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Not Only Housewives:
The Image of Middle-Class Working Women in Post-War America.

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Introduction

In this thesis I am going to study the cultural representation of 1950s middle-class working women in the United States, in order to dispel the myth of the 'happy housewife' created at that particular moment in American history. Indeed, when looking back to women's lives in that decade, the very first image that comes to mind is that of the homemaker, completely devoted to her husband and children. Although it is acknowledged that many women belonging to the working-class, to the African-American, and the immigrant communities were joining the labor market, I will specifically focus on middle-class working women, considering them as opposed to their counterpart, the middle-class housewives. I will analyze how they were differently regarded by society. The main documents that I have chosen to analyze are both contemporary and recent and include movies, sit-coms, and novels. Central to the development of my thesis are two books: Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique,* first published in 1963, and Marion Steinmann's *Women at Work: Demolishing a Myth of 1950s,* published in 2005. While the former is an accusation on society's depiction of women, the latter collects the data of those women who in the 1950s undertook both academic and professional careers, setting themselves in opposition to society's precepts which placed the woman into the house.

In the first chapter I am going to outline the image of the 1950s American housewife, as the embodiment of what Betty Friedan called the 'feminine mystique.' By studying some selected episodes of the sitcom *I Love Lucy*, which aired from 1951 to 1957, I will show how the character of Lucy actually challenged the general assumption that a woman's only occupation was that of the housewife. The six episodes that I will analyze take into consideration various topics: the economical interaction between husband and wife, and their respective roles both within the family and outside of it. Through Lucy's portrait as the out-of-the-ordinary housewife, I will introduce the idea of break with the rules which particularly characterizes the figure of the career woman.

The second chapter deals with the aforementioned figure of the 1950s career woman. The central sources here studied are Rona Jaffe's novel *The Best of Everything*, first published in 1958, and its cinematic adaptation which premiered a year later with the same title. Through these sources I will illustrate the dual meaning of a job according to women, as a stopgap between school and marriage for some, and as a means to achieve an identity

for others. *The Best of Everything* is characterized by conflicting opinions both among women and between men and women. What differs are the points of view on women's roles, on what is expected from them professionally, and on what they actually achieve.

As far as the main sources are concerned, this thesis is structured in a chronological order and therefore the third chapter will act as a link between literary and cinematic productions of post-World War II, and those more recent. As a matter of fact, this chapter takes into consideration first the 1945 movie titled *Mildred Pierce*, and then its 2011 miniseries adaptation. The protagonist here is a divorced businesswoman, who goes from "rags to riches" in order to satisfy her daughters' whims. The main topics here considered are mother-daughter relationship, husband-wife relationship, and how money influences such dynamics. The focus of this particular chapter is on how and to what degree the figure of the accomplished career woman actually challenges the male authority.

In the fourth and last chapter I will study the influence of higher education in 1950s women's choice of pursuing a career. I will base this analysis on the 2003 movie titled *Mona Lisa Smile*, which is set in 1953, and therefore is a portrait of the time *a posteriori*. I will focus on the protagonist's role in challenging the cultural script of the time in favor of a more progressive point of view. In addition to that, I will consider the interview to a Class 1951 Pembroke College alumna, which gives a real-life example of living, studying, and working as a middle-class woman during the 1950s in the United States.

1. Occupation: Housewife

1. 1. The Revival of Domesticity

"Kinder, Küche, Kirche."[1]

During World War II, in the name of patriotism, many women were recruited to fill in the jobs left by men who were fighting at the front. The most popular example of 'home front' propaganda is the figure of Rosie the Riveter. She personified the thousands of women, wives and mothers, who entered the labor market, often in areas previously off-limits for them. As Ware points out, "Rosie was not just a patriotic housewife who took a job 'for the duration': many women already in the labor force used wartime labor shortages to move up into better paying industrial jobs" (2015: 95). Although 350,000 women joined the 15 million men in the military, (*ibid.* 96) World War II cannot be considered a watershed as far as women's work is concerned; as a matter of fact, its direct influence on female occupation has been rather modest (Goldin 1991: 741). The response of society to the end of the war in terms of labor market for women was ambivalent. On the one hand, the jobs offered to women during the war were taken away from them at the end of it (*ibid.* 743), in particular in highly specialized areas. On the other hand, women who "had entered the labor market before or during the war declined to retire to the home once the 'emergency' had passed or they had married" (Blackwelder 1997: 168).

After the atrocities of war and its unsettling effects, the American society sought a return to security which could be translated into what became the 'cult of family.' One way to achieve it was by appealing to pre-war gender dynamics, and the general idea was that as men went back to work, women went back home. By the end of the war the aforementioned dynamics had changed and women, as well as men, "had to come to terms with the tension between the public idea of the wife and homemaker and the harsher realities of more and more women entering the workforce, mostly in low paying jobs" (Carosso 2012: 94). The downside of the end of the war was that, "like Rosie the Riveter, new roles were acceptable only if they were temporary" (Ware 2015: 96), and many women were expected to get rid of what were considered to be 'men's shoes' and fit into the old role of wife and mother. In order to create this sense of 'normalcy' similar to pre-war, society had to turn to the traditional roles of male the breadwinner and female the

[1] Meaning "Children, kitchen and church". Nazi's slogan expressing women's domestic role.

homemaker (Campbell and Kean 2012: 225). For those reasons we could say that the 1950s were characterized by a 'revival of domesticity' in which a certain idea of family played a central role in society.

Figure 1: Norman Rockwell's "Rosie the Riveter" which appeared as cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943.

Strictly linked to the cult of domesticity, the 'happy housewife' represented the main 'cultural script'[2] of the time. Indeed, this particular type of woman was the one spread by the media and accepted by the majority of the population. This very image of femininity became the object against which Betty Friedan, author of the book *The Feminine Mystique*, addressed her crusade. In her book, the author describes the new ideal of femininity, which actually is an old one: " 'Occupation: Housewife' " (Friedan 2013: 33). In each chapter, Friedan's condemnation of the mystique takes into consideration different causes which further contribute to its spreading and affirmation in the popular culture. Particularly, Friedan identifies in media the perpetrators of the feminine mystique: for instance,

[2] A cultural script is a convention of knowledge shared by a culture (Campbell and Kean 2012: 217).

McCall's description of women is the perfect example of feminine mystique at work. There, women are described as such: "young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home" (*ibid.* 27). Another accused by Friedan to spread the gospel of the 'feminine mystique' at a scientific level is Freud: "to him her [the woman's] identity was defined as child-housewife, even when she was no longer a child and not yet a housewife" (*ibid.* 91). Even in Freud's personal life the influence of the feminine mystique was clear: "Freud was pained when she [Freud's wife] did not meet his chief test—'complete identification with himself, his opinions, his feelings, and his intentions' " (Jones qtd. in Friedan 2013: 93).

Women's entrance into the labor market, especially in areas which were not traditionally 'feminine' represented a threat to masculinity. As in Freud's case, the woman's only identity had to coincide with the identity of her husband. "In particular, this definition of masculinity was concerned with employment, 'bread-winning', protection and authority. […] If women worked, as many did, it was seen as a temporary measure before settling into marriage and raising a family in the suburbs" (Campbell and Kean 2012: 225). Men had to discover again their authority not only in the household, but also in society. In order to do so, "women had to be contained […] and from every source messages came to reinforce the importance of home, family and marriage" (*ibid.* 227). In the process of re-masculinization of America television was the more direct and persuasive of means, especially in its reinforcement of the central role of home and family in the American society (*ibid.*). As a result, the role of the woman as mother, wife, and homemaker became central more than ever. Many ads depicted "a matriarchal household by picturing the mother at the center of the family, but it also tells of her purchasing power by stating 'everybody looks to Mother when it comes to the final decision' " (Catalano 2002: 49).

