goes shopping, tries on dresses, looks in the mirror wondering which one her husband, Sam, will like.

Always Sam, like a Greek chorus in the back of her head. As if she herself hadn’t a definiteness of her own, a clarity that was indisputably hers…. Suddenly she couldn’t make the difference between pleated and gored skirts of sufficient importance to fix her decision. She looked at herself in the full-length glass, tall, getting thicker around the hips, the lines of her face beginning to slip. She was twenty-nine, but she felt middle-aged, as if a great many years had passed and there wasn’t very much yet to come…which was ridiculous, for Ellen was only three. There was her whole future to plan for, and perhaps another child. It was not a thing to be put off too long.

When the young housewife in “The Man Next to Me” (Redbook, November, 1948) discovers that her elaborate dinner party didn’t help her husband get a raise after all, she is in despair. (“You should say I helped. You should say I’m good for something…Life was like a puzzle with a piece missing, and the piece was me, and I couldn’t figure my place in it at all.”) So she dyes her hair blonde, and when her husband reacts satisfactorily in bed to the new “blonde me,” she “felt a new sense of peace, as if I’d answered the question within myself.”

Over and over again, stories in women’s magazines insist that woman can know fulfillment only at the moment of giving birth to a child. They deny the years when she can no longer look forward to giving birth, even if she repeats that act over and over again.
feminine mystique, there is no other way for a woman to dream of creation or of the future. There is no way she can even dream about herself, except as her children’s mother, her husband’s wife. And the documentary articles play back new young housewives, grown up under the mystique, who do not have even that “question within myself.” Says one, described in “How America Lives” (Ladies’ Home Journal, June, 1959): “If he doesn’t want me to wear a certain color or a certain kind of dress, then I truly don’t want to, either. The thing is, whatever he has wanted is what I also want…. I don’t believe in fifty-fifty marriages.” Giving up college and job to marry at eighteen, with no regrets, she “never tried to enter into the discussion when the men were talking. She never disputed her husband in anything…. She spent a great deal of time looking out the window at the snow, the rain, and the gradual emergence of the first crocuses. One great time-pass and consolation was…embroidery: tiny stitches in gold-metal or silken thread which require infinite concentration.”

There is no problem, in the logic of the feminine mystique, for such a woman who has no wishes of her own, who defines herself only as wife and mother. The problem, if there is one, can only be her children’s, or her husband’s. It is the husband who complains to the marriage counselor (Redbook, June, 1955): “The way I see it, marriage takes two people, each living his own life and then putting them together. Mary seems to think we both ought to live one life: mine.” Mary insists on going with him to buy shirts and socks, tells the clerk his size and color. When he comes home at night, she asks with whom he ate lunch, where, what did he talk about? When he protests, she says, “But darling, I want to share your life, be part of all you do, that’s all….I want us to be one, the way it says in the marriage service…” It doesn’t seem reasonable to the husband that “two people can ever be one the way Mary means it. It’s just plain ridiculous on the face of it. Besides, I wouldn’t like it. I don’t want to be so bound to another person that I can’t have a thought or an action that’s strictly my own.”

The answer to “Pete’s problem,” says Dr. Emily Mudd, the famous marriage counsellor, is to make Mary feel she is living his life: invite her to town to lunch with the people in his office once in a while, order his favorite veal dish for her and maybe find her some “healthy physical activity,” like swimming, to drain off her excess energy. It is not Mary’s problem that she has no life of her own.
The ultimate, in housewife happiness, is finally achieved by the Texas housewife, described in “How America Lives” (Ladies’ Home Journal, October, 1960), who “sits on a pale aqua satin sofa gazing out her picture window at the street. Even at this hour of the morning (it is barely nine-o’clock), she is wearing rouge, powder and lipstick, and her cotton dress is immaculately fresh.” She says proudly: “By 8:30 A.M., when my youngest goes to school, my whole house is clean and neat and I am dressed for the day. I am free to play bridge, attend club meetings, or stay home and read, listen to Beethoven, and just plain loaf.

“Sometimes, she washes and dries her hair before sitting down at a bridge table at 1:30. Mornings she is having bridge at her house are the busiest, for then she must get out the tables, cards, tallies, prepare fresh coffee and organize lunch…. During the winter months, she may play as often as four days a week from 9:30 to 3 P.M…. Janice is careful to be home, before her sons return from school at 4 P.M.”

She is not frustrated, this new young housewife. An honor student at high school, married at eighteen, remarried and pregnant at twenty, she has the house she spent seven years dreaming and planning in detail. She is proud of her efficiency as a housewife, getting it all done by 8:30. She does the major housecleaning on Saturday, when her husband fishes and her sons are busy with Boy Scouts. (‘There’s nothing else to do. No bridge games. It’s a long day for me.’)

“‘I love my home,’ she says…. The pale gray paint in her L-shaped living and dining room is five years old, but still in perfect condition…. The pale peach and yellow and aqua damask upholstery looks spotless after eight years’ wear. ‘Sometimes, I feel I’m too passive, too content,’ remarks Janice, fondly, regarding the wristband of large family diamonds she wears even when the watch itself is being repaired….Her favorite possession is her four-poster spool bed with a pink taffeta canopy. ‘I feel just like Queen Elizabeth sleeping in that bed,’ she says happily. (Her husband sleeps in another room, since he snores.)

“‘I’m so grateful for my blessings,’ she says. ‘Wonderful husband, handsome sons with dispositions to match, big comfortable house…. I’m thankful for my good health and faith in God and such material possessions as two cars, two TV’s and two fireplaces.’”

Staring uneasily at this image, I wonder if a few problems are not somehow better than this smiling empty passivity. If they are happy,
these young women who live the feminine mystique, then is this the end of the road? Or are the seeds of something worse than frustration inherent in this image? Is there a growing divergence between this image of woman and human reality?

Consider, as a symptom, the increasing emphasis on glamour in the women’s magazines: the housewife wearing eye makeup as she vacuums the floor—“The Honor of Being a Woman.” Why does “Occupation: housewife” require such insistent glamorizing year after year? The strained glamour is in itself a question mark: the lady doth protest too much.

