The Novel Mystique: Depictions of Women in Novels of the 1950s

Sarah Fender

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol14/iss1/12

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Copyright © 2018 Sarah Fender
The Novel Mystique: Depictions of Women in Novels of the 1950s

SARAH FENDER

Throughout history, novels have consistently been scrutinized over the images they portray (Cameron 18-25). For some readers, the concern is that scandalous scenes in dirty books will corrupt the young and the feeble-minded. Others worry that representations of certain groups will disrespect and stereotype oppressed peoples. Clearly, novels are not only entertainment or means for escape; they can have moral and political implications. Popular ones most especially reveal a great deal about the culture and time in which they were read. This essay examines the images of women popular novels were offering during the 1950s, an era in which the term “career woman” first became a dirty word (Friedan 32). The small sample of novels analyzed here reveal that a great portion of Americans did indeed consider independent women indecent, but that a smaller fraction of society was working hard to dismantle that maxim.

Immediately following World War II, Americans were insecure about the state of world affairs. The world was a terrifying place filled with war, genocide, and weapons of mass destruction. Where could Americans feel safe? According to Betty Friedan’s 1963 groundbreaking book The Feminine Mystique, “After the loneliness of war and the unspeakableness of the bomb, against the frightening uncertainty, the cold immensity of the changing world, women as well as men sought the comforting reality of home and children” (213). Americans thus began marrying and having children at younger and younger ages. During the war, women had worked outside the home in record breaking numbers, but employers and the government alike wanted to assure that veterans returning from war could find work. Thus, women were quickly pushed out of the workforce through decreasing salaries and propaganda campaigns painting domestic life as women’s patriotic duty (May 67).

In her book Homeward Bound, historian Elaine Tyler May figures that this is why images of women as housewives emerged overwhelmingly in American culture during the 1940s and 50s. Rosie the Riveter quickly became a petite young housewife enjoying her new washing machine. This image, what Friedan termed “the feminine mystique,” is the focus of her 1963 study of popular women’s magazines. In Homeward Bound, May claims: “The new mystique makes the house-wife mothers, who never had a chance to be anything else, the model for all women” (36). The mystique was this strange paradox wherein contemporary women were doing everything they were told to do that would make them happy—housekeeping, raising children, and catering to their husbands—and yet, American women’s rate of depression, alcoholism, and suicide skyrocketed at this time (Friedan 22). Friedan thus set out to understand this phenomenon by analyzing popular women’s magazines, all of which perpetuated images of women that were limited in their scope.

As a former editor of a women’s magazine, Friedan knew that the topics discussed, and the stories told in these magazines, had evolved over the course of her career. Thus, in her research for The Feminine Mystique, she collected magazines ranging from the 1930s to the late 1950s in order to better understand this evolution. In the notes that she took at this time, located at the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University, Friedan tallied the number of short stories featuring “independent” women, “housewives,” and “career” women in Ladies’ Home Journal editions for 1939, 1949, and 1959. She found that during World War II, independent career women were often the protagonists in magazine fiction stories; Friedan documented eleven independent female characters, three feminist characters, and only six housewives in 1939. Eventually, the independent women and feminists faded away, replaced with almost exclusively housewives by 1959. That year,
she tallied two single women, whose stories focused solely on the pursuit of husbands, eleven housewives, and two career women, one of whom was a housewife who temporarily sold sandwiches in order to save money and buy dresses.

Ultimately, Friedan’s book shows how this mystique invaded a myriad of different realms of American culture, but as comprehensive as her study is, Friedan does not include analyses of contemporary novels. Yet, the crux of her book is based on how women were searching for an escape from the dullness of housewifery. Are novels not one of the greatest mediums through which to escape reality? Scholar Ardis Cameron, in her book Unbuttoning America, posits that they are, asking in reference to women of the 1950s, “where, if not in novel form, could the female reader find herself an actor in a world where women’s actions mattered?” (25). Surely, they were not major players in history books at the time; but, novels with significant female characters could seriously influence and inspire female readers, a growing market at this time as an explosion in cheap dime novels made literature available to women and men of all economic classes (Cameron 86).