Concerning media, be them television, radio, or magazines, there are different opinions over the role played by advertisement in the depiction of women in the 1950s. Sure enough "television challenged movies as the dominant form of American popular culture and supplied some of the most enduring images of the decade as a time of suburban, family-oriented bliss" (Ware 2015: 99). On the one hand, according to Betty Friedan, advertising companies employed 'motivational manipulators' in order to drive the social forces behind 'the feminine mystique' to the point of persuading women to identify in housewifery a profession "when, in actuality, 'her time-consuming task, housekeeping, is not only

endless, it is a task for which society hires the lowliest, least-trained, most trod-upon individuals and groups'." (Friedan 2013: 180) On the other hand, one might argue that advertising companies simply try to channel society's trend towards their own interests, choosing as target the one with the highest power to purchase.[3]

The 1950s generated what "Nancy Woloch calls the 'split character' " (Campbell and Kean 2012: 225), meaning women's double pull: the one exercised for a return to domesticity and the one exercised by the labor market. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan identifies a similar phenomenon which she calls 'the problem that has no name.' While interviewing many American housewives, mainly from the suburbs, she recognized that many of those women felt the need for something more than their career as housewife, and that 'more' turned out to be an identity. One of the women interviewed by Friedan stated: "The problem is always being the children's mommy, or the minister's wife and never being myself" (Friedan 2013: 20). The other side of the coin was represented by the guilt felt by 1950s working mothers who were accused of neglecting their children and not being 'feminine enough.' "These feelings followed directly from the heightened expectations of the post-World War II environment" (Blackwelder 1997: 149), which called for domesticity.

Betty Friedan's book represents a very harsh critique to the popular culture of the time, especially to the means which spread such ideals. "In the post-war era […] journalists, educators, advertisers, and social scientists had pulled women into the home [using the 'feminine mystique' as] an ideological stranglehold" (Meyerowitz 1987: 229). In spite of the huge success of the book and its influence on historiography, at a later exam we could argue that *The Feminine Mystique* deals with a rather narrow point of view. According to Meyerowitz:

> With The Feminine Mystique, Friedan gave a name and a voice to housewives' discontent, but she also homogenized American women and simplified postwar ideology; she reinforced the stereotype that portrayed all middle-class, domestic, and suburban, and she caricatured the popular ideology that she said suppressed them (*ibid.* 3).

Therefore Meyerowitz accusation to Friedan is similar to the one Friedan herself makes against Margaret Mead. Despite acknowledging the great influence of Mead on her own

[3] "One's position about the portrayal of women in advertisements is partially contingent upon his/her perception of the role of advertising in society. Do ads imitate life or does life imitate ads?" (Catalano 2015: 51).

generation, Friedan asserts that "a mystique takes what it needs from any thinker of the time" (Friedan 2013: 114), implying some degree of exploitation on the part of society's needs.

1. 2. *I Love Lucy* — The Sitcom

"The television audience was rapidly reduced to a market of consumers."[4]

The United States called for a democratic ideal of unity against the threat of Communism. For this reason the emphasis on family as the basic unit of the democratic American society has never been stronger, as stated in the Introduction of Joanne Meyerowitz's book *Not June Cleaver*: "In the midst of Cold War anxiety, 'the family seemed to offer a psychological fortress,' a buffer against both internal and external threats" (1987: 3). In such family-centered productions as situation comedies, or sitcoms, women played the central role around which the dynamics of the household evolved. Moreover, the situation comedy sub-genre represented that "very thin line between reality and representation" (Carosso 2012: 91), so much so that middle-class families could identify in the everyday problems faced by the protagonists. In this respect, the emerging class of "female comics—performers like Lucille Ball, Joan Davis, and Gracie Allen, did not upset middle-class codes of femininity and [their] humor was deemed acceptable for television" (*ibid.* 94).

We could say that the 1950s' almost-decade-running sitcom *I Love Lucy* best represents the spirit of the time thanks to its naturalistic features. Indeed, according to Andrea Carosso: "Naturalism, a quintessentially theatrical genre, entered the family comedy to make it a virtual 'theater of the everyday,' showcasing reality in a heightened, exaggerated fashion" (*ibid.* 93). This combination of theatrical features, together not only with the Lucy character, but also with Lucille Ball the actress considered by "millions, two of the nation's best known figures" of the time (Doyle 2015), created the perfect mix for success. While drawing the character Lucille Ball herself "wanted [it] to appeal to average viewers. She did not want to be cast as a Hollywood star, but rather, a housewife who wanted to be a star. In fact, that became an oft-repeated theme in many shows, with Lucy always scheming in some way to get on stage or prove she had talent." (*ibid.*) Proof of the show's

[4] McQuail qtd. in Carosso 2012: 87.

unprecedented success was “the episode in which Lucy gives birth to Little Ricky aired the day before President Eisenhower's inauguration,” this episode, in fact, drew almost twice the audience than the President’s speech (Karlin 2015).

The Encyclopedia of Television describes the sitcom *I Love Lucy* in these words:

> Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz played Lucy and Ricky Ricardo, a young married couple living in a converted brownstone on the upper east side of Manhattan. Ricky is the orchestra leader for the Tropicana nightclub; Lucy is a frustrated housewife who longs to escape the confinement of her domestic role and participate in a larger public world, preferably to join Ricky in show business. […] Her acts of rebellion--taking a job, performing at the club, concocting a money-making scheme, or simply plotting to fool Ricky--are meant to expose the absurd restrictions placed on women in a male-dominated society (Anderson).

Accordingly, it is Lucy’s need to overcome the ordinary image of the ‘prefect housewife’ which sets into motion the whole comedic situation of each episode. She goes out of the tracks laid by society and by her husband to find her own solution to everyday problems. Her attempts are never taken too seriously and her constant falling back into the cultural script of ‘happy housewife’ may be part of the long-lasting success of the show. “Television in the 1950s was an insistently domestic medium, abundant with images of marriage and family. The story of *I Love Lucy*'s humble origins suited the medium perfectly, because it told of how a television program rescued a rocky marriage, bringing forth an emotionally renewed and financially triumphant family” (*ibid.*).

Figure 2: Still from the episode titled “Lucy Hires a Maid” of the sit-com *I Love Lucy* depicting the traditional family roles of the 1950s.

While following Lucy's many accidents, the sitcom sheds light onto the status, though at times stereotypical, of many middle-class housewives of the 1950s, thus representing a proper case of study for this chapter of the thesis. *I Love Lucy* covers many themes: male and female role in the family, married life, pregnancy, career ambitions, to name a few. For the purpose of this thesis, we are going to take into consideration six selected episodes[5] which define the role of husband and wife, in particular concerning the economic management of the house. Who earns the money? Who manages it and to which extent can he/she do so without the partner's direct influence?

1. 3. Lucy the Housewife

"Mrs. Ricardo, what are you trying to do to the wives of America?"[6]

The situation comedy *I Love Lucy* first aired on CBS in October 1951 and ended in 1957, had a total of 179 black and white episodes of about 25 minutes each. The main shots used in this sitcom are full-shots and close-ups. The former aims at giving a general view of the surrounding set, mainly closed spaces, while the latter focuses of facial expressions which convey most of the comedic meaning of the genre. The TV show is shoot on-set with an audience behind the camera which provides for laughs outside the set. The transition between scenes is not smooth because it is carried out by jump cuts. Each episode starts with an opening situation which prepares the ground for the development of the topic of the episode.