The image of woman in another era required increasing prudishness to keep denying sex. This new image seems to require increasing mindlessness, increasing emphasis on things: two cars, two TV’s, two fireplaces. Whole pages of women’s magazines are filled with gargantuan vegetables: beets, cucumbers, green peppers, potatoes, described like a love affair. The very size of their print is raised until it looks like a first-grade primer. The new *McCall’s* frankly assumes women are brainless, fluffy kittens, the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, feverishly competing, procures rock-and-roller Pat Boone as a counselor to teenagers; *Redbook* and the others enlarge their own type size. Does the size of the print mean that the new young women, whom all the magazines are courting, have only first-grade minds? Or does it try to hide the triviality of the content? Within the confines of what is now accepted as woman’s world, an editor may no longer be able to think of anything big to do except blow up a baked potato, or describe a kitchen as if it were the Hall of Mirrors; he is, after all, forbidden by the mystique to deal with a big idea. But does it not occur to any of the men who run the women’s magazines that their troubles may stem from the smallness of the image with which they are truncating women’s minds?

They are all in trouble today, the mass-circulation magazines, vying fiercely with each other and television to deliver more and more millions of women who will buy the things their advertisers sell. Does this frantic race force the men who make the images to see women only as thing-buyers? Does it force them to compete finally in emptying women’s minds of human thought? The fact is, the troubles of the image-makers seem to be increasing in direct proportion to the increasing mindlessness of their image. During the years in which that image has narrowed woman’s world down to the home, cut her role back to housewife, five of the mass-circulation magazines geared to
women have ceased publication; others are on the brink.

The growing boredom of women with the empty, narrow image of the women’s magazines may be the most hopeful sign of the image’s divorce from reality. But there are more violent symptoms on the part of women who are committed to that image. In 1960, the editors of a magazine specifically geared to the happy young housewife—or rather to the new young couples (the wives are not considered separate from their husbands and children)—ran an article asking, “Why Young Mothers Feel Trapped” (*Redbook*, September, 1960). As a promotion stunt, they invited young mothers with such a problem to write in the details, for $500. The editors were shocked to receive 24,000 replies. Can an image of woman be cut down to the point where it becomes itself a trap?

At one of the major women’s magazines, a woman editor, sensing that American housewives might be desperately in need of something to enlarge their world, tried for some months to convince her male colleagues to introduce a few ideas outside the home into the magazine. “We decided against it,” the man who makes the final decisions said. “Women are so completely divorced from the world of ideas in their lives now, they couldn’t take it.” Perhaps it is irrelevant to ask, who divorced them? Perhaps these Frankensteins no longer have the power to stop the feminine monster they have created.

I helped create this image. I have watched American women for fifteen years try to conform to it. But I can no longer deny my own knowledge of its terrible implications. It is not a harmless image. There may be no psychological terms for the harm it is doing. But what happens when women try to live according to an image that makes them deny their minds? What happens when women grow up in an image that makes them deny the reality of the changing world?

The material details of life, the daily burden of cooking and cleaning, of taking care of the physical needs of husband and children—these did indeed define a woman’s world a century ago when Americans were pioneers, and the American frontier lay in conquering the land. But the women who went west with the wagon trains also shared the pioneering purpose. Now the American frontiers are of the mind, and of the spirit. Love and children and home are good, but they are not the whole world, even if most of the words now written for women pretend they are. Why should women accept this picture of a half-life, instead of a share in the whole of human destiny? Why should women try to make housework
“something more,” instead of moving on the frontiers of their own time, as American women moved beside their husbands on the old frontiers?

A baked potato is not as big as the world, and vacuuming the living room floor—with or without makeup—is not work that takes enough thought or energy to challenge any woman’s full capacity. Women are human beings, not stuffed dolls, not animals. Down through the ages man has known that he was set apart from other animals by his mind’s power to have an idea, a vision, and shape the future to it. He shares a need for food and sex with other animals, but when he loves, he loves as a man, and when he discovers and creates and shapes a future different from his past, he is a man, a human being.

This is the real mystery: why did so many American women, with the ability and education to discover and create, go back home again, to look for “something more” in housework and rearing children? For, paradoxically, in the same fifteen years in which the spirited New Woman was replaced by the Happy Housewife, the boundaries of the human world have widened, the pace of world change has quickened, and the very nature of human reality has become increasingly free from biological and material necessity. Does the mystique keep American woman from growing with the world? Does it force her to deny reality, as a woman in a mental hospital must deny reality to believe she is a queen? Does it doom women to be displaced persons, if not virtual schizophrenics, in our complex, changing world?

It is more than a strange paradox that as all professions are finally open to women in America, “career woman” has become a dirty word; that as higher education becomes available to any woman with the capacity for it, education for women has become so suspect that more and more drop out of high school and college to marry and have babies; that as so many roles in modern society become theirs for the taking, women so insistently confine themselves to one role. Why, with the removal of all the legal, political, economic, and educational barriers that once kept woman from being man’s equal, a person in her own right, an individual free to develop her own potential, should she accept this new image which insists she is not a person but a “woman,” by definition barred from the freedom of human existence and a voice in human destiny?

The feminine mystique is so powerful that women grow up no
longer knowing that they have the desires and capacities the mystique forbids. But such a mystique does not fasten itself on a whole nation in a few short years, reversing the trends of a century, without cause. What gives the mystique its power? Why did women go home again?
With a vision of the happy modern housewife as she is described by the magazines and television, by the functional sociologists, the sex-directed educators, and the manipulators dancing before my eyes, I went in search of one of those mystical creatures. Like Diogenes with his lamp, I went as a reporter from suburb to suburb, searching for a woman of ability and education who was fulfilled as a housewife. I went first to the suburban mental health centers and guidance clinics, to reputable local analysts, to knowledgeable local residents, and, stating my purpose, asked them to steer me not to the neurotic, frustrated housewives, but to the able, intelligent, educated women who were adjusted full-time housewives and mothers.

“I know many such housewives who have found fulfillment as women,” one psychoanalyst said. I asked him to name four, and went to see them.

One, after five years of therapy, was no longer a driven woman, but neither was she a full-time housewife; she had become a computer programmer. The second was a gloriously exuberant woman, with a fine successful husband and three able, exuberant children. Throughout her married life she had been a professional psychoanalyst. The third, between pregnancies, continued seriously her career as a dancer. And the fourth, after psychotherapy, was moving with an increasingly serious commitment into politics.

I reported back to my guide and said that while all four seemed “fulfilled” women, none were full-time housewives and one, after all, was a member of his own profession. “That’s a coincidence with those four,” he said. But I wondered if it was a coincidence.

In another community, I was directed to a woman who, my informant said, was truly fulfilled as a housewife (“she even bakes her own bread”). I discovered that during the years when her four children were under six and she wrote on the census blank “Occupation: housewife,” she had learned a new language (with certification to teach) and had used her previous training in music
first as volunteer church organist and then as a paid professional. Shortly after I interviewed her, she took a teaching position.

