

Francesco Meli

ENGL 101

CRN 57732

09th of May 2010

Women And Stereotypes: 1950 - Present

Women cook, clean the home, stay with the children, and have to be careful about how they behave in public as well as in the home with their family. They are weaker than men, they mend socks for the husband and they are good listeners but bad advisers. Fifty years ago, all of these stereotypes were prevalent. Some would argue that they still exist today to some degree.

With time, women have become more independent, having a strong presence in the work force, along with freedom to think and to do what they want, free of overbearing discrimination. At least, that is how it may seem. How are women truthfully appraised today? Has this outdated, sexist, and unfair concept of women really diminished greatly within the last fifty years? Jessica Rachoza, author of the article "The Power of the Gaze: The Stereotypical Image of Women in Advertisements" explains, "In many ways, it still exists. Stereotypes from the past have vanished, only to have new ones taking their place, while others have not changed at all" Compared to men, the role of women in the business world is still seen as having little importance and the homemaker archetype still pervades society. The paradox remains: to remain in the home is somehow seen as weak or facile, but the methods a woman must often employ to succeed in the business world, while being expected or even admired in a man, are often seen as harsh or ruthless, basically, not "woman-like".

How did all of these stereotypes come into being? Women have always been considered to be less important than men; consequently, throughout history, the things

for which they have been traditionally responsible (the home and the children) have been viewed as minor and less important. The question now is why is this so? Why have women always been marginalized as the weaker sex? One may think it is because men are physically stronger than woman and more specifically because they have a stronger muscle structure. "Females are smaller and weaker than males, so in prehistoric times, women and their offspring were prone to being the victims of predators, and violence" says Dr. Nick Neave, an evolutionary psychologist from Northumbria University. They needed the support and protection of men who didn't just have brute force but also had social status in the group, either through their sheer physicality or the strength of their personality (Daily Mail). Obviously, this is not the case anymore. Since dinosaurs are no longer a threat and the world is no longer a primeval wilderness, a woman no longer requires the company of a man as a bodyguard. However, besides having a less substantial muscle structure, are women really the weaker sex? Lowri Turner, the author of the article "Are Women Really the Weaker Sex?" writes that men are more likely to get cancer and have heart attacks, but women are recognized to have weaker bones, a more easily compromised immune system, and a higher likelihood of having a mental illness. Turner, after her analysis, concludes, "Overall, when you add up the number of individuals affected by all these conditions, women are the weaker sex." So, from a physical aspect, men have the advantage compared to women but physicality is not the sole reason women may be considered weaker and less significant. For example, women are not the dominant partners in the biological sense during sexual intercourse. In addition, the Bible refers to women as the weaker sex. The book of 1 Peter says, "Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be

hindered." Even in the most widely read book, women are called the "weaker vessel" in contrast.

The most enduring images of this homemaker stereotype emerged in the 50's. RoobixCoob, one of the writers from AssociatedContent.com, through the article "A Woman's Role in The 1950's", explains how women were viewed at that time. "The role of women in the 1950's was repressive and constrictive in many ways", he writes. "Women were supposed to fulfill certain roles, such as a caring mother, a diligent homemaker, and an obedient wife. A wife was a 'good' wife only if she carried out her man's every order and agreed with him on everything." Their education, or lack thereof, hindered them from explaining themselves or even complaining about any disagreements they had with their husbands.

A reference that proves the existence of this stereotype is in a 1955 American journal that was published monthly. An essay found in this journal titled "How to be a Good Wife" says, "be a little gay and a little more interesting for him. His boring day may need a lift and one of your duties is to provide it. Minimize all noise. At the time of his arrival, eliminate all noise of the washer, dryer or vacuum. Encourage the children to be quiet. Be happy to see him. Listen to him. You may have a dozen important things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first - remember, his topics of conversation are more important than yours." These are clear proofs of the pervasive existence of the housekeeper stereotype of the 50's and were only a few of the suggestions written in this women journal.