The main characters of the show are Lucille Ball playing the role of Lucy Ricardo, and her real-life husband Desi Arnaz playing the role of her fictional husband Ricky Ricardo. In many episodes they are supported by former vaudeville theatre actors Vivian Vance and William Frawley playing respectively Ethel and Fred Mertz, landlords of the apartment building in which the Ricardos live.

1. 3.1 The Economic Dynamics Inside the Home

The 14th episode of the first series titled "The Amateur Hour," first aired on January 14, 1952. It begins with Lucy and Ethel coming home exhausted after a morning of shopping,

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[5] For a summary of single episodes: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0043208/?ref_=ttep_ep_tt

[6] from *I Love Lucy*; S01E33 — 17'29"
(All the quoted dialogue of this thesis is taken directly from the sitcom/movies).

and they end up discussing how to convince Ricky to let Lucy keep the dress she bought on sale:

> Lucy: Truthfully Ethel, isn't this the biggest bargain you've ever seen? Oh, of course now it's the question of how to get Ricky let me keep it. […] Well, that's the gamble I'm taking. I have to get Ricky to say that I can keep it without letting him know that even if he says I can't keep it, I'll have to keep it because the store'll make me keep it anyway (*I Love Lucy*; S01E14 — 0'50").

Since the very beginning of the episode these lines portray the economic dynamics of the Ricardos' household. It is the husband, Ricky, who has the last word on the wife's expenses. Indeed, when Ricky arrives home and learns of Lucy's purchase, he tells her that she can keep the dress only if she pays for it herself, meaning with her own money. The narrative of this specific episode mirrors Betty Friedan's words concerning housewives' allowances: "They could be safely encouraged to go out and get a part-time job to help their husbands pay for all the things they buy" (Friedan 2013: 183).

In this regard, Lucy embodies the stereotype of the 1950s' housewife who does not have a job outside the home, and therefore no personal income. The division of labor between men and women as explained by Andrea Carosso in the book *Cold War Narratives* implied a very rigid contrast: "Men earned wages, wives were homemakers; and although the myth of the woman-homemaker of the 1950s has been highly exaggerated, only ten percent of suburban women held jobs outside the home in the 1950s" (2012: 71). As a matter of fact, during the 1950s emerged the so-called two-income family, implying that "a woman's income, still supplementary, and her job, still less than a career, could make the difference between sheer survival and minimal comfort" (Kessler-Harris 1982: 299). The economic contribution of working wives afforded families to own the most recent electrical appliances and therefore a better standard of living, it was they who "brought the family a more disposable income" (Berman 2015).

Lucy accepts Ricky's challenge and as a result she decides to be treated "like a fellow businessman" by her husband:

> Ricky: Lucy, I have no breakfast.
> Lucy: Down the stove. Get it yourself.
> Ricky: Now Lucy…
> Lucy: Listen, I am no longer the doting housewife. If you are going to send me out into the

> world—the business—to earn my own money you can just treat me like a fellow businessman (*I Love Lucy*; S01E14 — 05'19").

Given these lines, we witness how Lucy turned Ricky's challenge into one of her own, not only towards her husband, but also to the standards set by society. Nevertheless, the job which she finds is that of babysitter, which is considered among typical female jobs, thus not so tradition-challenging. Lucy and the twins, whom she is babysitting, win 100$ at a contest hosted by Ricky's show, thus assuring her the money for her dress. This episode's focus on male and female roles concerning money, calls into question Catalano's point of view: "Although men traditionally worked and *earned* the money, it was women who *controlled* it and therefore exerted dominant power and influence over countless aspects of family life" (Catalano 2002: 49). As it turns out, in Lucy's case women did not even have control over the money her husband put on her account every month, because he wanted an explanation on why and how Lucy spent it.

1. 3.2 Who Runs the Household?

The 33rd episode of the first series titled "Lucy's Schedule," first aired on May 2, 1952. The episode focuses on Lucy's inability to be on time. In the opening situation Ricky is waiting for Lucy to be ready to go see a movie:

> Ricky: Lucy, for goodness sake, ain't you ready yet?
> Lucy: [with a singsong voice] I'll be ready in a minute, dear!
> Ricky: Hurry up, we're gonna miss the start of the movie.
> Lucy: I'll be ready in a minute, dear!
> Ricky: What did you do with the paper?
> Lucy: I'll be ready in a minute, dear!
> Ricky: Lucy! You haven't even got your dress on yet. You were supposed to be ready an hour ago!
> Lucy: Well, it's all your fault.
> Ricky: My fault?
> Lucy: Yeah, I wasted an hour telling you I'd be ready in a minute (*I Love Lucy*; S01E33 — 0'40").

This episode raises the question on who runs the household. It is clear that, although Ricky tries to urge Lucy to be on time, she is the one setting the pace in the household. The Mertzes, instead, manage to arrive on time only thanks to Fred's firmness which caused

Ethel to go out only with her underwear under the coat. In the following lines between Ricky and Fred, we have the idea that it is the husband to decide how and when their wives will be ready, but as we will reveal later, this is only an assumption.

> Ricky: Well, you did better than I did, Lucy's still dressing.
> Fred: You weren't firm enough!
> Ricky: Well, I'll be firm enough tomorrow night, boy. We gonna have dinner with the new boss.

As the episode evolves, the Ricardos are invited at Ricky's new boss, Mr. Littlefield, for dinner, but once again Lucy's clumsiness causes them to arrive late. Once home Ricky lays down a schedule for Lucy to follow, in order to budget her time and never be late again. Mr. Littlefield will agree to give Ricky the position of manager only after witnessing how well the schedule is working for Lucy.

After much praising for The Schedule from her husband, Mrs. Littlefield decides to visit Lucy and explain her reasons to rebel against their husbands:

> Mrs. Littlefield: Mrs. Ricardo, what are you trying to do to the wives of America?
> Lucy: [confused] I beg your pardon?
> Mrs. Littlefield: Your husband told my husband that you've been running this house on a time schedule.
> Lucy: That's right…
> Mrs. Littlefield: You, Benedict Arnold!
> Lucy: What do you mean?
> Mrs. Littlefield: We wives have spent years persuading our husbands that we haven't time to do our, now, and if you go through this you'll louse it up for all of us! (*I Love Lucy*; S01E33 — 17'29").

Mrs. Littlefield expresses the general notion that the house is the domain of the wife, and she is the only one who can manage the schedule and the pace of the household. The episode ends with Lucy, Ethel and Mrs. Littlefield putting into action their plan to not-so-subtly convince their husbands to abolish the schedule. This is one of the few episodes in which Lucy's plan develops in her favor. Here home management, which is what society identifies as 'the woman's proper place,' is called into question by the husbands' intervention. As a result, the wives gather together to claim their own supremacy over the home.

1. 3.3 Breadwinner and Homemaker

The 1st episode of the second series of *I Love Lucy*, titled "Job Switching," first aired on September 15, 1952. The main topic of this episode is Lucy's inability to manage her money until the end of the month, and consequently the respective economic roles into the household.

> Ricky: Lucy, I'm serious. I don't know what's the matter with you. Every month, every single month your bank account is withdrawn. Now, what is the reason?
> Lucy: You don't give me enough money?! (*I Love Lucy*; S02E01 — 01'25").

In this exchange Ricky's tone is condescending, as if talking to a child. This portrait of the 1950s woman recalls *McCall's* description of "young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine" woman (Friedan 2013: 26). It implies that the wife cannot be trusted with the managing of money, and in this episode both Ricky and Fred Mertz, agree on this point of view.