In many instances, however, the women I interviewed truly fitted the new image of feminine fulfillment—four, five, or six children, baked their own bread, helped build the house with their own hands, sewed all their children’s clothes. These women had had no dreams of career, no visions of a world larger than the home; all energy was centered on their lives as housewives and mothers; their only ambition, their only dream already realized. But were they fulfilled women?

In one upper-income development where I interviewed, there were twenty-eight wives. Some were college graduates in their thirties or early forties; the younger wives had usually quit college to marry. Their husbands were, to a rather high degree, engrossed in challenging professional work. Only one of these wives worked professionally; most had made a career of motherhood with a dash of community activity. Nineteen out of the twenty-eight had had natural childbirth (at dinner parties there, a few years ago, wives and husbands often got down on the floor to practice the proper relaxing exercises together). Twenty of the twenty-eight breastfed their babies. At or near forty, many of these women were pregnant. The mystique of feminine fulfillment was so literally followed in this community that if a little girl said: “When I grow up, I’m going to be a doctor,” her mother would correct her: “No, dear, you’re a girl. You’re going to be a wife and mother, like mummy.”

But what was mummy really like? Sixteen out of the twenty-eight were in analysis or analytical psychotherapy. Eighteen were taking tranquilizers; several had tried suicide; and some had been hospitalized for varying periods, for depression or vaguely diagnosed psychotic states. (“You’d be surprised at the number of these happy suburban wives who simply go berserk one night, and run shrieking through the street without any clothes on,” said the local doctor, not a psychiatrist, who had been called in, in such emergencies.) Of the women who breastfed their babies, one had continued, desperately, until the child was so undernourished that her doctor intervened by force. Twelve were engaged in extramarital affairs in fact or in fantasy.

These were fine, intelligent American women, to be envied for their homes, husbands, children, and for their personal gifts of mind and spirit. Why were so many of them driven women? Later, when I
saw this same pattern repeated over and over again in similar suburbs, I knew it could hardly be coincidence. These women were alike mainly in one regard: they had uncommon gifts of intelligence and ability nourished by at least the beginnings of higher education—and the life they were leading as suburban housewives denied them the full use of their gifts.

It was in these women that I first began to notice the tell-tale signs of the problem that has no name; their voices were dull and flat, or nervous and jittery; they were listless and bored, or frantically “busy” around the house or community. They talked about “fulfillment” in the wife-and-mother terms of the mystique, but they were desperately eager to talk about this other “problem,” with which they seemed very familiar indeed.

One woman had pioneered the search for good teachers in her community’s backward school system; she had served her term on the school board. When her children had all started school, she had thought seriously at thirty-nine about her own future: should she go back to college, get an M.A., and become a professional teacher herself? But then, suddenly, she had decided not to go on—she had a late baby instead, her fifth. I heard that flat tone in her voice when she told me she had now retired from community leadership to “major again in the home.”

I heard the same sad, flat tone in an older woman’s voice as she told me:

I’m looking for something to satisfy me. I think it would be the most wonderful thing in the world to work, to be useful. But I don’t know how to do anything. My husband doesn’t believe in wives working. I’d cut off both my arms if I could have my children little, and at home again. My husband says, find something to occupy yourself that you’ll enjoy, why should you work? So now I play golf, nearly every day, just myself. When you walk three, four hours a day, at least you can sleep at night.

I interviewed another woman in the huge kitchen of a house she had helped build herself. She was busily kneading the dough for her famous homemade bread; a dress she was making for a daughter was half-finished on the sewing machine; a handloom stood in one corner. Children’s art materials and toys were strewn all over the floor of the
house, from front door to stove: in this expensive modern house, like many of the open-plan houses in this era, there was no door at all between kitchen and living room. Nor did this mother have any dream or wish or thought or frustration of her own to separate her from her children. She was pregnant now with her seventh; her happiness was complete, she said, spending her days with her children. Perhaps here was a happy housewife.

But just before I left, I said, as an afterthought, that I guessed she was joking when she mentioned that she envied her neighbor, who was a professional designer as well as the mother of three children. “No, I wasn’t joking,” she said; and this serene housewife, kneading the dough for the bread she always made herself, started to cry. “I envy her terribly,” she said. “She knows what she wants to do. I don’t know. I never have. When I’m pregnant and the babies are little, I’m somebody, finally, a mother. But then, they get older. I can’t just keep on having babies.”

While I never found a woman who actually fitted that “happy housewife” image, I noticed something else about these able women who were leading their lives in the protective shade of the feminine mystique. They were so busy—busy shopping, chauffeuring, using their dishwashers and dryers and electric mixers, busy gardening, waxing, polishing, helping with the children’s homework, collecting for mental health, and doing thousands of little chores. In the course of my interviews with these women, I began to see that there was something peculiar about the time housework takes today.

On one suburban road there were two colonial houses, each with a big, comfortable living room, a small library, a formal dining room, a big cheerful kitchen, four bedrooms, an acre of garden and lawn, and, in each family, one commuting husband and three school-age children. Both houses were well-kept, with a cleaning woman two days a week; but the cooking and the other housework was done by the wife, who in each case was in her late thirties, intelligent, healthy, attractive, and well-educated.

In the first house, Mrs. W., a full-time housewife, was busy most of every day with cooking, cleaning, shopping, chauffeuring, taking care of the children. Next door Mrs. D., a microbiologist, got most of these chores done before she left for her laboratory at nine, or after she got home at five-thirty. In neither family were the children neglected, though Mrs. D.’s were slightly more self-reliant. Both
women entertained a fair amount. Mrs. W., the housewife, did a lot of routine community work, but she did not “have time” to take a policy-making office—which she was often offered as an intelligent capable woman. At most, she headed a committee to run a dance, or a PTA fair. Mrs. D., the scientist, did no routine community work, but, in addition to her job and home, played in a dedicated string quintet (music was her main interest outside of science), and held a policy-making post in the world-affairs organization which had been an interest since college.

How could the same size house and the same size family, under almost identical conditions of income, outside help, style of life, take so much more of Mrs. W.’s time than of Mrs. D.’s? And Mrs. W. was never idle, really. She never had time in the evening to “just read,” as Mrs. D. often did.