The role novels might have played in either perpetuating or countering the feminine mystique was a question Friedan, in a way, left open. In her chapter on women’s magazines, she claimed that “the new image of woman did not permit the internal honesty, the depth of perception, and the human truth essential to good fiction” (50). Given her hypothesis, if popularity is a sufficient measure of “goodness,” then perhaps best-selling novels would have more nuanced portrayals of women than short stories in women’s magazines.

The four novels explored in this essay all were published at different periods throughout the 1950s, were on The New York Times’ bestseller list, had central female characters, and had contemporary settings: Star Money by Kathleen Winsor (1950), Marjorie Morningstar by Herman Wouk (1955), The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit by Sloan Wilson (1955), and Peyton Place by Grace Metalious (1956). This sample suggests that popular 1950s novels indeed reflected the American societal “problem with no name”—the feminine mystique—as each, in one way or another, acknowledges that ideally women were to be obedient housewife-mothers. Winsor’s novel rejects this ideal, Wouk’s and Wilson’s embrace it, and Metalious’s complicates it. Not surprisingly, novels that most promoted the feminine mystique were those written by male authors; the female characters in these novels were happiest when married, dependent on men, and taking care of children. Female authors, in contrast, depicted female characters with other passions; these women were actually happy working and being autonomous.

**Star Money**

Kathleen Winsor’s Star Money features Shireen Delaney, a young woman who begins her career wanting fame, fortune, and respect. When her husband Ed leaves to fight in World War II, she sets out to gain this kind of celebrity through the publication of a novel she had worked on for years. Navigating her new way of life, Delaney better understands herself as well as American patriarchal society.

Published in 1950, Star Money embraces a dying narrative. This narrative was, according to Betty Friedan, that of “the New Woman” who was “independent and determined to find a new life of her own” (30). Shireen represents exactly that. After Ed’s departure, her feelings of loneliness and uselessness work as catalysts for her career. Once finished with it, she sends her manuscript to an agency in New York City, and soon she moves there and starts the process of publishing her book.

Shireen quickly starts earning money for her hard work, and this financial autonomy reaps rewards of all kinds, including a sense of sexual independence. With Ed away and Shireen no longer reliant on him for finances, she feels less obliged to be faithful to him. In New York, she thus begins a series of affairs that teach her a great deal about men. The relationship between Shireen’s economic independence and her sexuality interestingly parallel contemporary fears of female monetary power of the time, described by May as “a scientific formula, that social freedom and employment for women would cause sexual laxity, moral decay, and
the destruction of the family” (68).

Admittedly, Shireen’s wealth does ultimately destroy her relationship with Ed, as the novel ends with their plans for divorce. According to our heroine, however, the end of their relationship has less to do with her power as it does with Ed’s insecurity over the matter. Ed is disgruntled by Shireen being the breadwinner, which apparently made, according to her male acquaintance, “The whole pattern of marriage [turn] upside down” (Winsor 403). Instead of Shireen becoming despondent about their lost love, however, their ill-fated marriage causes her to make one of many realizations about men. In this case it is that they tend to believe:

that women have no business being cleverer or making more money than men. Because whatever will the poor dears do then? They’re not used to it, because it’s their normal part in life to dominate and give women what they think she deserves—a house and clothes and whatever fragments of affection they have handy. And if that power is taken from them then they’re nervous and upset and begin walking on eggs! And isn’t it pitiful! I suppose if a woman happens to have some kind of ability she should thoughtful enough not to use it, because she might do better than her husband and that would make him unhappy! (403)

Shireen’s understanding of men’s attitudes underscores May’s claim that because the Great Depression, World War II, and corporate jobs—that many men took after the war—disempowered middleclass men, both the media and the government pushed the idea that men should find their power as the head of their households. Accordingly, a home with an obedient wife was a place in which men “could see tangible results of their efforts and receive a measure of respect” (86).