> Fred: Let's face it Rick, when it comes to money there are two kinds of people: the earners and the spenders or, as they are properly known: husbands and wives.
> […]
> Mrs. Mertz: What's so tough about earning a living?
> Ricky: Have you ever done it?
> […]
> Lucy: No, but I could!
> […]
> Ricky: Listen, holding down a job is a lot more difficult than lying around the house all day long.
> Lucy: Is that what you think we do?
> Ricky: Oh, anybody can cook and do the housework! (*I Love Lucy*; S02E01 — 02'30").

Husbands and wives agree to switch their jobs for a week to prove their respective point.

In this episode we witness an 'unusual' switching: on the one hand, the husbands become the homemakers, facing the hardships of cleaning, ironing, and cooking. On the other hand, the wives struggle to find a job without having any experience in the areas available at the employment agency: stenographer, book keeper, dental technician, PBX operator, and candy maker among others (*I Love Lucy*; S02E01 — 08'05"). In both cases the venture results in confusion and even some damage, hence, they all agree to go back to the previous traditional roles. In the research of Courtney and Lockeretz, cited by Jennifer

Figure 3: A still from the episode titled "Job Switching" of *I Love Lucy* in which Ricky and Fred try to do the housework.

Holt's article *The Ideal Woman*: "Women were found to be eleven times more likely to be associated with housework than were men" (Holt). In this episode of *I Love Lucy*, while on the one hand, the image of men figuratively wearing women's shoes is portrayed as unlikely and therefore very funny; on the other hand, women wearing men's shoes does not appear as implausible, probably due to the 'feminine nature' of the jobs offered to women. According to Friedan the severe distinction between male and female roles has been brought about by manipulators, so much so that such distinction is fundamental for the cultural script of the time:

> An observer of the American scene today accepts as fact that the great majority of American women have no ambition other than to be housewives. [… The manipulators] have seared the feminine mystique deep into every woman's mind, and into the mind of her husband, her children, her neighbors. They have made it part of the fabric of her everyday life (Friedan 2013: 190-191).

However, the sitcom *I Love Lucy* could be seen as a sort of self-parody of postwar gender roles. Clearly, Lucy is not the woman without ambition described by Friedan, on the

contrary, thanks to her individuality she repeatedly challenges the main cultural script to find her own version of 'not-so-perfect housewife.'

1. 3.4 Family Roles

The 23rd episode of the second series, titled "Lucy Hires a Maid" first aired on April 27, 1953. In this episode Lucy's exhaustion is caused by taking care of both the baby and the house, and she and Ricky end up arguing on who should take care of the baby, should he wake up during the night.

> Lucy: Oh Ricky! I'm simply asking if the baby wakes up that you wake up and take care of him.
> R: Honey, I know it's a lot of work taking care of a baby but… that's what mothers are for!
> Lucy: Oh, and what are fathers for?
> Ricky: Well, the father is the breadwinner, he's supposed to get his rest at night so he can get up fresh in the morning, go out into the world and make money for his family.
> Lucy: You wouldn't tell me the rules before the game started. [*Laughs outside the stage*] The next time we have a baby I get to be the father (*I Love Lucy*; S02E23 — 01'32").

Reading this exchange we understand which are the family dynamics of the Ricardos, and allegedly of society in general. As Ricky states: "Father is the breadwinner," and therefore for him this role takes the priority over the other tasks of the household. Whereas, as stated in the following lines, since the birth of the baby the mother has had little to none engagements outside of her home.

> Ricky: Listen, tonight I'm gonna make sure you go to bed real early.
> Lucy: We are gonna play bridge at the Mertzes.
> Ricky: I'll call that off.
> Lucy: Oh no! Don't do that. That's all the fun I have. (*I Love Lucy*; S02E23 — 05'40").

As repeatedly stated by Betty Friedan, motherhood has become a proper career, almost a cult. In the sixth chapter of *The Feminine Mystique*, where she illustrates the misinterpretation of Margaret Mead's study, Friedan affirms that: "She [Margaret Mead] was taken so literally that procreation became a cult, a career, to the exclusion of every other kind of creative endeavor" (2013: 124).

The second, although minor, topic discussed in this episode, and in particular by the maid, is that of the amount and range of electrical appliances one expects to find in an average middle-class household of the 1950s.

Maid: Of course, you have an automatic dishwasher?
Lucy: No.
Maid: A drier?
Lucy: No… But we have a garbage disposal and a washing machine. [*The maid is still hesitant*] And a television set, 21-inch screen.
Maid: I'll take the job. (*I Love Lucy*; S02E23 — 11'40").

Indeed, in the 1950s middle-class suburban houses were equipped with all the new technologies of the time, but Betty Friedan did not agree in the advantages brought about, both in terms of time- and labor-saving, by the new electrical appliances: "The Modern American housewife spends far more time washing, drying, and ironing than her mother. If she has an electric freezer, she spends more time cooking than a woman who does not have these labor-saving appliances" (2013: 201). For her, housewifery could only be compared to a full-time career because it expanded in order to fill the time available (*ibid.* 194-213).

1. 3.5 Businesswomen

The 2nd episode of the third series, titled "The Girls Go Into Business" first aired on October 12, 1953. In this episode of the third series Lucy and Ethel try to convince their husbands to buy Mrs. Hanson's dress shop for them, the wives, to manage.

Ricky: I had to get myself a little business.
Lucy: That's a wonderful idea Ricky!
Fred: Hey, we got a couple of bucks saved up, maybe we could go on a partners with him.
Ethel: Yeah!
Ricky: Really?!
Lucy: Yeah! What kind of business did you have in mind?
Ricky: Well, I don't know… You know…
Lucy: I do! Hanson's dress shop!
Ethel: Yeah, that's for sale, you know, that little store in the middle of the next block…
Lucy: It's a gold mine, right here in our own neighborhood.
Ricky: Wait a minute…
Lucy: Ricky, a dress shop is just the right thing for you!
[…]
Lucy: The point is that the dress shop would be a good investment for us.
Ricky: Look, that might be fine […] but it's out of the question. Fred and I don't know anything about running a dress shop.
Lucy: You don't have to. Ethel and I will!
Ricky and Fred: [Laugh] (*I Love Lucy*; S03E02 — 04'12").

The husbands' reaction to Lucy and Ethel's proposal reveals the men's mistrust on the women's managerial skills. As the episode's narrative evolves, we see Lucy and Ethel buying the shop without their husbands knowing, but they are tricked into it by Mrs. Hanson.

In the Fifties the image of businesswomen was even less common than that of career women, but Lucille Ball herself represents a suitable example of the former category. Main star of the show, she was the one to convince production and sponsor to take in her real-life husband Desi Arnaz. Moreover, she founded the Desilu production company together with her husband, and after the divorce she bought Arnaz's part too, thus becoming "the first female head of a major production company" (Karlin 2015). Another businesswoman of the 1950s worth of attention is Estelle Ellis, whom coordinated marketing and promotions for various magazines, including *Seventeen*, *Charm*, *Glamour,* and *House&Garden*.

> In 1950, Ms. Ellis helped to launch another groundbreaking publication, *Charm*, the first magazine to position working women as a separate market segment. […] The "Interview" and "Teena" reports commissioned by Ms. Ellis were among the first market research studies to establish teenage girls and working women as distinct and economically powerful markets (Allen 2002).

If we consider Betty Friedan's description of 'manipulators,' then Estelle Ellis should fit in the category, but with completely different reasons. As stated by Catalano: "Advertisements simply mirrored the society (or audience) that they targeted. Advertising, then, did not harm or denigrate women; rather, it portrayed reality" (2002: 51). In this perspective, Ellis was the first to identify in teenagers and working women new targets, not simply for advertising, but also and above all to start a change in society's views of the 'feminine mystique'.