In a large, modern apartment building in a big eastern city, there were two six-room apartments, both a little untidy, except when the cleaning woman had just left, or before a party. Both the G.’s and the R.’s had three children under ten, one still a baby. Both husbands were in their early thirties, and both were in demanding professional work. But Mr. G., whose wife is a full-time housewife, was expected to do, and did, much more housework when he got home at night or on Saturday than Mr. R., whose wife was a freelance illustrator and evidently had to get the same amount of housework done in between the hours she spent at her drawing table. Mrs. G. somehow couldn’t get her housework done before her husband came home at night and was so tired then that he had to do it. Why did Mrs. R., who did not count the housework as her main job, get it done in so much less time?

I noticed this pattern again and again, as I interviewed women who defined themselves as “housewives,” and compared them to the few who pursued professions, part or full time. The same pattern held even where both housewife and professional had full-time domestic help, though more often the “housewives” chose to do their own housework, full time, even when they could well afford two servants. But I also discovered that many frantically busy full-time housewives were amazed to find that they could polish off in one hour the housework that used to take them six—or was still undone at dinnertime—as soon as they started studying, or working, or had some other serious interest outside the home.

Toying with the question, how can one hour of housework expand
to fill six hours (same house, same work, same wife), I came back again to the basic paradox of the feminine mystique: that it emerged to glorify woman’s role as housewife at the very moment when the barriers to her full participation in society were lowered, at the very moment when science and education and her own ingenuity made it possible for a woman to be both wife and mother and to take an active part in the world outside the home. The glorification of “woman’s role,” then, seems to be in proportion to society’s reluctance to treat women as complete human beings; for the less real function that role has, the more it is decorated with meaningless details to conceal its emptiness. This phenomenon has been noted, in general terms, in the annals of social science and in history—the chivalry of the Middle Ages, for example, and the artificial pedestal of the Victorian woman—but it may come as somewhat of a shock to the emancipated American woman to discover that it applies in a concrete and extreme degree to the housewife’s situation in America today.

Did the new mystique of separate-but-equal femininity arise because the growth of women in America could no longer be repressed by the old mystique of feminine inferiority? Could women be prevented from realizing their full capabilities by making their role in the home equal to man’s role in society? “Woman’s place is in the home” could no longer be said in tones of contempt. Housework, washing dishes, diaper-changing had to be dressed up by the new mystique to become equal to splitting atoms, penetrating outer space, creating art that illuminates human destiny, pioneering on the frontiers of society. It had to become the very end of life itself to conceal the obvious fact that it is barely the beginning.

When you look at it this way, the double deception of the feminine mystique becomes quite apparent:

1. The more a woman is deprived of function in society at the level of her own ability, the more her housework, mother-work, wife-work, will expand—and the more she will resist finishing her housework or mother-work, and being without any function at all. (Evidently human nature also abhors a vacuum, even in women.)

2. The time required to do the housework for any given woman varies inversely with the challenge of the other work to which she is committed. Without any outside interests, a woman is virtually forced to devote her every moment to the trivia of keeping house.

The simple principle that “Work Expands to Fill the Time
Available” was first formulated by the Englishman C. Northcote Parkinson on the basis of his experience with administrative bureaucracy in World War II. Parkinson’s Law can easily be reformulated for the American housewife: Housewifery Expands to Fill the Time Available, or Motherhood Expands to Fill the Time Available, or even Sex Expands to Fill the Time Available. This is, without question, the true explanation for the fact that even with all the new labor-saving appliances, the modern American housewife probably spends more time on housework than her grandmother. It is also part of the explanation for our national preoccupation with sex and love, and for the continued baby boom.

Tabling for the moment the sexual implications, which are vast, let’s consider some of the dynamics of the law itself, as an explanation for the disposal of feminine energy in America. To go back several generations: I have suggested that the real cause both of feminism and of women’s frustration was the emptiness of the housewife’s role. The major work and decisions of society were taking place outside the home, and women felt the need, or fought for the right, to participate in this work. If women had gone on to use their newly-won education and find new identity in this work outside the home, the mechanics of housewifery would have taken the same subsidiary place in their lives as car and garden and workbench in man’s life. Motherhood, wifehood, sexual love, family responsibility, would merely have acquired a new emotional importance, as they have for men. (Many observers have noticed the new joy American men have been taking in their children—as their own work week is shortened—without that edge of anger women whose children are their work seem to feel.)

But when the mystique of feminine fulfillment sent women back home again, housewifery had to expand into a full-time career. Sexual love and motherhood had to become all of life, had to use up, to dispose of women’s creative energies. The very nature of family responsibility had to expand to take the place of responsibility to society. As this began to happen, each labor-saving appliance brought a labor-demanding elaboration of housework. Each scientific advance that might have freed women from the drudgery of cooking, cleaning, and washing, thereby giving her more time for other purposes, instead imposed new drudgery, until housework not only expanded to fill the time available, but could hardly be done in the available time.
The automatic clothes dryer does not save a woman the four or five hours a week she used to spend at the clothesline, if, for instance, she runs her washing machine and dryer every day. After all, she still has to load and unload the machine herself, sort the clothes and put them away. As a young mother said, “Clean sheets twice a week are now possible. Last week, when my dryer broke down, the sheets didn’t get changed for eight days. Everyone complained. We all felt dirty. I felt guilty. Isn’t that silly?”

The modern American housewife spends far more time washing, drying, and ironing than her mother. If she has an electric freezer or mixer, she spends more time cooking than a woman who does not have these labor-saving appliances. The home freezer, simply by existing, takes up time: beans, raised in the garden, must be prepared for freezing. If you have an electric mixer, you have to use it: those elaborate recipes with the puréed chestnuts, watercress, and almonds take longer than broiling lamb chops.

According to a Bryn Mawr survey made just after the war, in a typical United States farm family, housework took 60.55 hours a week; 78.35 hours in cities under 100,000; 80.57 in cities of over 100,000. With all their appliances, the suburban and city housewives spend more time on housework than the busy farmer’s wife. That farmer’s wife, of course, has quite a lot of other work to do.