Professionally successful women like Shireen threatened the dynamic. This is likely why the men she spent time with made sure to assert their dominance over her in a multitude of ways. Some men attempted to maintain their superiority by attacking the young woman’s femininity. For instance, one of her close male friends, Dallas, asks her, “What made you decide you didn’t want to be a woman?” because, apparently, “Children are certainly part of any woman’s life” (312). Here Dallas attempts to force onto Shireen a lifestyle of motherhood, projecting what Betty Friedan called “a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or else deny their femininity” (36). In making himself the authority over who is to be considered a true woman, Dallas proves, at least to himself, that he is superior to the object of his ridicule: Shireen.

Men in Shireen’s life not only made themselves feel bigger in the presence of this strong woman by rejecting her femininity, however. Another tactic was to subject her to their opinions about what they found attractive in women. Ed does this when he is clearly insecure about his place within the household and tells Shireen she is not nearly as beautiful without makeup, momentarily destroying her confidence. Many men, however, do it simply by encouraging only certain kinds of behaviors in her. One man, she realizes, loved her most:

When she suddenly betrayed herself as a child. Not when she was being a siren, dangerous to men, not as a calculating successful and independent woman, not even when she became very serious and talked … philosophically. Just when she returned for a moment to her childhood and he knew that he was older and wiser than she and had nothing to be afraid of. (329)

Only when she is being childish and unsure of herself do men really treasure her. Otherwise, she often makes them feel anxious and fearful of their place in the patriarchal, social hierarchy. Shireen’s consistent distaste for these men’s attitudes, and her ultimate success and happiness without them, show that the novel by and large rejects the traditional maxim that women ought to accept their supposed inferiority to men.

Despite this constant insistence from her lovers that Shireen should conform to men’s desires, the novel ends with her resolving to never again be dependent on a man either emotionally or financially. In her search for happiness our heroine concludes, “The solution would be found in writing—her own private and
reliable world” (372). Like female protagonists of the 30s and early 40s, Shireen immerses herself in her passion, finding a sense of security not in the arms of a man but in the embrace of a career. For both Shireen and the fictional heroines featured in women’s magazines before the feminine mystique swept over American culture, a “career [means] more than job. It [means] doing something, being somebody yourself, not just existing in and through others” (Friedan, 32).

Perhaps this is why contemporary critics of Kathleen Winsor’s novel called the main character “without a doubt the dullest, silliest, and generally most objectionable young beauty in contemporary fiction” (The Atlantic 88). As both Friedan and May indicate, American culture was not accepting of such bold imagery of female autonomy. In fact, “Single women … became targets of government-sponsored campaigns urging women back into their domestic roles” (May 70). The mainstream critics easily fell in line by denouncing her book. Meanwhile, libraries across the nation did their part to reject depictions of female independence by deeming her novels pornography and refusing to carry them (Fowler).

In spite of these dismissals, both of the author’s first two novels achieved great notoriety and became New York Times bestsellers. Regardless of the supposed vulgarity of the content, readers were enticed. Yet critics refused to take the author seriously. Perhaps it was her surprising success as a beautiful, young, divorced female author that caused them to dismiss Winsor’s novels so easily (Fowler). After years of independence during World War II, the culture of conservatism was bent on chasing women back into the domestic sphere. Thus a successful, independent woman like Winsor whose texts addressed issues such as female autonomy and sexuality was the perfect target for scorn.

Ultimately, considering its content, Star Money’s success signals that while both the government and the media disparaged female autonomy in all its many forms, American readers were at least curious enough about such a topic as to elevate Winsor’s novels to bestseller status. While The Atlantic claimed Star Money “achieves a really high standard of pointlessness” clearly American readers got the point (88). They read this novel about a woman pursuing her dreams, succeeding, living luxuriously, and having affairs with any man she pleased, and they devoured it. Throughout the 50s, however, readers would be subject largely to images of women who were happiest as housewives and mothers.