In this specific episode of *I Love Lucy*, the figure of the businesswoman is not taken too seriously, even mocked for their lack of sense of business. Indeed, after acknowledging that the shop does not pay back as much as they wished, Lucy and Ethel decide to sell it, and earn some money in the transition. When they go home sure to have closed a favorable deal, their husbands read an article saying that the new owner re-sold the shop at a much higher price to a company which would build a skyscraper. The episode depicts women under the "stereotype that women do not make important decisions. This was seen by the fact that women made only trivial purchases, often with a male shadow" (Holt).

A similar point of view is illustrated by Eliza Berman's article "Life Before Equal Pay: Portrait of a Working Mother of the 1950s" which appeared on the *Time* on April 13, 2015. She analyzes the praising features of a LIFE magazine issue which focused on working mothers. However, when drawing the conclusions, she acknowledges that even the headline 'My Wife Works and I Like It' evokes a patronizing tone, "Jennie [the working mother] was the pretty face, and Jim [Jenny's husband] the confident voice" (2015).

1. 3.6 Advertisement

The 13th episode of the third series of *I Love Lucy*, titled "The Million-Dollar Idea" first aired on January 11, 1954. In this episode Lucy and Ricky argue once again on Lucy's inability to budget her money. "Now, would you mind telling me why you were overdrawing at the bank? Every month I put money in the bank, and every month you spend it all and more besides. I don't understand it" (Arnaz as Ricky in *I Love Lucy*; S03E13 — 03'47"). For this reason Ethel suggests her to find that 'million-dollar idea' to prove her husband wrong and earn some money of her own. The great idea turns out to be her delicious salad dressing, but what makes the idea brilliant is Lucy's intuition of promoting it through television: "I'm gonna bottle it [the salad dressing] and put it on the market. […] How are gonna people know that we're selling it? We've got to advertise. […] We'll go on television!" (Ball as Lucy in *I Love Lucy*; S03E13 — 05'24"). These lines explain what Carosso suggests in his book, "*I Love Lucy* was one of many early sitcoms to blur the boundaries between real life and televised life for explicit purpose of promoting the new television medium" (2012: 98).

As a matter of fact, in the 1950s together with magazines, television had its starting point as the most successful means for advertisement. In this episode Lucy and Ethel's TV advertisement targeted women, housewives in particular: "Advertising logically targeted women because, as Douglas herself acknowledged, 'America's consumer culture was predicated on the notion that women were the major consumers of most goods' " (Catalano 2002: 49).

> Ethel: Good afternoon homemakers, I am Mary Margaret McMirth, and today I have a wonderful surprise for you. For years, only a few close friends and relatives knew the thrill of eating salad made with 'Aunt Martha's old-fashioned salad dressing.' But aunt Martha, sweet, lovable, kind old lady that she is, has finally consent to let the world in on her secret.

> And today you can buy a quart of real, honest and good 'Aunt Martha's old-fashioned salad dressing' for only 40 cents a quart (*I Love Lucy*; S03E13 — 08'00").

The choice of words and tone of this advertisement clearly addresses "homemakers." By naming aunt Martha and her "old-fashioned" recipe, Edith, the seller, evokes an old way of life, presumably pre-war. In this episode, as in many cases throughout the series, Lucy's personal, and at times unusual, attempts to find a solution to her problems will have a negative outcome. In this case, Lucy and Ethel end up losing money because the costs of production and shipping of their product are too high and therefore there would not be profit. Once again it is Ricky, Lucy's husband, to realize the loss and will explain it to his wife in a patronizing tone.

1. 4. Lucy and 1950s' Society

"'I think there is a misconception that sitcoms are made up of jokes: they're not.'"[7]

Nowadays, when thinking back to 1950s' American women, the first image which comes to mind is that of the 'perfect housewife.' But as we have understood, there is much more behind the *façade* of homemaker and mother. By taking into consideration some selected episodes of the sitcom *I Love Lucy*, we shed a new light on what Betty Friedan calls the 'feminine mystique.' At first glance, Lucy's character seems to typify the 1950s ideal of the 'happy housewife'. On the contrary, this sitcom introduced many variations to the rule, thus portraying a changing society in which women challenged the pre-war dynamics of domesticity and fixed gender roles. As a matter of fact, Lucy, both the character and the actress, presents a new image of housewife through self-parody. By facing the audience with the not-so-serious and family-centered genre of the sitcom, the main topics which were introduced, episode after episode, were accepted more easily by the 1950s society.

The image of the 1950s housewife carries many ambivalences. If, on the one hand the Cold War fears called for women to be the symbol of the family's unity, on the other hand more and more women felt the pull of the labor market and with it a new challenge to their potentialities. Yet, society's need to re-masculinize the nation lead to a special emphasis on the image of the 'happy housewife.' In the 1950s, "when you wrote about an actress for a women's magazine, you wrote about her as a housewife" (Friedan 2013: 41). With this respect, the figure of Lucy embodies the ambivalences of the time, indeed, she was both

[7] Sioned William (TV and radio producer) qtd. in Carosso 2012: 83.

groundbreaking and ordinary. She challenged conventions but never too drastically, always going back to the cultural script so popular at the time. Through the many jokes expressed in the sitcom, actually this genre succeeded in conveying a different message, one of subtle critique to society's standards.

Through the episodes here analyzed, we learned that the one who manages the purse's strings is Lucy's husbands. Month by month he refills her bank account but in return he expects to know why and how she spent her money, revealing a paternalistic attitude towards the wife who, in this case, could be compared to a child. Indeed, when husbands (Ricky and Fred) and wives (Lucy and Ethel) switch jobs, the outcome is very chaotic, and the only way to reestablish some sort of balance is by going back to the original roles of husbands breadwinners and wives homemakers. In the episode titled "The Girls Go Into Business," Lucy and Ethel are not taken too seriously by their husbands, and their venture results ruinous. The implication repeated in more than one episode are that women could not be successful businesswomen, but the very example of the life of the actress Lucille Ball confutes this idea. Moreover, when trying to sell her product, Lucy has the brilliant idea to advertise it through television, which at the time was becoming a more and more popular means for publicity. In the episode "Lucy Hires a Maid," Ricky clearly explains his role as breadwinner in the parent-child dynamics, while Lucy as homemaker should stay home and take care of the baby. There is no space for sharing the raising of the child, and therefore, when the wife cannot take care both of the child and of the house, the only option given by Ricky is to take a maid. The only episode here considered which has a completely positive outcome for the wife, is the one in which Ricky forces Lucy to adopt a schedule to optimize her time. As it turns out, when it comes to household dynamics, there is no doubt that it is the domain of the wife.

2. Working Women in the Fifties

2. 1. Real and Fictional "Women of '50"

"But nowadays a girl had to work, even if she didn't need the money".[8]

In *The Feminine Mystique* Betty Friedan did not discuss much about those middle-class women who were actually working. She identified in working a possible way out for housewives from unhappiness, but more generally she insisted on looking for what caused the 'feminine mystique' to be ever-present in her society. Nevertheless, the most important statement she made on working women is about the importance of a career as a means to achieve independence, or better an identity. In the 1950s to associate the words 'career' and 'woman' represented almost a taboo, but in the quest for an identity outside the household it was fundamental. As Friedan stated in the second chapter of her book:

> 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 depression. But the readers of these magazines were not the women who got the jobs; career meant more than a job. It seemed to mean doing something, being somebody yourself, not just existing through others. (2012: 30)

As when considering housewives, when taking into account working women Friedan covers only a very narrow point of view and probably the most pessimistic. For her "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" (*ibid.* 54). While in lower social classes for a woman to have a job was a necessity, for the middle-class a woman's role into the household was still considered paramount over other obligations. Thus, despite the fact that "employment rates rose fastest among middle-class women" (Hartmann qtd. in Meyerowitz 1987: 86), the very idea of middle-class women working was not generally accepted by the popular culture.