In the 1950’s, sociologists and home economists reported puzzlement, and baffling inconsistencies, as to the amount of time American women were still spending on housework. Study after study revealed that American housewives were spending almost as many, or even more, hours a day on housekeeping as women thirty years earlier, despite the smaller, easier-to-care-for homes, and despite the fact that they had seven times as much capital equipment in housekeeping appliances. There were, however, some exceptions. Women who worked many hours a week outside the home—either in paid jobs or community work—did the housekeeping, on which the full-time housewife still spent sixty hours a week, in half the time. They still seemed to do all the homemaking activities of the housewife—meals, shopping, cleaning, the children—but even with a thirty-five-hour work week on the job, their work week was only an hour and a half a day longer than the housewife’s. That this strange phenomenon caused so little comment was due to the relative scarcity
of such women. For the even stranger phenomenon, the real significance of which the mystique hid, was the fact that, despite the growth of the American population and the movement of that population from farm to city with the parallel growth of American industry and professions, in the first fifty years of the twentieth century the proportion of American women working outside the home increased very little indeed, while the proportion of American women in the professions actually declined. From nearly half the nation’s professional force in 1930, women had dropped to only 35 per cent in 1960, despite the fact that the number of women college graduates had nearly tripled. The phenomenon was the great increase in the numbers of educated women choosing to be just housewives.

And yet, for the suburban and city housewife, the fact remains that more and more of the jobs that used to be performed in the home have been taken away: canning, baking bread, weaving cloth and making clothes, educating the young, nursing the sick, taking care of the aged. It is possible for women to reverse history—or kid themselves that they can reverse it—by baking their own bread, but the law does not permit them to teach their own children at home, and few housewives would match their so-called generalist’s skill with the professional expertise of doctor and hospital to nurse a child through tonsillitis or pneumonia at home.

There is a real basis, then, for the complaint that so many housewives have: “I feel so empty somehow, useless, as if I don’t exist.” “At times I feel as though the world is going past my door while I just sit and watch.” This very sense of emptiness, this uneasy denial of the world outside the home, often drives the housewife to even more effort, more frantic housework to keep the future out of sight. And the choices the housewife makes to fill that emptiness—though she seems to make them for logical and necessary reasons—trap her further in trivial domestic routine.

The woman with two children, for example, bored and restive in her city apartment, is driven by her sense of futility and emptiness to move, “for the children’s sake,” to a spacious house in the suburbs. The house takes longer to clean, the shopping and gardening and chauffeuring and do-it-yourself routines are so time-consuming that, for a while, the emptiness seems solved. But when the house is furnished, and the children are in school and the family’s place in the community has jelled, there is “nothing to look forward to,” as one woman I interviewed put it. The empty feeling returns, and so she
must redecorate the living room, or wax the kitchen floor more often than necessary—or have another baby. Diapering that baby, along with all the other housework, may keep her running so fast that she will indeed need her husband’s help in the kitchen at night. Yet none of it is quite as real, quite as necessary, as it seems.

One of the great changes in America, since World War II, has been the explosive movement to the suburbs, those ugly and endless sprawls which are becoming a national problem. Sociologists point out that a distinguishing feature of these suburbs is the fact that the women who live there are better educated than city women, and that the great majority are full-time housewives.4

At first glance, one might suspect that the very growth and existence of the suburbs causes educated modern American women to become and remain full-time housewives. Or did the postwar suburban explosion come, at least in part, as a result of the coincidental choice of millions of American women to “seek fulfillment in the home?” Among the women I interviewed, the decision to move to the suburbs “for the children’s sake” followed the decision to give up job or profession and become a full-time housewife, usually after the birth of the first baby, or the second, depending on the age of the woman when the mystique hit. With the youngest wives, of course, the mystique hit so early that the choice of marriage and motherhood as a full-time career ruled out education for any profession, and the move to the suburbs came with marriage or as soon as the wife no longer had to work to support her husband through college or law school.

Families where the wife intends to pursue a definite professional goal are less likely to move to the suburbs. In the city, of course, there are more and better jobs for educated women; more universities, sometimes free, with evening courses, geared to men who work during the day, and often more convenient than the conventional daytime program for a young mother who wants to finish college or work toward a graduate degree. There is also a better supply of full-or part-time nurses and cleaning help, nursery schools, day-care centers, after-school play programs. But these considerations are only important to the woman who has commitments outside the home.

There is also less room for housewifery to expand to fill the time available, in the city. That sense of restless “marking time” comes early to the educated, able city housewife, even though, when her
babies are little, the time is more than filled with busyness—wheeling the carriage back and forth in the park, sitting on the playground bench because the children can’t play outside alone. Still, there’s no room in the city apartment for a home freezer, no garden to grow beans in. And all the organizations in the city are so big; the libraries are already built; professionals run the nursery schools and recreation programs.

It is not surprising, then, that many young wives vote for a move to the suburbs as soon as possible. Like the empty plains of Kansas that tempted the restless immigrant, the suburbs in their very newness and lack of structured service, offered, at least at first, a limitless challenge to the energy of educated American women. The women who were strong enough, independent enough, seized the opportunity and were leaders and innovators in these new communities. But, in most cases, these were women educated before the era of feminine fulfillment. The ability of suburban life to fulfill, or truly use the potential of the able, educated American woman seems to depend on her own previous autonomy or self-realization—that is, on her strength to resist the pressures to conform, resist the time-filling busywork of suburban house and community, and find, or make, the same kind of serious commitment outside the home that she would have made in the city. Such a commitment in the suburbs, in the beginning at least, was likely to be on a volunteer basis, but it was challenging, and necessary.

When the mystique took over, however, a new breed of women came to the suburbs. They were looking for sanctuary; they were perfectly willing to accept the suburban community as they found it (their only problem was “how to fit in”); they were perfectly willing to fill their days with the trivia of housewifery. Women of this kind, and most of those that I interviewed were of the post-1950 college generation, refuse to take policy-making positions in community organizations; they will only collect for Red Cross or March of Dimes or Scouts or be den mothers or take the lesser PTA jobs. Their resistance to serious community responsibility is usually explained by “I can’t take the time from my family.” But much of their time is spent in meaningless busywork. The kind of community work they choose does not challenge their intelligence—or even, sometimes, fill a real function. Nor do they derive much personal satisfaction from it—but it does fill time.

So, increasingly, in the new bedroom suburbs, the really
interesting volunteer jobs—the leadership of the cooperative nurseries, the free libraries, the school board posts, the selectmenships and, in some suburbs, even the PTA presidencies—are filled by men. The housewife who doesn’t “have time” to take serious responsibility in the community, like the woman who doesn’t “have time” to pursue a professional career, evades a serious commitment through which she might finally realize herself; she evades it by stepping up her domestic routine until she is truly trapped.