Other references of this mindset can be found in *Vogue* magazine, a publication addressing topics of fashion, life and design. Rachoza writes that advertisements of the 50's displayed women who appeared to be innocent, weak, and subdued. Many photographs showed women looking down or away from the camera, avoiding eye

contact with the readers. Rachoza accurately describes a specific advertisement that showed a woman shocked with a naive expression (or more clearly a lack of experience) on her face. Even when a smile was cracked, it was a closed mouth grin. The rest of the advertisements had women with somber or even pained expressions on their faces. This depiction of women displayed the thinking of the time, that women should be enjoyed as a nice thing to see but not heard as a human being.

A very pertinent example of this misogynistic mindset is in the film *Pleasantville*, a 1998 fantasy comedy/drama film made by Gary Ross. The teen protagonists in the movie, siblings David and Jennifer magically enter into the world depicted in their television during a marathon of *Pleasantville*, a black-and-white '50s sitcom, through the use of an odd retro-styled remote control. Because of their intrusion in the sitcom and the way they behave, such as teaching on issues such as sex, personal freedom and literature, the behavior the townsfolk starts changing at a rapid pace and the setting slowly begins to gain some color, literally. One of the most relevant and interesting scenes of this movie is the one where George and his wife Betty, the main couple in the sitcom, have their first argument. Betty, as a result of the intrusion of David and Jennifer, starts forming her own ideas and making decisions independently, which leaves her husband outraged and confused. He loves his wife, or rather the image and template that she is, for her simplicity and "propriety". However, He becomes impatient when she takes on new interests and refuses to follow the old rules. One scene portrays this dilemma perfectly.

"We will just go to that meeting", George commands her.

"I told you George, I'm not going to that meeting," she replies.

"Sure you are," he snaps back at her.

“No, I’m not. Look at me George. Look at my face.” Her face, in full color, stands out against the black and white background. “That meeting is not for me”, she explains.

Again, he commands her “You will put on some makeup!”

She retorts, “I don’t want to put on some make up.”

About to lose his temper, George answers, “It goes away. It will go away!” referring to the color her face had gained.

Betty sedately answers, “I don’t want it to go away.”

After an awkward silence, he orders her, “Now you listen to me. You are going to come to this meeting. You are going to put up some makeup. You are going to be home at 6 o’clock every night and you are going to have dinner ready on this table”

Betty calmly replies, “No, I’m not sweetie.”

Things have changed since then. Now women are not seen in the same way as they were in the past. But unfair stereotypes are still something that women need to deal with everyday. In light of this setback, women in recent years have accomplished amazing feats in every facet of our culture that was traditionally limited to males. But society still imagines them to be the weaker sex, dependent on their partner, obsessed with what men think of them, consumed largely with frivolous things, and too often only recognized as a sexual outlet.

In the 21st century, it is easy to find women in the corporate world in positions of leadership. Are women really accepted in the business world? “A 2006 Gallup poll found that of people who preferred their manager to be a certain gender, 37 percent wanted a man, compared with only 19 percent who preferred a woman”, says Sara Conrad, author of the article “When A Woman Is In Charge.” Why such a result? When a businesswoman is a back-stabber or employs manipulative business practices, she seems to set a bad example. On the other hand, when men show the same kind of

behavior are viewed as doing what they have to do to get things done, as being strategic and as being open to collaboration, respectively. Qualities perceived to be soft and feminine, such as “being a good listener”, are synonymous of weakness whereas qualities perceived to be hard and masculine are synonymous of strong. A “good listener” is perceived as weaker and less capable of making decisions independently than an assertive decision-maker who goes with his gut feeling without consulting others first. "People don't tend to polarize about men as much because we're used to seeing men in those leadership roles," added Adams, vice president of Common Ground Consulting, which focuses on workforce diversity education. That's called the "think-leader-think-male" phenomenon, Conrad writes.