**Marjorie Morningstar**

Hermon Wouk’s 1955 Marjorie Morningstar follows a similar storyline as Star Money but with important, dramatic differences. While Kathleen Winsor’s novel idolizes the independent woman, Hermon Wouk’s denounces her, essentially deeming any young woman’s interests in autonomy as a mere phase in her life. Moreover, whereas Star Money rejects the supposed feminine duty of pleasing men and boosting their egos, Marjorie Morningstar espouses it.

The young heroine of Wouk’s novel is Marjorie Morgenstern, a young Jewish girl living in New York City with her family in the 1930s. Early on, she takes on the pseudonym Morningstar in her pursuit of an acting career. Much like Shireen, Marjorie from a young age expresses disdain toward housewifery: “It was during this time of her life that she worked up a number of bright arguments against marriage, made fun of sex, and declared that instead of becoming some man’s dishwasher and cook she was going to be a career woman” (24). Both the narrator as well as the other characters of the novel treat the young woman’s passion as silly, not necessarily because acting is a difficult field to succeed in but for the simple fact that it is a career at all.

Early in the novel Marjorie’s mother, for instance, has an argument with her daughter about marriage prospects and Marjorie’s dream of being an actress. Mrs. Morgenstern simply “[mutters] that Marjorie could probably be cured of any career by actually trying to work at it” (47). But, unlike Shireen Delaney, who faces doubts about her passion and counters those doubts by proving her abilities, Marjorie does in fact fail at every attempt at work she makes. She not only fails to become an actress, but she despises doing any kind of professional work, quitting every part time job she acquires. Over the course of a few years she finds that
her mother was right in claiming, “A good husband and children is what you’ll want in a year or two, darling, once you’ve had a taste of dragging like a tramp around Broadway” (153).

Rather than engaging in affairs with men, learning about their expectations, and rejecting them, Marjorie learns about men’s assumptions through her one and only lover, other than her husband. Noel writes her a letter explicitly telling her what her role as a woman should be, and she eventually follows suit. Her first love writes:

All girls, including you, are too goddamn emancipated nowadays. You get the idea from all the silly magazines and movies you’re bathed in from infancy, and then from all the talk in high school and college that you’ve got to be somebody and do something. Bloody nonsense. A woman should be some man’s woman and do what women are born and built to do—sleep with some man, rear his kids, and keep him reasonably happy while he does his fragment of the world’s work. They’re not really happy doing anything else. (436)

Interestingly, the magazines Noel mentions here are those of the 1930s which Friedan claims did in fact encourage female independence. Regardless of these images though, Marjorie ultimately proves Noel’s point when she marries a conservative Jewish lawyer and becomes Mrs. Shwartz. They move to the suburbs and have four children. The young writer Wally Wonken who had fallen in love with her at South Wind acting camp visits her in 1954. According to Wonken, “Contented, she obviously is. There was no mistaking the look she gave her husband when he came in with their two boys from a father-and-son softball game, in old clothes, all sweaty and dirty; nor the real kiss, nor the way she rubbed her face for a second against his shoulder” (559). The young woman who dreaded a suburban lifestyle as a housewife and was absolutely determined to be a star on Broadway now was “only remarkable” for the mere fact that “she ever hoped to be remarkable, that she ever dreamed of being Marjorie Morningstar. She couldn’t be a more run-of-the-mill wife and mother” (564).

Marjorie’s submission, and her choice of lifestyle proves not only Noel’s assertion that women are happiest when they take on their traditional gender role, but, along with her rejection of a career comes too his claim that in order to be truly happy, she must also work to make her man “reasonably happy” (436). Unlike *Star Money*, Wouk’s text clearly supports the prevailing belief of the time that women were made to please men and be happy, dutiful housewives. This sentiment of ultimate gender traditionalism holds true for all young women like Marjorie in the text. During her time at South Wind acting camp, she sees her fellow actresses and, rather than seeing them as passionate, ambitious young women, “she thought that they were exactly like herself, youngsters snatching at fun while they chased the dream of happy marriage” (208).