The dimensions of the trap seem physically unalterable, as the busyness that fills the housewife’s day seems inescapably necessary. But is that domestic trap an illusion, despite its all-too-solid reality, an illusion created by the feminine mystique? Take, for instance, the open plan of the contemporary “ranch” or split-level house, $14,990 to $54,990, which has been built in the millions from Roslyn Heights to the Pacific Palisades. They give the illusion of more space for less money. But the women to whom they are sold almost have to live the feminine mystique. There are no true walls or doors; the woman in the beautiful electronic kitchen is never separated from her children. She need never feel alone for a minute, need never be by herself. She can forget her own identity in those noisy open-plan houses. The open plan also helps expand the housework to fill the time available. In what is basically one free-flowing room, instead of many rooms separated by walls and stairs, continual messes continually need picking up. A man, of course, leaves the house for most of the day. But the feminine mystique forbids the woman this.

A friend of mine, an able writer turned full-time housewife, had her suburban dream house designed by an architect to her own specifications, during the period when she defined herself as housewife and no longer wrote. The house, which cost approximately $50,000, was almost literally one big kitchen. There was a separate studio for her husband, who was a photographer, and cubbyholes for sleeping, but there wasn’t any place where she could get out of the kitchen, away from her children, during the working hours. The gorgeous mahogany and stainless steel of her custom-built kitchen cabinets and electric appliances were indeed a dream, but when I saw that house, I wondered where, if she ever wanted to write again, she would put her typewriter.

It’s strange how few places there are in those spacious houses and those sprawling suburbs where you can go to be alone. A
sociologist’s study of upper-income suburban wives who married young and woke, after fifteen years of child-living, PTA, do-it-yourself, garden-and-barbecue, to the realization that they wanted to do some real work themselves, found that the ones who did something about this often moved back to the city. But among the women I talked to, this moment of personal truth was more likely to be marked by adding a room with a door to their open-plan house, or simply by putting a door on one room in the house, “so I can have someplace to myself, just a door to shut between me and the children when I want to think”—or work, study, be alone.

Most American housewives, however, do not shut that door. Perhaps they are afraid, finally, to be alone in that room. As another social scientist said, the American housewife’s dilemma is that she does not have the privacy to follow real interests of her own, but even if she had more time and space to herself, she would not know what to do with it. If she makes a career of marriage and motherhood, as the mystique tells her, if she becomes the executive of the house—and has enough children to give her quite a business to run—if she exerts the human strength, which she is forbidden by the mystique to exert elsewhere, on running a perfect house and supervising her children and sharing her husband’s career in such omnipresent detail that she has only a few minutes to spare for community work, and no time for serious larger interests, who is to say that this is not as important, as good a way to spend a life, as mastering the secrets of the atoms or the stars, composing symphonies, pioneering a new concept in government or society?

For the very able woman, who has the ability to create culturally as well as biologically, the only possible rationalization is to convince herself—as the new mystique tries so hard to convince her—that the minute physical details of child care are indeed mystically creative; that her children will be tragically deprived if she is not there every minute; that the dinner she gives the boss’s wife is as crucial to her husband’s career as the case he fights in court or the problem he solves in the laboratory. And because husband and children are soon out of the house most of the day, she must keep on having new babies, or somehow make the minutiae of housework itself important enough, necessary enough, hard enough, creative enough to justify her very existence.

If a woman’s whole existence is to be justified in this way, if the
housewife’s work is really so important, so necessary, why should anyone raise an eyebrow because a latter-day Einstein’s wife expects her husband to put aside that lifeless theory of relativity and help her with the work that is supposed to be the essence of life itself: diaper the baby and don’t forget to rinse the soiled diaper in the toilet before putting it in the diaper pail, and then wax the kitchen floor.

The most glaring proof that, no matter how elaborate, “Occupation: housewife” is not an adequate substitute for truly challenging work, important enough to society to be paid for in its coin, arose from the comedy of “togetherness.” The women acting in this little morality play were told that they had the starring roles, that their parts were just as important, perhaps even more important than the parts their husbands played in the world outside the home. Was it unnatural that, since they were doing such a vital job, women insisted that their husbands share in the housework? Surely it was an unspoken guilt, an unspoken realization of their wives’ entrapment, that made so many men comply, with varying degrees of grace, to their wives’ demands. But having their husbands share the housework didn’t really compensate women for being shut out of the larger world. If anything, by removing still more of their functions, it increased their sense of individual emptiness. They needed to share vicariously more and more of their children’s and husbands’ lives. Togetherness was a poor substitute for equality; the glorification of women’s role was a poor substitute for free participation in the world as an individual.

The true emptiness beneath the American housewife’s routine has been revealed in many ways. In Minneapolis recently a school-teacher named Maurice K. Enghausen read a story in the local newspaper about the long work week of today’s housewife. Declaring in a letter to the editor that “any woman who puts in that many hours is awfully slow, a poor budgeter of time, or just plain inefficient,” this thirty-six-year-old bachelor offered to take over any household and show how it could be done.

Scores of irate housewives dared him to prove it. He took over the household of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Dalton, with four children, aged two to seven, for three days. In a single day, he cleaned the first floor, washed three loads of clothes and hung them out to dry, ironed all the laundry including underwear and sheets, fixed a soup-and-sandwich lunch and a big backyard supper, baked two cakes, prepared two salads for the next day, dressed, undressed, and bathed
the children, washed wood work and scrubbed the kitchen floor. Mrs. Dalton said he was even a better cook than she was. “As for cleaning,” she said, “I am more thorough, but perhaps that is unnecessary.”

Pointing out that he had kept house for himself for seven years and had earned money at college by housework, Enghausen said, “I still wish that teaching 115 students were as easy as handling four children and a house… I still maintain that housework is not the interminable chore that women claim it is.”

This claim, periodically expressed by men privately and publicly, has been borne out by a recent time-motion study. Recording and analyzing every movement made by a group of housewives, this study concluded that most of the energy expended in housework is superfluous. A series of intensive studies sponsored by the Michigan Heart Association at Wayne University disclosed that “women were working more than twice as hard as they should,” squandering energy through habit and tradition in wasted motion and unneeded steps.

The puzzling question of “housewife’s fatigue” sheds additional light. Doctors in many recent medical conventions report failure to cure it or get to its cause. At a meeting of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, a Cleveland doctor stated that mothers, who cannot get over “that tired feeling” and complain that their doctors are no help, are neither sick nor maladjusted, but actually tired. “No psychoanalysis or deep probing is necessary,” said Dr. Leonard Lovshin, of the Cleveland Clinic. “She has a work day of sixteen hours, a work week of seven days…. Being conscientious, she gets involved in Cubs, Brownies, PTA’s, heart drives, church work, hauling children to music and dancing.” But strangely enough, he remarked, neither the housewife’s workload nor her fatigue seemed affected by how many children she had. Most of these patients had only one or two. “A woman with one child just worries four times as much about the one as the woman with four children, and it all comes out even,” Dr. Lovshin said.