Today, it is also easier to find stereotypes in commercials and advertisements than in the past. In some countries such as the USA, the formula is new, even though the old image of the housekeeper is not completely gone. But in other countries such as India, stereotypes haven't changed very much.

In America we find commercials that use women's stereotypes to sell deodorants and beers. For example, there are commercials where women are unfairly shown to the public in a distorted sexual way to attract the target that is presumably male. The tagline, “You'll be irresistible with the new fresh flavor of Axe.” The screen then shows a guy standing in between two girls who are flirting aggressively with him and smiling seductively into the camera. Another commercial titled “Kiss and Make Up,” promoting Blue Light beer, also has a very strong stereotypical message. The commercial begins by showing two girls next to each other in a club or bar. One girl begins to apply lipstick, which prompts the other to reveal that she loves that particular color of lipstick very much. The first girl asks her if she would like some of it and they begin to share a very steamy kiss while three young guys, each with a beer in their

hand, watch excitedly. The bar scene ends and the message “Less limits is more fun... Less is more” appears followed by a snippet of the three guys and the two girls dancing together.

Even if in the USA the general idea of the stereotype has been changing, there are still cases where the stereotype of the woman as housekeeper reemerges. Bonnie Erbe, a writer of “U.S. news” and the author of the article “The Housewife Stereotype Lives On” says, “The Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary is fighting back against ‘the collapse of the American family’ by offering bachelor’s degrees ‘with a concentration in homemaking’ to women students only.” Erbe finds this idea very offensive and ridiculous: “There were 143,000 stay-at-home dads versus 5.6 million stay-at-home moms in 2005.” A better idea may be a bachelor’s degrees ‘with a concentration in homemaking’ only for men instead exclusively for women.

On the other hand, in countries like India it is still possible to find commercials still sticking to the old stereotype of homemaker. “Advertisements like gifting a woman a washing machine as a wedding present could soon be a no-no on television”, says Himanshi Dhawan, a journalist of *The Times of India*. Fortunately, the National Commission for Women of India is fighting to have advertisements stereotype-free.

Vogue, the magazine that used to represent the weak, innocent, quiet woman stereotype is still a magazine full of stereotypes, just more contemporary. Images of weak women are still there; they are easy to notice because of stronger men posed such as they are defending them. Women are also still shown in subservient poses, lying back in an unprotected position, vulnerable and the object of the gaze. What it really has gotten worse with time is the ideal and “healthy” image of women. Thin, with large breasts, perfectly toned, and possibly with a perfect face. The body must be perfectly toned in all the right places and women should be willing to do anything to

look like the models featured. The consequences are catastrophic: surgery, diet pills and everything else that is commercialized to “transform” an overweight body into a perfect sculpture, ruins women’s health, all the while convincing them that they are doing the right thing.

In Conclusion, even though the idea of women in the 50’s and the idea of women now are very different from each other, the new role of women continues to be plagued by unfair, meaningless, and false stereotypes. This patriarchal system will always encourage people to come up with a new distorted concept of women and, for some reason, women will continue to be seen as inferior to men.

Works Cited

Dhawan, Himanshi. "Ads That 'stereotype' Women May Be Banned [India]." *The Times of India* 21 July 2008. ProQuest. Web. 04 May 2010.

Advertisements like gifting a woman a washing machine as a wedding present could soon be a no-no on television. Women in "stereotypical" roles like playing the ideal homemaker or advertisements that reinforce ideas of skin fairness to achieve success could be a thing of the past, if the National Commission for Women (NCW) has its way.

Sara, Conrad. "When a Woman is in Charge." *Florida Times Union* 08 Mar. 2010. ProQuest. Web. 04 May 2010.