Apparently, Wouk’s reinforcement of conformity was true in much of his fiction. According to scholar Ardis Cameron, another of Wouk’s novels *The Caine Mutiny* was one of many novels interpreted by contemporary sociologist William H. Whyte in his study *The Organization Man* as being a part of a phenomenon wherein “popular novels in the postwar period greatly distorted the realities of American life, often avoiding conflict and increasingly advising readers to ‘adjust to the system’” (34). Accomplishing this same goal, *Marjorie Morningstar* certainly encouraged contentment with traditional gender roles. The novel especially prescribes motherhood, housewifery, and subservience as cure-alls for young women seeking a purpose in life.

Of course, Marjorie’s purpose is more nuanced given her Jewish heritage. As May suggests, “The view of childbearing as a duty was painfully true for Jewish parents, after six million of their kin were snuffed out in Europe” (26). In fact, Marjorie’s exposure to the atrocities of the Holocaust on a trip to Europe becomes one of the motivating factors that causes her to reject her flamboyant, secular lover that, at least at times supported her career, and instead marry a conservative Jewish man and rear his four children.

In this way, Wouk’s novel espouses the feminine ideal Friedan found major fault with by making the satisfaction of men the centerpiece of good women’s lives. Yet *Marjorie Morningstar*
also sheds light on the significant role that World War II played in reaffirming women’s proper roles in society. Wartime gave women the opportunity to leave the domestic sphere and enter the workforce as it did for Shireen Delaney, but, for many women, the pressure to fulfill domestic duties and focus solely on supporting husbands and children after such a horrendous war won out over the pursuit of meaningful careers which were few and far between for most women.

**The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit**

In its own way, Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, like *Marjorie Morningstar*, encourages conformity; specifically, it gives readers an example of a strong female character who sacrifices her desires and natural ambitious tendencies in order to make her husband feel more powerful. This novel focuses mainly on the father of the Rath household, Tom Rath, and it highlights the pressures men faced as breadwinners as they tried to balance family life with demanding careers. There are almost no career women of any kind in this novel. Two of the few mentioned are described superficially as “one chosen for looks, apparently, and one for utility” (9). Tom’s wife Betsy, however, does play a key role in influencing her husband’s choices. At the start of the novel, Tom is not ambitious at all, and it is Betsy that motivates him and presses him to do more at work and at home.

True, given her drive and prudence, she is not exactly like the happy housewife heroines Friedan found in women’s magazines, but the resolution at the end of the novel diminishes her power within her marriage, making Tom more dominant and Betsy more dependent, a common trope of 50s literature (195). In the second chapter, the narrator acknowledges that Betsy is confident enough that “she was perhaps the only woman in the world who didn’t like… compliments” about her looks (5). She is not only confident, but she is competent and pragmatic. Late at night while trying to unravel the unhappiness she knows both her and her husband have been experiencing as of late, she comes to the conclusion that “People rely too much on explanation these days, and not enough on courage and action” (112). From there forward she seeks to solve the problems in their marriage by altering their everyday routine, taking the matter into her own hands and pursuing a resolution enthusiastically.

Betsy’s energy and confidence turn out to be points of tension in the Rath household that are resolved by the end of the novel. First, though, Betsy learns that Tom had a love affair and fathered a child while away at war. She is so upset she takes the family car and goes for a drive late at night, but, for the first time over the course of the entire novel, she finds herself a damsel in distress when her car breaks down and police pick her up. When her husband saves her, she urgently tells him that he ought to send alimony to his child in Italy, insists they stop worrying so much about money, and suggests he talk to her about his time at war—all things Tom had been hoping for all along. She then apologizes for “[acting] like a child”; to all of this Tom just repeatedly responds, “I love you” (271).

