

WMST 211
Magazine Analysis Paper
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The Saturday Evening

POST

The Saturday Evening Post arrived every week providing women and men alike a current, political and informational source of entertainment. Today, it sheds light onto the world in which my mother was born. Many messages in this magazine, hidden and apparent, targeted women by telling them how to act, how to behave and to which ideals a woman should aspire. First, a woman should be a housewife, the stereotypical consumerist, postwar image portrayed by television and periodicals of the day. Women were also supposed to be human, an equal in their relationship, children were expected eventually, but not as the primary purpose of marriage. While articles talked about these more realistic women, advertisers portrayed beauty and career images. In 1957 the ideals of what a woman should be were separate and distinct. The typical female audience was expected to be the perfect housewife, consumer, spouse and mother. They could have careers, but were expected to be gorgeous. This left each individual with the dilemma of how to combine them all.

The readers of *The Saturday Evening Post* were white and for the most part married. The magazine did not mention nor picture minorities. Rich people are portrayed as above the reader, out of reach, in status, though the consumerism portrayed acts as if the readers had enough money to buyout a department store. Lower middle class issues range as low in class as this magazine goes, and those articles are sparse. Articles and ads more often than not depict women and men in separate spheres. The idea that they should occasionally they should make time to be social together, or go on a date existed, but each would have their own role and rules of conduct.

The Saturday Evening Post conveyed women as being housewives above their any other identity, both by advertisers and article writers. The term housewife will refer to the nonsexual woman whose parental status is not important to her identity as this type of women. Not to say that this is the only identity portrayed to or felt by women. The housewife was respected in her own

right within the family and held special responsibilities, equal in necessity to those of her husband, just different. As talked about in lecture, she was in her own sphere, disconnected from her husband, not less equal in this relationship, but she was in charge of certain responsibilities and did not have a say in other decisions made by the husband.

The housewife's main duty was to make a comfortable, safe, relaxing and clean home, not unlike the Victorian era notion of a "true women." These tasks were seen as duties to perform for their husband and vicariously their country. Ideally the wife would not have to work, leaving the financial burden on her husband. Therefore the wife should make sure the husband has everything he needs to be a productive worker.

The United States was in the cold war at this time, and the American way had to be upheld. America viewed housewife of America as a big difference (and a preferable one) to the Russian women, who were portrayed as non-feminine and forced to work. Stable American families played a "crucial role in giving the United States the upper hand in the Cold War," (DuBois and Dumenil, 557) and the housewife is what made the family stable, at least this was the perception at the time. In 1959 Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev held their informal Kitchen Debate. Khrushchev argued Russia was focused on " 'things that matter' rather than luxury" (GNU Free Documentation License). Keeping a booming economy was another way to fight the 'Ruskies'; the best way to keep up the economy is to have everybody employed and working at their peak efficiency. Society charged wives with the task of relieving her husband's stress when he got home from work.

The "Honey, I'm home," idea was promoted throughout the magazine, where the husband should come home to a kiss, a hot meal, and a relaxing evening of reading the paper, smoking, and reading this periodical. Food product advertisements and recipes littered *The Saturday Evening Post* issues. Betty Crocker sold her products by claiming they would make men happy. Worcestershire

Sauce ran the slogan, “Dishes **Men** Like,” (Worcestershire Sauce) where the word ‘men’ written in red to make it stand out. Many of the cigarette ads claimed smooth and relaxing feelings, shown with older a gentlemen smoking. The *Post* itself was meant to be a relaxing thing to do of after a day of work, with its short stories and novelettes.

The comical cover of the February 23, 1957 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* paints a clear image of what is socially accepted from a housewife through its use of humor.¹ A living room scene is colorfully pictured and at the center is a slightly confused man coming in from the kitchen with appetizers and a serving bowl in his hands. Around the room couples are sitting talking to each other, but the men are sitting on makeshift furniture (footrests, folding chairs) while the women are sitting comfortable on the upholstered furniture. One man is even sitting on the floor in his suit. This humor is only possible if the reader has certain ideas of what a man and a woman should do in social situations.

Women were responsible keeping the house neat and clean, ranging from laundry to dishes. Products were sold specifically to women to make her job easier, if not more effective, such as the Cosco step stool, “When a step stool is handy ... everything else is,” (Cosco). Appliances, such as refrigerators and washers, always featured women in their ads, many times it was a women recommending or standing behind whatever was claimed by the advertisement. Articles talked of new techniques in cleaning and non-preferential tips on which products to buy.