One of the books which best confutes the cultural script of the 1950s' 'happy housewife' is Marion Steinmann's *Women at Work: Demolishing the Myth of the 1950s*. In actuality, the book is based on a "Survey of the women graduates of the Cornell University Class of 1950" (Steinmann 2005: 13). It is a very detailed analysis, census-like, on the lives of those Women of '50, as Steinmann calls them. She lists their achievements in their private life,

[8] from *The Best of Everything* (Jaffe 2005: 41)

education, and work. In some chapters she explains their reasons for working, but also the women's thoughts and those of their families on their decision to work and pursue a career. Through this work Steinmann aims at refute the "great myth—and quite erroneous—stereotype that life during the decade of the 1950s was gray, dull, bland. […] The stereotype, particularly, hold that during the 1950s women did not work" (*ibid.* 15). On the contrary, despite the fact that "by 1960 nearly 80 percent of the women who earned wages worked in jobs that were stereotyped as female" (Kessler-Harris 1982: 303), the 'Cornell Women of '50,' and many others like them, pursued careers in fields that at the time were far from being considered 'feminine.' Some became engineers, physicians, lawyers, or businesswomen, while others worked in the academic field at all levels: teachers, college professors, even head of a department at college.

What thwarted women's ambitions, and in a way stopped their careers, was sex discrimination. This kind of episodes have been noticed both by Betty Friedan and Marion Steinmann.

> Women were often driven embittered from their chosen fields when, ready and able to handle a better job, they were passed over for a man. In some jobs a woman had to be content to do the work while the man got the credit. Or if she got a better job, she had to face the bitterness and hostility of the man (Friedan 2013: 156).

It was not only a matter of often denied promotions, but also of pay. For instance, "Jocelyn Frost Sampson, a management and training consultant, says she was told she was receiving 'lower pay than men because *men had families*.' At the time Jocelyn was herself divorced with four children, […] to raise" (Steinmann 2005: 104). An attempt at prohibiting occupational segregation was made by the Kennedy administration in 1962 by "push[ing] through the Congress an Equal Pay Act" (Kessler-Harris 1982: 314). But it was only in 1972, at the height of the second wave of feminism, that the Congress sent an ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] to the states, as the question of women's roles was becoming a major public issue" (*ibid.*).

In her survey, Steinmann asks the 1950's Cornell Alumnae the reasons why they chose to work, and the answers could be summed up as such: "We Women of '50 worked for all the obvious reasons still true today. […] Because we had to—and also because we wanted to" (Steinmann 2005: 64). On the one hand, for many of those women and their families a job represented just a stopgap until marriage: "Most of us expected to—and most of our

parents expected us to—earn our own living until we married and started having children or if we remained single" (*ibid.* 64). On the other hand, many of those same women resumed working both for personal and economic reasons. Among the reasons was the need to provide for their children's college education, for instance: "Margery Westlake Clauson worked because of her 'interest in fields outside the home' and also 'saving for college for three children' " (*ibid.* 74). Therefore the two-income family was a necessity not only to afford the household a certain degree of modernity concerning electrical appliances, but also to guarantee the children of a high-degree education. A woman's role became triple: mother, wage earner, and citizen. (Blackwelder 1997: 159).

The topic of women's life ambitions is taken up by Rona Jaffe's novel *The Best of Everything*. As Rachel Cooke says in her article: "Another clever young woman wrote a novel about the struggle of her peers to combine work and the search for love, and it, too, was both a scandal and a roaring success" (2011). In the 1950s Rona Jaffe was herself about twenty-five-years old and just out of Radcliffe college. She found her first job at Fawcett Publications, rising from filing clerk to the position of associate editor in four years, and in the meantime she tried to publish her own books. Who, then, better than Jaffe herself to narrate to stories of five twenty-years old women's "private anxieties: about money, about contraception, about promotion" (*ibid.*). The idea of the book came about while she was visiting a friend working at Simon&Schuster, there "a famous Hollywood producer happened to be in the room. He told her he was looking for a book about being young and female in New York" (Birne 2011), some sort of modern-day *Kitty Foyle*. After reading it, Jaffe's judgement was such: "I thought it was dumb. I said to myself: He doesn't know anything about women. I know about women. And I work in an office" (Jaffe 2011: ix).

2. 2. *The Best of Everything* — A 1958 Novel

"I don't see why a girl has to quit her job just because she gets married".[9]

Rona Jaffe's novel *The Best of Everything* is among the few literary texts which best portrays the 1950s as a decade of transition between pre-war and war-time society on the one hand, and the 1960s with the new wave of social uprising like the Civil Rights Movement, and the second wave of Feminism on the other. As Joanne Meyerowitz states in

[9] Rona Jaffe in the "Foreword" to her novel *The Best of Everything* (Jaffe 2011: 148)

Figure 4: Cover of the 2011 edition of the novel *The Best of Everything*.

her introductory essay: "Postwar women provided a coda to the saga of Rosie the Riveter or a prelude to the story of 1960s feminist" (1987: 2). Rona Jaffe did not base the novel only on her personal experience, but she "interviewed fifty women to see if they'd had the same experiences, with the men and the jobs and all the things nobody spoke about in polite company" (Jaffe 2011: x). As a result, the novel "was frank about women's newfound sexual freedom; it was honest about their ambitions" (Birne 2011). It did not just depicted the surface of society as appeared in ads and commercials, but the author dared to frankly narrate taboo topics as affairs with older and married men, contraceptives, abortion, and women's sex outside marriage. Rona Jaffe described her novel in those words: "The Best of Everything is a sociological document but it's also about change: how your dreams change, how your life changes, how each thing that happens to you changes something else. And that doesn't change" (2011: xi).

The review written by Rachel Cooke in 2011 on *The Guardian* best describes the topics of the novel:

> The women in *The Best of Everything*, who work at a New York publishing house, struggle to choose a new way of living. […] These are women who fear progress and modernity even as a part of them longs for it; the pressure to conform is simply too entrenched, the

> specter of spinsterdom, at a time when such a status could be achieved before one had even turned 25, too shaming (Cooke 2011).

The novel presents round characters, especially the female ones, they evolve throughout the novel achieving their initial goal, even though getting lost in the way. And while, although at different degrees, all of them grow and change, the male characters could be described as flat because most of them keeps his own traits throughout the whole narration, which for most are selfishness and narcissism. Every one of the five female protagonists embodies a different kind of struggle. Caroline Bender, a twenty-two-years old bourgeois woman is torn between the personal satisfaction given by her career, and the pull of conformity and marriage. April Morrison, a twenty-something naïve woman from Colorado learns the hard way that, by having the perfect boy does not always adds up to the perfect relationship. Gregg Adams is a twenty-three-years old actress, who tries to fight depression by throwing herself headlong into relationships. Barbara Lemont is twenty-years old, divorced and with a baby-girl. She struggles to find a man to marry and to raise together her daughter while maintaining her and her mother. Lastly, Mary Agnes is another young woman in her twenties who works in order to save some money and marry her fiancé. In *The Best of Everything* "there are sparkling passages of writing that track the minute-by-minute ups and downs of the characters' confidence and insecurities" (Birne 2011).