Not only that, but she resolves to help him and boost his ego in one final way. A way that his poor, vulnerable Italian lover always did, by asking him, “Do you think I’m beautiful?” (177). For this young woman Maria, it was true that “physical love was the only form of reassurance she knew, and that she was completely happy and sure of him only when she was caressing him and giving him pleasure… it was chiefly this that caused her constantly to entice him” (176). Clearly, Tom is attracted to women who need his approval. Betsy finally realizes this, humbles herself, and thus asks her husband after they have made up, “Do you like the way I look? … I want to hear it now. Often. Tell me again I’m beautiful” (273). For a woman like Shireen Delaney in *Star Money*, men’s ability to determine her value by focusing solely on her looks is irksome and disempowering. But in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Betsy’s newfound dependency on Tom and her desire to please him is treated as a sort of skill she has learned to strengthen their relationship. In fact, in the final line of the aforementioned scene, Tom muses “‘all’s right in the world’” (274).

This lesson Betsy learns works to alter her behavior in a way that literature of the 1950s promoted across the board. For
instance, one short story Friedan highlights in her chapter “Happy Housewife Heroine” involves a wife whose husband has cheated on her with a clingy, innocent, needy young woman; a friend of the protagonist points this out and encourages similar behavior in the wife in order to win him back. She does, and her problems are thus so easily resolved. The lesson the story teaches mirrors that of an article titled “Do Foreign Women Make Better Wives?” that Friedan studied in her research for her book. According to the article, the answer is yes. Why? Ultimately the author of the article concurs with an army chaplain who is quoted as saying that “European girls have been brought up feeling a traditional dependence on men—and that makes them more attractive” (30). Tom’s affair with his Italian mistress works in much the same way that this article does, reminding American women of their vulnerability, and the fact that they ought to act properly according to the feminine mystique because they are replaceable.

The U.S. in the 1950s was a world in which women’s career prospects were severely restricted, their average pay equaled half of men’s, and the mere act of pursuing careers often made them suspected of communism in this red scare era. Thus, marriage to a man was their only really viable option for economic stability. Messages identifying what was attractive to men consequently promised to seriously influence women’s behavior (May 85). The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit much like Marjorie Morningstar and in opposition to Star Money, reinforced problematic gender roles and contributed to a culture of limiting women’s autonomy by subverting the agency they had discovered during wartime and redefining feminine patriotism as service to one’s husband and children exclusively. For Betsy, her patriotism is expressed through her making her veteran husband’s happiness her priority. Just as May proposed, after World War II, “Much of the healing process [fell onto] women” (64). So too did it for Betsy Rath.

Peyton Place

While the three other novels this project analyzes either accept or reject ideas about gender role conformity, the 1956 “blockbuster” novel Peyton Place offers more raw, honest, nuanced depictions of female life that complicate the discussion. For example, every female character Peyton Place focuses on has a job, not because they desire to be strong, independent women, but by pure necessity. Nellie Cross’s husband Lucas is a drunk and spends his money irrationally on booze, and so in order to keep their family afloat, Nellie works as a housekeeper. Constance MacKenzie is a single mother and owner of a clothing store in town. Nellie’s daughter Selena started working for Connie in high school when she decided she wanted to have spending money. Allison MacKenzie, Constance’s daughter, is the only woman for whom having a job is a choice. She chooses to write for her local newspaper and then move to New York City writing short stories for women’s magazines because, for her, writing is both a passion as well as an escape.

At fifteen, Allison thinks much like the young women of Star Money and Marjorie Morningstar. When discussing her future with a friend, Allison declares: “I am going to be a brilliant authoress. Absolutely brilliant. And I shall never marry. I just hate boys!” (91). But, while Allison has a seemingly typical attitude toward men that the young women of the other novels have also espoused, the other women of this novel have different kinds of skepticism toward men. Rather than disliking them generally for the way they tended to demean women verbally as Shireen Delaney did, these women of Peyton Place were cynical about men because men in their lives had seriously injured them in some way or another.