Some doctors, finding nothing organically wrong with these chronically tired mothers, told them, “It’s all in your mind” others gave them pills, vitamins, or injections for anemia, low blood pressure, low metabolism, or put them on diets (the average housewife is twelve to fifteen pounds overweight), deprived them of drinking (there are approximately a million known alcoholic housewives in America), or gave them tranquilizers. All such
treatments were futile, Dr. Lovshin said, because these mothers were truly tired.\(^9\)

Other doctors, finding that such mothers get as much or more sleep than they need, claimed the basic cause was not fatigue but boredom. This problem became so severe that the women’s magazines treated it fulsomely—in the Pollyanna terms of the feminine mystique. In a spate of articles that appeared in the late 1950’s, the “cures” suggested were usually of the more-praise-and-appreciation-from-husband variety, even though the doctors interviewed in these articles indicated clearly enough that the cause was in the “housewife-mother” role. But the magazines drew their usual conclusion: that is, and always will be woman’s lot, and she just has to make the best of it. Thus, *Redbook* (“Why Young Mothers Are Always Tired,” September, 1959) reports the findings of the Baruch study of chronic-fatigue patients:

> ...Fatigue of any kind is a signal that something is wrong. Physical fatigue protects the organism from injury through too great activity of any part of the body. Nervous fatigue, on the other hand, is usually a warning of danger to the personality. This comes out very clearly in the woman patient who complains bitterly that she is “just a housewife,” that she is wasting her talents and education on household drudgery and losing her attractiveness, her intelligence, and indeed her very identity as a person, explains Dr. Harley C. Sands, one of the co-heads of the Baruch project. In industry the most fatiguing jobs are those which only partially occupy the worker’s attention, but at the same time prevent him from concentrating on anything else. Many young wives say that this mental gray-out is what bothers them most in caring for home and children. “After a while your mind becomes a blank,” they say. “You can’t concentrate on anything. It’s like sleep-walking.”

The magazine also quotes a Johns Hopkins psychiatrist to the effect that the major factor which produces chronic fatigue in patients was “monotony unpunctuated by any major triumph or disaster,” noting that this “sums up the predicament of many a young mother.” It even cites the results of the University of Michigan study in which of
524 women asked “what are some of the things which make you feel ‘useful and important,’” almost none answered “housework” among the women who had jobs, “the overwhelming majority, married and single, felt that the job was more satisfying than the housework.” At this point the magazine interjects editorially: “This, of course, does not mean that a career is the alternative to fatigue for a young mother. If anything, the working mother may have more troubles than the housebound young matron.” The magazine’s happy conclusion: “Since the demands of housework and child-rearing are not very flexible, there is no complete solution to chronic-fatigue problems. Many women, however, can cut down fatigue if they stop asking too much of themselves. By trying to understand realistically what she can—and, more important, what she cannot—do, a woman may, in the long run, be a better wife and mother, albeit a tired one.”

Another such article (“Is Boredom Bad for You?” McCall’s, April 1957) asked, “Is the housewife’s chronic fatigue really boredom?” and answers: “Yes. The chronic fatigue of many housewives is brought on by the repetition of their jobs, the monotony of the setting, the isolation and the lack of stimulation. The heavy household chores, it’s been found, aren’t enough to explain the fatigue…. The more your intelligence exceeds your job requirements, the greater your boredom. This is so to such an extent that experienced employers never hire above-average brains for routine jobs…. It is this boredom plus, of course, the day-to-day frustrations which makes the average housewife’s job more emotionally fatiguing than her husband’s.” The cure: “honest enjoyment in some part of the job such as cooking or an incentive such as a party in the offing and, above all, male praise are good antidotes for domestic boredom.”

For the women I interviewed, the problem seemed to be not that too much was asked of them, but too little. “A kind of torpor comes over me when I get home from the errands,” one woman told me. “It’s as if there’s nothing I really have to do, though there’s plenty to do around the house. So I keep a bottle of martinis in the refrigerator, and I pour myself some so I’ll feel more like doing something. Or just to get through till Don comes home.”

Other women eat, as they stretch out the housework, just to fill the time available. Obesity and alcoholism, as neuroses, have often been related to personality patterns that stem from childhood. But does this explain why so many American housewives around forty have the same dull and lifeless look; does it explain their lack of vitality, the
deadly sameness of their lives, the furtive between-meal snacks, drinks, tranquilizers, sleeping pills? Even given the various personalities of these women, there must be something in the nature of their work, of the lives they lead, that drives them to these escapes.

This is no less true of the American housewife’s work than it is of the work of most American men, on the assembly lines or in corporation offices: work that does not fully use a man’s capacities leaves in him a vacant, empty need for escape—television, tranquilizers, alcohol, sex. But the husbands of the women I interviewed were often engaged in work that demanded ability, responsibility, and decision. I noticed that when these men were saddled with a domestic chore, they polished it off in much less time than it seemed to take their wives. But, of course, for them this was never the work that justified their lives. Whether they put more energy into it for this reason, just to get it over with, or whether housework did not have to take so much of their energy, they did it more quickly and sometimes even seemed to enjoy it more.

Social critics, during the togetherness era, often complained that men’s careers suffered because of all this housework. But most husbands of the women I interviewed didn’t seem to let housework interfere with their careers. When husbands did that bit of housework evenings and weekends because their wives had careers, or because their wives had made such a career of housework they could not get it done themselves, or because their wives were too passive, dependent, helpless to get it done, or even because the wives left housework for their husbands, for revenge—it did not expand. But I noticed that housework did tend to expand to fill the time available with a few husbands who seemed to be using domestic chores as an excuse for not meeting the challenge of their own careers. “I wish he wouldn’t insist on vacuuming the whole house on Tuesday evenings. It doesn’t need it and he could be working on his book,” the wife of a college professor told me. A capable social worker herself, she had managed all her professional life to work out ways of caring for her house and children without hiring servants. With her daughter’s help, she did her own thorough housecleaning on Saturday; it didn’t need vacuuming on Tuesday.