Figure 5: A still from *The Best of Everything* (1959) depicting a close-up of the advertisement found by Caroline.

The beginning of the first chapter sets the pace for most of the others, evoking the image of New York City with its rhythm imposed by the seasons. "The emotional lives of these women are beautifully drawn, and Jaffe makes piercing use of the contrast between the

surface allure of New York […] and the drab rooms they share; studio couches against the wall" (Cooke 2011). The novel begins as such:

> You see them every morning at a quarter to nine, rushing out of the maw of the subway tunnel, filing out the Grand Central Station, crossing Lexington and Park and Madison and Fifth avenues, the hundreds and hundreds of girls. Some of them look eager and some look resentful, and some of them look as if they haven't left their beds yet. Some of them have been up since six-thirty in the morning, the ones who commute from Brooklyn and Yonkers and New Jersey and Staten Island and Connecticut. They carry the morning newspapers and overstuffed handbags. Some of them are wearing pink or chartreuse fuzzy overcoats and five-year-old ankle-strap shoes and have their hair up in pin curls underneath kerchiefs. Some of them are wearing chic black suits (maybe last year's but who can tell?) and kid gloves and are carrying their lunches in violet-sprigged Bonwit Teller paper bags. None of them has enough money (Jaffe 2011: 1).

The beginning of the second chapter is again about New York and it makes reference to the changeability of the city in which the buildings are torn down to make place for new ones, while the streets are "torn up [or] fenced off" (*ibid*. 19). By drawing an image of a changing city, as well as of the passing seasons, the text shows a parallel with the changeability of the lives of the protagonists. As a result, we could say that the topic of change represents the leitmotiv of the novel. Chapter nine narrates the thoughts of the five protagonists during those "sleepless nights of the summer of 1952" (*ibid*. 137), while in chapter ten Autumn is seen as a time of rebirth. Chapter sixteen is about the wedding season, specifically Mary Agnes's wedding, and Spring, while the following chapter is again about summer, or as the text says it is "the fifth season [of] New York, the season of the Summer Bachelor" (*ibid*. 274), and so on until chapters twenty-eight and twenty-nine where the time is referred to in broader terms.

At first, those young women are thrilled by the idea of living by themselves or with some friends. They have expectations on how the apartment of a working girl should look like, and even if eventually it differs from their idea, they are still happy with it because it represents independence. Caroline, for instance, imagined herself talking to April in an "austere but romantically chic apartment" (*ibid*. 54). Subsequently, once she has lived for a while in the city with an absent flatmate and the dozens of personal and working commitments, Caroline can see the 'working girl's apartment' for what it really is:

> What a typical picture for anyone out of New York: career girl's apartment, stockings drying over the shower rod, clothes hung helter-skelter in the rush to get to the office in time, to a date on time, a scrap of cheese and some canned orange juice in the icebox,

> perhaps a bottle of wine there too, wads of dust lying under the studio couch because you couldn't clean except on weekends and sometimes not even then, and all those brightly colored matchbooks with names of well-known eating places, so that even if one managed only two good and sufficient meals a week one could still light one's cigarettes for the rest of the week with the memory (Jaffe 2011: 325).

The protagonists' apartments, lacking balconies and with in-wall-beds, appear very different from those of their male counterparts. For instance, the apartment of Gregg's boyfriend, the producer David Wilder Savage, was nothing like those she had seen before, with "tall bookshelves" and "a carved black mantlepiece" (*ibid*. 85). While the one of April's boyfriend, Dexter Key, had expensive modern furniture, "brightly colored paintings above the fireplace" and "a small bronze statue" (*ibid*. 132). Chapter after chapter and season after season, we witness the passing of time, but also the growth of the characters and the end of their disillusionment about life in New York City.

2. 2.1 Mary Agnes and Bermuda Schwartz: 1950s' Stereotypes

In the 1950s grown up unmarried women and men were not referred to as such, but as 'girls' and 'boys.' In a blog discussing Rona Jaffe's novel, a contributor explains the difference between the former and the latter epithets:

> I remember very clearly (I was born in 1953) that my mother was shocked and horrified when someone was referred to as a woman. (To her it was one step away from saying "whore," although she would never have used the word). 'Girls' were sexually innocent. They were social, not sexual. So were 'ladies.' 'Women' were created in the act of 'becoming women,' through the agency of men. 'Boys' also were social. They were required to complete 'a couple.' If they were 'nice,' they brought corsages, opened doors, and conferred chaste goodnight kisses (Susan Loyal on April 29, 2014).

The two characters who best represent this description are Mary Agnes and Paul Landis. In *The Best of Everything* the character of Mary Agnes in a secondary one because most of the time she is mentioned only through the other characters, and only few of the chapters are dedicated just to her character. In this analysis, however, I consider her among the protagonists because she represents the society's standard to which all the other protagonists are compared.

The character of Mary Agnes fits perfectly the general idea of conformity of the time. Indeed, "the notion of the 1950s as the age of conformity has been the leitmotiv of the discourse of the decade and about the decade" (Carosso 2012: 202). Mary Agnes is

described from three different points of view: first, the third-person narrator takes her as a model for any other girl: "The girls like Mary Agnes who had no ambition except to do their work satisfactorily, disappear at five o'clock on the dot, and line up at the bank on payday, were the backbone of the office, and the office could not run without them" (Jaffe 2011: 67). Second, in a conversations between Caroline and her friend Mike Rice, Mary Agnes represents some sort of allegory of the 'happy suburban housewife:'

> [Mike to Caroline] " 'You know who are the lucky ones? The Mary Agneses of this world. Mary Agnes has her whole life figured out: get married next June, save her money, plod along in her job, never look to life to give her anything more. She's the poor little product of training and ignorance and habit, and she's smarter than any of you'
> 'I had plans like that once,' Caroline said.
> 'Well, maybe we all get one chance to be a Mary Agnes. You lose it, and that's it, you're on the way. But you see, if you were a *real* Mary Agnes, you'd find a second chance, even if it wasn't as good as the first' " (*ibid.* 107).

Third, through Mary Agnes's conversations with Caroline we understand that even her thoughts are 'husband-centered,' for her the important things in life are being a couple, then a wife, to be able to say: "My husband. My husband says…" (*ibid.* 138). But the most interesting statement she makes is while talking to Caroline about Mike Rice's unsuccessful wedding:

> 'Marriage solves everything?' Caroline asked.
> 'What a funny thing to say.'
> 'Why is it funny?'
> 'Well…' Mary Agnes said, 'there are only two ways to live, the right way and the wrong way. If you live the right way you're happy, and if you live the wrong way you're miserable. If you get married it doesn't mean positively you're going to be happy, but if you get married and you walk out on ti then you *can't* be happy. You'll always know you gave up on a responsibility' (Jaffe 2011: 47).

In Gregg's words the vast group of girls like Mary Agnes fit the category of 'The Happy Ones,' or 'The Grapefruits' because their lives are "partitioned off into nice little predictable segments, every one the same" (*ibid*. 256). In this respect, Mary Agnes personifies the "stereotype of domestic, quiescent, suburban womanhood" (Meyerowitz 1987: 11), and by the end of the novel her figure slowly vanishes into "the land of marriage and respectability" (Jaffe 2011: 112) to enter the category which could be defined through the label 'Occupation: Housewife.'

The male counterpart to Mary Agnes is represented by the character of Paul Landis, Caroline's quasi-boyfriend. Gregg gives him the nickname of 'Bermuda Schwartz,' very likely to make fun of his propriety and of him being so conventional in every situation.