Women are often judged on their abilities to fit into prescribed feminine stereotypes, as well as their job performance, according to Adams and recent studies. Most people know the stereotypes: Women are perceived as being better nurturers and "good listeners," men as being "tough when they need to be" and "good decision makers." But women are also perceived as "backstabbing, manipulative and not as decisive," Adams said, while men showing the same behaviors are seen positively - as doing what they have to get things done, as being strategic and as being open to collaboration, respectively.

Bonnie, Erbe. "The Housewife Stereotype Lives On." Web log post. *US News and World Report*. USNEWS, 27 Aug. 2007. Web. 04 May 2010. <

<http://www.usnews.com/blogs/erbe/2007/08/27/the-housewife-stereotype-lives-on.html>>.

The latest wrinkle comes to us from the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, which is fighting back against "the collapse of the American family" by offering bachelor's degrees "with a concentration in homemaking" to women students only. The degree equips female students with such skills as cooking, sewing, and child psychology. Luckily, the Associated Press reports that some Southern Baptists find the program offensive.

"A Woman's Role in the 1950's." *Associated Content - Associatedcontent.com*. 17 Nov.

2005. Web. 05 May 2010.

<http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/13216/a_womans_role_in_the_1950s.html?cat=38>.

The role of women in the 1950's 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.

Vaishali, Shrikhande. "Stereotype of Women in Television Advertisements." Thesis.

University of Pune, India, 2003. Print.

This study examined the portrayal of women in television commercials and documented the stereotypes associated with women in today's television commercials.

Dogra, Sakshi. "Women and the Stereotype of Domesticity." Web log post. *Merinews*. 15 Jan. 2009. Web. 04 May 2010. <<http://www.merinews.com/article/women-and-the-stereotype-of-domesticity/156283.shtml>>.

"I am sure men are equally good at multi-tasking. They say a small gesture can say a lot. Let that small gesture not be just earning money and taking your wives out to movies; let that small gesture be cooking one meal a day."

Rachoza, Jessica. *The Power of the Gaze: The Stereotypical Image of Women in Advertisements*. The Power of the Gaze: The Stereotypical Image of Women in Advertisements. 01 Apr. 2003. Web. 04 May 2010. <<http://www.jessicara.com/portfoliofiles/The%20Power%20of%20the%20Gaze.pdf>>.

Through the years, and countless feminist movements and strides towards equality, this image of women has changed. The negative still remains, though. While the 1950's woman was supposed to be a great mother and wife, the woman of today must be a great mother, wife, and career driven- a superwoman who does it all.

Neave, Dr Nick. "Sorry, but Women Are Dependent on Men | Mail Online." Online posting. *Home | Mail Online*. 04 Dec. 2006. Web. 07 May 2010. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-420513/Sorry-women-dependent-men.html>>.

We live in an age in which women have earned complete independence. So do they need men at all? According to Dr. Nick Neave, an evolutionary psychologist

from Northumbria University, not only do they need men, they are fundamentally programmed to depend on them.

"How to Be a Good Wife." *Housekeeping Monthly* (1955). Web. 08 May 2010. <<http://jwalk.com/other/goodwife/index.htm>>.

A guide contained in an American journal for housekeepers developed through 15 points.

"Blue Light Beer Commercial." *Blue Light Beer Commercial*. CBS. San Diego, California. 19 Jan. 2007. Web. 09 May 2010.

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDxZUsilEsM>>.

Blue Light Beer commercial firstly aired in 2007.

Sheckler, Ryan, prod. "Ryan Sheckler AXE Commercial - Double Pits to Chesty." AXE Commercial - Double Pits to Chesty. San Diego, California. 20 Oct. 2009. Web. 09 May 2010. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXAydIb1UOI&NR=1>>.

Ryan Sheckler in AXE Commercial - Double Pits to Chesty.

1 Peter. Holy Bible. Web. 09 May 2010.

<<http://www.gnpccb.org/esv/search/?q=1+Peter+2:25-3:2,+3:7>>.

Pleasantville. Dir. Gary Ross. 1998. Videocassette.