Constance was always wary of men until she met her eventual husband Tom Makris because she had been impregnated by a man who already had a family, and when he died she was left with little money and with social stains she had to constantly lie about to cover up. Nellie, on the other hand, was terribly abused by her husband, physically, emotionally, and sexually, leaving her so disoriented, depressed, and mentally ill that before committing suicide, “Nellie had gone from cursing [her husband] and all other men to believing that she was afflicted with a strange disease” (186). Worse still, Selena Cross’s experience with her stepfather caused her once to contemplate telling her friend Allison that
“[Your father, h]e’s dead—and you’re better off for it, kid” (40). Selena’s step father, also Nellie’s husband, was so cruel, he not only physically abused the girl at a young age, but he raped and impregnated her too. Her pregnancy caused not only her, but the local physician to grapple with the luxury of holding such conventional moral beliefs in the face of such horrific circumstances. For, how could he follow traditional morality by denying the child an abortion and thus sentence her both to motherhood as well as social leprosy?

The text poses a myriad of questions about contemporary morality, especially gendered morality. If it is good and moral for women to obey men’s desires, what does a woman do when a man wants to have unprotected, premarital sex? What does she do when her father forces an incestuous relationship on her? If she is supposed to be the homemaker, and her husband the breadwinner, what does she do when her husband does not earn an income that allows for such a lifestyle? What about when the man dies? Metalious raises these questions simply by writing about the reality that she and millions of other women experienced on a daily basis. As Cameron shows, “Allison MacKenzie [is] like her creator, restless, eager for success, hungry for something else… A small-town girl without a father but whose mother carries on in arch solitude, protecting her past by keeping a social and emotional distance from others” (71).

The experiences of the women of Peyton Place are not only reflective of the author’s experience as a woman, but catalogued in Cameron’s book Unbuttoning America is further affirmation of the events that take place in Metalious’s novel. Cameron shows that the experiences of women in Peyton Place seriously resonated with readers. The American Studies scholar documents letters written to Metalious by fans after the publication of Peyton Place and finds that the novel “represented a radical leap in its conception of women characters, encouraging readers to recognize themselves or one of their neighbors in its pages” (117). Moreover, she asserts “the women of Peyton Place touched a national nerve, their true-to-life stories simultaneously well known and silenced, the subject of clandestine gossip and will-to-not-know” (117). Accordingly, fans again and again wrote to Metalious, “I live in Peyton Place” (117).

Part of that familiarity was not just the recognition of how gossip spreads in towns, and how gender role ideals were unobtainable for many women, but it was also their unfortunate ability to relate to the hardships the female characters of the novel faced dealing with the men. As Cameron points out in reference to Selena Cross’s traumatic experience, “The home remains today … ‘the most dangerous place for children’; their most likely [sexual and physical] assailant is … their father” (48). So, while United States leaders of both government and media, as well as a number of novelists, spent their time urging women to humble themselves and make the satisfaction of men the focus of their lives, a great many women and children were already subject to men’s violent, brutal desires.

Fortunately, women related not only to the traumas of the women of Peyton Place, but they recognized too these women’s attempts to seize control of their own lives. As Star Money displayed, financial independence often gave women some degree of sexual independence. The same is true in Peyton Place. While, “Husbands, the academic experts and health professionals agreed, should assume not only just economic but sexual dominance,” both the promiscuous women of Peyton Place as well as the notorious 1953 Kinsey Reports reveal that women can be sexually assertive and desiring, not just submissive and desirable (128).

While Star Money glamorizes the rarely experienced life of a successful female author, Marjorie Morningstar rejects such dreams as silly and insists on the contentment women acquire from adherence to traditional gender roles, and The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit proposes families are happiest when wives are submissive, Peyton Place represents something far closer to reality. Regardless of their desires, women often were dominated by men, poor ones were forced to take jobs, but those jobs were under-paid and gendered. But mostly, they did have personal desires that deviated from the supposed norm; they often sought escapes from female oppression
through activities including but not limited to reading, writing, sex, and working.