Consumerism was an integrated part of the housewife’s characteristics. Women made the decisions on what to buy for inside the house. These decisions would range from which brand of soup would be best for her family to which refrigerator would be stylish and easy to use. Automobiles were clearly shown as the husband’s decision, but advisements suggested that a family buy a new car both for the man to drive to work, as well as letting women run errands or drop kids

¹ See the cover image of this paper.

off at school via the old car; again, helping out to relieve potential stressors the a man might have to deal with.

These advertisements were clear indications of America's shift to a more consumer-oriented nation, contradictory to what it was in World War II and the depression. This included a shift in what was previously seen as luxury, was now seen as required. The War provided many women and families with money to buy items that would have been seen as unnecessary just years previous, but consumer goods were not available during to the war years. So for four years women planned and imagined what to buy after the war was over, such as the women in "The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter" who declared she was going to buy a vacuum right after the war was over.

Doubtlessly, many families were using machinery purchased in the twenties before the great depression which needed to be replaced. The fifties allowed people to replace or buy for the first time appliances and even upgrade to a better, prettier, easier to use model, despite the price difference. Women were the ones to make these important purchase decisions.

Products were advertized to women based on their looks and ease of use, without much emphasis on their quality. Hotpoint's "New American Beauty," a pink refrigerator is a prime example of this. Its tag line was, "So beautiful to see ... so beautiful to live with ... so beautifully convenient!" (Hotpoint, 5). The paragraph that describes the model goes into greater detail about how wonderful and easy your kitchen life will be with this new model, without mentioning how well it performs against competitors. Advertisers had this mentality in general in a variety of ads, but most that focused on quality and durability were directed toward men, whereas these details were omitted from the advertisements women would view. These colorful appliances are a huge indication of the consumer culture that existed in the 1950's.

But women were also supposed to be wives as well. This more private, more human view of women carried respect as an equal partner in marriage as well as an attractive, desirable person. Though this wifely view was kept contextually separate from the housewife role, it was no less important, and portrayed almost as often in this magazine. While the advertisers focused on the housewife role, many of the longer articles looked at what it was like to be an actual, non-ideal married woman.

“Time out for Marriage” by Charlotte Edwards gives the story of a ‘real woman’ and her struggle for a healthy relationship with her husband. This article is not idealized and focuses on realistic issues, such as money and quality relationship time, that many women had to deal with, despite advertisers’ ignorance of these issues.

Our mother figure, Vicky, begins each day with automatic, emotionless dialogue between her and her husband, which is symbolic of the rest of her day. She scrimps and saves as her husband does not earn enough to give her children everything they need; sports uniforms are not purchased and basic needs are a struggle to meet. By the time evening rolls around on this day, Vicky decides to take her husband’s overtime money and spend it on a romantic night out, though she knows there are other practical ways to spend that money for the family. When her kids find out she will be paying for a baby sitter, they question her, but Vicky replies, “Your father and I are going to take time out for marriage,” (Edwards, 80).

That evening she and Sam do leave the house for a night out. As they drive, Vicky instructs Sam to drive to the most expensive restaurant around, and to which he replies,

“How?” he asked simply.

It was there. In that one word. Everything. The trying and scrimping and stretching and working. A word had no right to prickle against your

eyelids, Vicky thought. A man who worked as hard as Sam should never have to ask how. It should be in his wallet, the how, the possible.

The rest of the account describes how genuine their conversations are and the renewed love they feel toward each other. They enjoy themselves, despite their visual class difference between the rest of the people at the restaurant. They end their evening on a romantic cliff overlooking their town and the discovery that they, “can go there, when we need to – and be quiet and together – and look down – and see what is ours –” (Edwards, 83).

This story demonstrates that everyone’s life was not *Leave it to beaver*, picturesque. The role of housewife is accepted, borne by Vicky rather than proudly carried, though it was not shameful, or dishonorable. This gives a powerful and meaningful message of hope and identification to the average wife who might read this article. Vicky does not have a career, and she finds it hard, financially and psychologically, to get through the day as the wife of a single income family. Many families during time period (as any time period) have financial difficulties when only person bring home an income. This article lets women know they are not alone when having overwhelmed feelings such as these.

We also see the woman sharing responsibility for the romance. This is not something that a housewife would have to do, for them, a clean house and hot dinner is all the family needs, but we clearly see, and know that this is not enough. Betty Friedan argues that “full-time domesticity stunted women and denied their ‘basic human need to grow,’” (Meyerowitz, 427) but we can see that this does not have to be the case, and in fact, a story of how to avoid this or work on these issues. But clearly there are competing images of what it is to be a married woman, an equal partner or a domestic housewife.