To do the work that you are capable of doing is the mark of maturity. It is not the demands of housework and children, or the absence of servants, that keep most American women from growing up to do the work of which they are capable. In an earlier era when
servants were plentiful, most of the middle-class women who hired them did not use their freedom to take a more active part in society; they were confined by “woman’s role” to leisure. In countries like Israel and Russia, where women are expected to be more than just housewives, servants scarcely exist, and yet home and children and love are evidently not neglected.

It is the mystique of feminine fulfillment, and the immaturity it breeds, that prevents women from doing the work of which they are capable. It is not strange that women who have lived for ten or twenty years within the mystique, or who adjusted to it so young that they have never experienced being on their own, should be afraid to face the test of real work in the world and cling to their identity as housewives—even if, thereby, they doom themselves to feeling “empty, useless, as if I do not exist.” That housewifery can, must, expand to fill the time available when there is no other purpose in life seems fairly evident. After all, with no other purpose in her life, if the housework were done in an hour, and the children off to school, the bright, energetic housewife would find the emptiness of her days unbearable.

So a Scarsdale woman fired her maid, and even doing her own housework and the usual community work, could not use up all her energy. “We solved the problem,” she said, speaking of herself and a friend who had tried to commit suicide. “We go bowling three mornings a week. Otherwise, we’d go out of our minds. At least, now we can sleep at night.” “There’s always some way you can get rid of it,” I heard one woman saying to another over lunch at Schraffti’s, debating somewhat listlessly what to do with the “afternoon off” from housewifery that their doctors had ordered. Diet foods and exercise salons have become a lucrative business in that futile battle to take off the fat that cannot be turned into human energy by the American housewife. It is slightly shocking to think that intelligent, educated American women are forced to “get rid of” their creative human energy by eating a chalky powder and wrestling with a machine. But no one is shocked to realize that getting rid of women’s creative energy, rather than using it for some larger purpose in society, is the very essence of being a housewife.

To live according to the feminine mystique depends on a reversal of history, a devaluation of human progress. To get women back into the home again, not like the Nazis, by ordering them there, but by “propaganda with a view to restoring woman’s sense of prestige and
self-esteem as women, actual or potential mothers...women who live as women,” meant that women had to resist their own “technological unemployment.” The canning plants and bakeries did not close down, but even the mystique makers felt the need to defend themselves against the question, “are we, in suggesting that women might, of their own volition, recapture some of their functions around the home, such as cooking, preserving and decorating, trying to turn back the clock of progress?”

Progress is not progress, they argued; in theory, the freeing of women from household drudgery liberates them for the cultivation of higher aims, but “as such aims are understood, many are called and few are chosen, among men no less than among women.” Therefore, let all women recapture that work in the home which all women can do easily—and let society stage-manage it so that prestige for women “be shifted emphatically to those women recognized as serving society most fully as women.”

For fifteen years and longer, there has been a propaganda campaign, as unanimous in this democratic nation as in the most efficient of dictatorships, to give women “prestige” as housewives. But can the sense of self in woman, which once rested on necessary work and achievement in the home, be re-created by housework that is no longer really necessary or really uses much ability—in a country and at a time when women can be free, finally, to move on to something more. It is wrong for a woman, for whatever reason, to spend her days in work that is not moving as the world around her is moving, in work that does not truly use her creative energy. Women themselves are discovering that though there is always “some way you can get rid of it,” they can have no peace until they begin to use their abilities.

Surely there are many women in America who are happy at the moment as housewives, and some whose abilities are fully used in the housewife role. But happiness is not the same thing as the aliveness of being fully used. Nor is human intelligence, human ability, a static thing. Housework, no matter how it is expanded to fill the time available, can hardly use the abilities of a woman of average or normal human intelligence, much less the fifty per cent of the female population whose intelligence, in childhood, was above average.

Some decades ago, certain institutions concerned with the mentally retarded discovered that housework was peculiarly suited to
the capacities of feeble-minded girls. In many towns, inmates of institutions for the mentally retarded were in great demand as houseworkers, and housework was much more difficult then than it is now.

Basic decisions as to the upbringing of children, interior decoration, menu-planning, budget, education, and recreation do involve intelligence, of course. But as it was put by one of the few home-and-family experts who saw the real absurdity of the feminine mystique, most housework, the part that still takes the most time, “can be capably handled by an eight-year-old child.”

The role of the housewife is, therefore, analogous to that of the president of a corporation who would not only determine policies and make over-all plans but also spend the major part of his time and energy in such activities as sweeping the plant and oiling machines. Industry, of course, is too thrifty of the capacities of its personnel to waste them in such fashion.

The true satisfaction of “creating a home,” the personal relationship with husband and children, the atmosphere of hospitality, serenity, culture, warmth, or security a woman gives to the home comes by way of her personality, not her broom, stove, or dishpan. For a woman to get a rewarding sense of total creation by way of the multiple monotonous chores that are her daily lot would be as irrational as for an assembly line worker to rejoice that he had created an automobile because he tightened a bolt. It is difficult to see how clearing up after meals three times a day and making out marketing lists (3 lemons, 2 packages of soap powder, a can of soup), getting at the fuzz in the radiators with the hard rubber appliance of the vacuum cleaner, emptying wastebaskets and washing bathroom floors day after day, week after week, year after year, add up to a sum total of anything except minutiae that laid end to end reach nowhere.11

A number of the more disagreeable sexual phenomena of this era can be seen now as the inevitable result of that ludicrous consignment of millions of women to spend their days at work an eight-year-old could do. For no matter how much the “home-and-family career” is
rationalized to justify such appalling waste of able womanpower; no matter how ingeniously the manipulators coin new scientific sounding words, “lubrilator” and the like, to give the illusion that dumping the clothes in the washing machines is an act akin to deciphering the genetic code; no matter how much housework is expanded to fill the time available, it still presents little challenge to the adult mind. Into this mental vacuum have flooded an endless line of books on gourmet cooking, scientific treatises on child care, and above all, advice on the techniques of “married love,” sexual intercourse. These, too, offer little challenge to the adult mind. The results could almost have been predicted. To the great dismay of men, their wives suddenly became “experts,” know-it-alls, whose unshakable superiority at home, a domain they both occupied, was impossible to compete with, and very hard to live with. As Russell Lynes put it, wives began to treat their husbands as part-time servants—or the latest new appliance.12 With a snap course in home economics or marriage and family under her belt and copies of Dr. Spock and Dr. Van de Velde side by side on the shelf; with all that time, energy and intelligence directed on husband, children, and house, the young American wife—easily, inevitably, disastrously—began to dominate the family even more completely than her “mom.”