

A Woman's Role in the 1950s

November 17, 2005 by [RoobixCoob](#)

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Analysis Based on Popular Media

The role of women in the 1950 was repressive and constrictive in many ways. Society placed high importance and many expectations on behavior at home as well as in public. Women were supposed to fulfill certain roles, such as a caring mother, a diligent homemaker, and an obedient wife. The perfect mother was supposed to stay



home and nurture so society would accept them. A diligent housewife had dinner on the table precisely at the moment her husband arrived from work. A wife was a "good" wife only if she carried out her man's every order and agreed with him on everything. In fact, even if she wanted to voice an opinion, her education, or rather lack of thereof would not allow it. Another reference is the 1950's American High School Home Economics textbook. An essay found in the book is entitled "How to be a Good Wife." The television shows aired at this time reflect the public's need for stability and conformity. The main character of the most watched show at the time, *I Love Lucy*, portrayed a woman as the stereotypical woman-in-distress, who always needed her husband, the man, to bail her out. She also was symbolic

of the inept woman: the "woman driver," the "over-spender" who cannot budget, and the basic downfall of man.

Pleasantville's Betty was an appropriate example of a 50's mother. Following is an excerpt that applies to motherhood. Prepare the children: Take a few minutes to wash the children's hands and faces, comb their hair, and if necessary change their clothes. They are God's creatures and he would like to see them playing the part.

Minimize all noise...eliminate the noise of the washer, dryer, [dishwasher](#) or vacuum. Try to encourage the children to be quiet.

Every morning, she woke her children up, cooked breakfast for them and sent them off to school. The breakfast however was far from the cereal and milk often enjoyed today. This was feast that consisted of towers of pancakes, piles of eggs, and platefuls of bacon and patties, all topped with a pound of syrup. Another example of women who longed to be good mothers was the contestants on *Queen for a Day*. They competed for pity points, but some of them genuinely wanted to make life better for their kids. Such over exaggerated behavior was typical of women at this time. They wanted to appeal to men and society and therefore felt they had to be perfect and overworking. They only felt secure when they were praised for their house keeping or kids.

A diligent homemaker not only kept the house sparkling but she cooked dinner, did laundry and ran errands.

"Have dinner ready. Prepare yourself. Touch up your makeup, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people. Be a little gay and a little more interesting. Clear away the clutter...run a dust cloth over the tables." reads the essay, listing the many chores of a woman. The woman's life revolved around the house and home and even when she went out to meet her friends. When women started complaining of boredom, society invented the sewing and quilt making clubs. They would do anything to please their men because their life depended on them so much. To disagree with her husband would have been the gravest of all errors. The men had almost total control over their wives.

"Some Don'ts: Don't greet him with problems or complaints. Don't complain if he is late for dinner. Arrange his pillow and offer to take off his shoes. Speak in a low, soft, soothing and pleasant voice. Listen to him: You may have dozens of things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first. Make the evening his. Never complain if he does not take you out to dinner or other pleasant entertainments." Fear of some how displeasing their husbands was prominent in all women...after all even their weekly monetary allowances depended upon their husbands. Men did not trust their wives with money because they were not educated enough, yet ironically and paradoxically, it was untraditional for a woman to receive as good of an education.

In the 1950's, the fact that a woman was even attending a college was uncanny and paranormal. Most women married after high school and fell into their traditional roles right away. The brave women that chose to learn further were not taught mathematics and science (fields they were later going to succeed in) but home economics and cooking. Women did not join the conversations, they just stood near the men with platters of *heure d'heures*. Men feared intelligent women because of their tendency to "think" for themselves and disagree with their man. In Pleasantville, when Betty starts doing things on her own, her husband is outraged and

confused. He has never known any other way or treating his wife. He loves his wife, or rather the image and template that she is, for her simplicity and "propriety". He however, becomes weary when his wife takes on new interests and refuses to follow the old rules. As soon as she learns something, she becomes a threat, seemingly to his manhood and manliness.

A contemporary example of stereotypical roles for women is the present day situation. By achieving equality with men, women have also set up new stereotypes. Now in order to be respected, a woman has to be a "career" woman balancing both children and a job. In fact, stay home moms now receive the same degrading look as educated working women did in the 50's. Although the pressure of being a perfect mother and wife are now gone, pressure still remains to get a good education and become a successful citizen. However, in the attempt to become equal, women have swung too far...neither extreme is reasonable and neither is truly the solution. In reality, the goal should be freedom of choice without prejudice. A woman must have the right to choose whether she wants the career or a homelike. Neither stereotype is healthy and right and society (women especially) who think they have accomplished the goal are delusional.

Many women during the fifties may feel that they were happy being mothers and that they were equal to men, just different. Homemaking was an engaging activity which appealed to many women. There is nothing degrading about raising kids, in fact, a woman needs to be skilled and wise. Also, a weakly allowance is not such a bad idea because then it does not have to be a responsibility. Another responsibility that succumbs is the guilt of not having enough time to educate the children. If a woman was not educate then she did not feel like a failure. Following a husbands orders may not have been so restricting either because it freed the mind to worry about the kids rather than what to think. There are many examples where the position of women is easier because eof men. Nevertheless, who wants to stay a three-year-old forever?

The role of women in the 1950 was a society-endorsing template that all women had to fill. Women had to be prefect mothers, obedient wives and clever homemakers. This perfection was not n a personal level, but rather on societies standards. The raising of the new generation was extremely important at this time so women worked diligently and hard to fill the oversized shoes prepared for them. Many TV shows of the fifties portrays this angelic mother figure with not a care in the world except her children. That is merely an illusion: women were bored, they wanted something more mind stimulating and weaving just didn't cut it.

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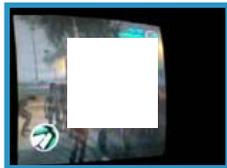


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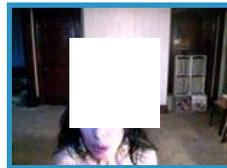
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