The subtitle of the article (probably written by the magazine editor) is: “Does a mother have the right to steal happiness at the expense of her children.” These words conflict with the message

of the story. Yes the mother does weigh spending money on her children or her relationship with her husband, but the overall message is that her decision is what is best for the family as a whole, that her son going another week without sports clothes is worth keeping their family together. Indeed Vicky knows she needs to be healthy psychologically to be a good mother.

The maternal role of a woman is almost assumed throughout the *Post's* articles. We see advertisers promoting healthy children's products, articles giving good parenting advice, but there is no doubt the message being conveyed is that a woman should be the nurturing parent and the one to implement the suggestions promoted in the magazine.

There are a variety of different ways to see this. In a political sense, women are portrayed in a caring sense, even if it is not logical – usually defined by an accompanying man's opinion. In the novelette, "No Blade of Grass," a world wide famine is spreading and the United States government is keeping a reserve of food for them alone, one of the women in the story exclaims in a discussion, " 'Millions facing famine' she said, 'and those fat old men [US congress] refuse them food,' " (Christopher, 100). The man she is conversing with explains to her that this is logically the best interest of America.

As maternal citizens they women are interviewed about their views of smog, a growing problem in bigger cities. Most of the research and statistics that are reported have been compiled by men, but women talk about how it affecting their children's health in a variety of articles. Women's nylon pantyhose would begin to disintegrate if the concentration became too high.

The *Post* portrayed yet another feminine identity existed: the woman with a career. Though only certain ads (almost no articles) depicted women as working. The overall message was that

women should be in the home. These clear lines continue into what was considered men's work and women's work. A Shell gas station advertisement (Shell, 2) depicted 15 different servants, the men savants were ice deliverers, grounds keepers and gourmet chefs; the women were pictured as washing dishes and clothes, dusting, ironing, hanging clothes and sweeping. Typewriter ads also solely focused on women, portraying older typing models as hard to use and dangerous. One of IBM's advertisements (IBM, 185) portrayed a male superior satisfactorily looking over his female secretary's typed note. Nurses are perhaps the most widely represented working women, popping up in the background of many pictures, though not receiving any direct focus.

Another advertiser that catered to the careered women was the Blue Cross and Blue Shield insurance company. This advertisement (Blue Cross and Blue Shield, 22-23) featured several scenes (exclusively women actresses) saying how well, easy and effective this insurance was. The ad instructs the women reader to ask about this insurance at work, and did not saying anything about asking her husband to ask for it. This also illustrates the women's partiality to be a caregiver.

While most of the messages (designed for women) in *The Saturday Evening Post* focus on married women, the health and beauty product ads target younger, single women. These messages told women that they should and could be beautiful, if only for beauty's sake. Many of these messages did not give a reason to look a certain way, just that a woman should want to be like this. Tartan shows two pictures of an unhappy, untan woman, and one picture of her tan, happy and carefree, in one of their ads, what a difference a tan makes.

Women are expected to work (if needed) to achieve this beauty standard. But rest assured, they are not alone, many products and programs exist to help. Kessamin advertises their plan to, "Have a new beauty figure for spring!" (Kessamin, 67) by safely loosing pounds. All women were

portrayed as thin, from the images in advertisements to the artistic drawings that accompanied the articles.

The magazine also gave the message that good hygiene was expected – out of married women too. Soaps and antiseptics were marketed exclusively to women (apparently men and children were naturally clean) to solve their hygiene issues. Listerine sets up a brief story where a member of a bridge group is being gossiped about because of her bad breath. The ad clearly gives a preventative solution to this potential problem. Deodorant soaps were also advertised to women, shown with beautiful, perfect looking models attaching subliminal messages: that a certain product would make everything about you beautiful.

This beautiful expectation had also objectified women, especially in the framed comic interspersed throughout the articles. Jerry Marcus draws a board meeting where two scantily clad, busty women accompany the boss while the businessmen stare intently, the women seemingly unaware of their affect. In these comics, women oblivious to the world around them, just doing what a man has told them to do (usually stand and look pretty, one would assume).

The ideal woman of 1957 would be beautiful job possessing women until marriage where she would truly shine as a caring, nurturing wife. *The Saturday Evening Post* sent many messages of what was expected out of women at the current time. Though not always consistent, they are rarely contradictory to each other, giving women the changeling of how much of which image is enough.

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