Interestingly, one young woman of *Peyton Place* who possesses a notable passion which she uses as an escape from the social ostracism she faces in high school and beyond is Allison MacKenzie. She is the only woman of the text privileged enough to pursue the kind of lifestyle Betty Friedan prescribed to the women of the United States—that of a career woman. Allison ends up working in New York City, “carry[ing] out the formulas,” as Friedan put it, of happy housewife heroine short story writing (49). Her story published in *McCall’s* mirrors well those that Friedan described: “It’s about a girl who works in an advertising agency in New York … She is a career girl who wants her boss’s job. This boss of hers is young and handsome and the girl can’t help herself. She falls in love with him. In the end she marries him, after deciding she loves him more than her career” (272). Having been fortunate enough to escape Peyton Place, Allison finds herself restricted to doing the uncreative, fruitless work of carrying out formulas of women’s magazine’s fiction. The resolution to the novel suggests that despite the limited opportunities women had in finding creative, fulfilling work in writing, there was hope. Readers are left with Allison back in Peyton Place, happy, and planning on pursuing the publication of a novel.

**Conclusion**

Both Shireen Delaney and Allison MacKenzie found that their only route to a career that could be rewarding both intellectually and monetarily was novel writing. This speaks volumes about the career opportunities for women in the 1950s. According to Friedan, when the happy housewife heroine stories of women’s magazines were being circulated at large, it was the case that in the magazine industry “Women often carr[ied] out the formulas, women edit[ted] the housewife ‘service’ departments, but the formulas themselves, which have dictated the new housewife image, [were] the product of men’s minds” (49). Men were in charge. Both the top editors and writers of women’s magazines as well as the supervisors, directors, managers, and CEOs of the majority of organizations in the United States were male in the 1950s. Not only that, but of the women who were still employed in war industries after World War II ended, “90 percent of them were earning less than they had earned during the war” (May 75). Wage discrimination and limits on workplace advancement opportunities for women were rampant in the postwar era.

The novelist heroines of *Star Money* and *Peyton Place* find a way around those barriers in order to be successes. They escape the chains of traditional gender roles by pursuing the publication of novels. During the middle of the twentieth century, this was indeed one of the few career opportunities open to women.

Cameron discusses the prospects granted to female writers after a dramatic commercialization of the novel-writing industry provoked publishing agencies to enlist everyday readers to write for them. The culture around writing ultimately “invit[ed] readers to imagine themselves as writers … advertisements for schools and contests conceptually flattened the hierarchies of talent and effectively tethered authorship to the consumerist fantasies of the era” (87). Essentially, while the majority of industries were confining women to low wages and at times rejecting their employment altogether, a massive commercialization of literature actually gave some of the forlorn, disoriented housewives Friedan studied a chance at success and fulfillment. Indeed, the industry glorified the career of authorship, and gave consumers the impression that anyone who worked hard enough could be somebody (88).

Both Grace Metalious and Kathleen Winsor, as well as their apparently autobiographically inspired young female protagonists, benefitted from this revolution in publishing. These women were ordinary, without university educations, and became major successes to the great surprise of the public. Winsor’s success was shocking because her writing abilities were not expected in such a beautiful young woman. Metalious was unique as a housewife and mother of three. Unlike the male authors Wilson and Wouk, Metalious and Winsor were pioneers of their demographic. Thus, their very ordinariness made them extraordinary.

Undoubtedly, their experiences navigating a man’s world...
as ambitious women determined to make names for themselves and garner respect influenced the images they chose to portray in their fiction. While the male authors perpetuated and encouraged a mystique with which they were not intimately familiar, Metalious and Winsor both offered to American reading audiences alternatives to the traditional narrative. Ultimately, while it was Friedan who put a name to the “problem with no name,” these female authors started the conversation by projecting it through their fiction.

**Works Cited**


**About the Author**

Sarah Fender graduated in May 2018 with majors in English and Political Science and a minor in American Studies. She completed this project in the summer of 2017 with the support of the Adrian Tinsley Program summer research grant. She was mentored by Dr. Heidi Bean of the English Department. She presented this paper at the 2018 National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) at the University of Central Oklahoma. In April 2017, Sarah presented other literary research at both the Massachusetts Statewide Undergraduate Research Conference at UMass-Amherst and the Undergraduate Literature Conference at Bridgewater State University. After graduating, Sarah plans to apply to law school to pursue a career as a sexual harassment lawyer.