> [Gregg and Caroline] 'The other night I was sitting around with nothing to do and I thought of a marvelous name for Paul,' Gregg said. 'Bermuda Schwartz'
> […] 'Do you suppose,' Caroline said, 'that every girl has a Bermuda Schwartz, and every Bermuda Schwartz has someone else who is a Bermuda Schwartz *to him*?' (*ibid.* 169-170).

He represents The Bachelor, a very rare figure in a decade of early marriages. He has the perfect job and seems to be the perfect man, the one who would never forget "his wife's birthday or their anniversary" (*ibid.* 323). In a conversation between Mike and Caroline about Paul there is the description of what he represents to her: " 'I know he won't [try to sleep with her]. He's marriage and two children and a two-car garage.' 'That's what you want eventually,' Mike said" (*ibid.* 160). More than once in the novel Paul is portrayed as the epitome of the 'perfect husband' who every girl would marry in order to conform, but above all "because they wanted so badly to be married" (*ibid.* 324). Men like Paul Landis want one thing in return from their wives: to forget career ambitions and leave their job.

2. 2.2 Men's Point of View

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, during the 1950s America faced a crisis on the idea of 'masculinity' which was under threat by more and more independent career women. The dominant image of 'maleness' probably was a follow-up to the hard boiled characters produced by the noir genre both in fiction and movies, like the characters of Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), or Philip Marlowe in *The Lady in the Lake* (1947). In the novel *The Best of Everything* there are different men, but most of them show a new kind of masculinity, not as dominant as in the noir genre, but with a paternalistic side when approaching women. In this novel most men reveal themselves to be selfish, even cruel at times, in order to keep their masculinity untouched by the 'hundreds' of working girls surrounding them. A statement made by Mr. Bossart might be explanatory for the general attitude towards women, regarding both the working place and their role in society: " 'Derby Books is a good place to have a woman or two because many of their

readers are women. A woman should not try to think like a man, because she can't even if

Figure 6: A 1959 poster from *The Best of Everything* representing the man-woman relationships in the movie.

she tries. A woman's weapon is in her femininity' " (Jaffe 2011: 184).

Mr. Shalimar, editor-in-chief of Derby Books, at first is described through the eyes of the naïve April, therefore acquiring an aura of respectability and sophistication from the fact that he met famous authors such as Eugene O'Neill, but by the end of the second chapter we are made known of his true intentions towards young employees, and through the whole novel we witness him sexually harassing more than one girl. It is during the Christmas party held by the Fabian Publications that he assaults Barbara Lemont, and at the same party he affirms his bitterness against young, talented, and in this case, female workers who might threat his position: " 'What's talent?' Mr. Shalimar said. His tone had become more aggressive. 'Training, that's what you need. Experience and training. Little college girls walk in here and think they're going to tell everybody what to do. Think they can bite the world in three bites. They don't know how long it takes to become an editor.' […] 'Talent,' Mr. Shalimar said. '*She* thinks she can get there with *talent*.' " (*ibid.* 180). On the other hand, Mr. Bossart and David Wilder Savage, even if in different ways, have a patronizing attitude towards the young women with whom they are involved, thus recalling the already mentioned[10] description by *McCall's* of "young and frivolous, almost childlike (Friedan 2013: 27).

[10] Chapter 1. 1 The Revival of Domesticity

The other men present in the novel could be described as selfish because they are supposedly happy with their way of life and would not change it. Eddie Harris, Caroline's ex-fiancé, does not intend to leave his wife and could only compromise for a lifelong affair with Caroline because he could not leave his comfortable life:

> 'You must be happier with her than you'll admit,' Caroline said.
> He shook his head. 'I'm not.'
> 'Then what is it you like? The safe, comfortable life? The heart-shaped swimming pool? That air-conditioned office with nothing to do? Those parties at the country club where you play the piano and feel nostalgic about me? Is that what you like?'
> 'Don't say that.'
> 'Is it true?'
> 'It's my life,' Eddie said. 'That's true.' (Jaffe 2011: 464-465).

Barbara's ex-husband, Mac Lemont, was not ready yet for marriage and family and therefore decided to abandon both Barbara and their daughter. Similarly, Dexter Key, April's narcissistic boyfriend, is not ready to settle down and have a "*Shotgun wedding*" (*ibid.* 211) and a baby with April, so he persuades her to abort with the false hope of a future wedding. Through Caroline's thoughts we are presented of a list of the kind of men she met during her life, summarizing what has been said so far:

> There were men like Dexter Key, […] all good looks and charm and loving himself so much that he didn't even bother to be subtle about it. There were dozens of utterly mismatched blind dates she had been inflicted with in the past two years. […] And there was the majority, the so-so dates, the young men who didn't particularly care about her or she about them, but who continued to call her once in a while for dinner or drinks because they too were marking time. It was nice, in the face of all this, to be with someone like Paul, who really cared about her, and she had known girls who had married men like Paul for that very reason and because they wanted so badly to be married. […] Caroline knew in her heart that if she had the choice today she would still throw away her job in a minute for life as Eddie's wife. Or she could continue to work for a few years. Eddie would be proud of her, he would like her to work if it was what she wanted (Jaffe 2011: 323-324).

The characters of Mike Rice and Sidney Carter, the former being editor of *The Cross,* while the latter being the owner of 'The Sidney Carter Agency,' could be considered positive figures in the lives of Caroline and Barbara respectively. Mike and Caroline share a " 'strange affair, a private love affair all of [their] own. A vicarious, mental affair.' " (*ibid.* 106). Later it will result in a single sexual moment which will leave both of them

unsatisfied, but still able to have an affectionate friendship. Sidney and Barbara's relationship evolves very quickly, and as quickly it dies because Sidney would not leave his family, but eventually he comes back and marries Barbara. While Caroline looks up at Mike as a friend and a coworker, for Barbara Sidney is the one who firstly, indirectly gives her a promotion and with it a raise, and secondly marries her and makes her the 'happy housewife.'

2. 2.3 A Woman's Career

In *The Best of Everything* there are three different types of working women which are embodied by the characters of Caroline Bender, Miss Farrow, and Barbara Lemont. Despite the exception of the husbands of the 'Cornell Women of '50' who "fully supported the idea of [their wives] working" (Steinmann 2005: 113), in Jaffe's novel Paul Landis's point of view on Caroline's aspirations was probably the most similar to that of the popular culture of the time:

> 'What the hell have you got to be serious about? Where is it all going to lead you? It's one thing to enjoy your job, every girl should have something to do until she's married, but you live with it every minute of the day. You take work home, you worry about office politics, you let Miss Farrow get you down. If you ask me, I think you'd like to have her job eventually.' (Jaffe 2011: 329).

The accusation that society made towards unmarried working women was even stronger, portraying them as not being feminine enough, or even having some psychological problem as, for instance, Mary Agnes suggests while talking to Caroline:

> 'Most girls our age are scared to death if there's nobody on the horizon, and that's silly. Because if you look at the girls five years older than we are, why, I don't know one who isn't married.'
> 'I do.'
> 'Are they terribly ugly?'
> 'Quite the contrary. I've met some at parties who are very pretty and smart, too, with good jobs.'
> Mary Agnes' eyes widened as if she were about to expound some great and mysterious bit of philosophy. 'Well,' she said, 'perhaps there's something psychologically wrong with them' (*ibid.* 253).

The real protagonist of Rona Jaffe's novel is Caroline. The novel begins and ends with her character as main subject of the narration. She represents the young working woman who is just out of college and dealing with her first job and a life in New York City. Caroline "did not consider herself basically a career girl. […] Now she had no fiancé and no one she was interested in, and the new job was more than an economic convenience, it was an emotional necessity" (*ibid.* 2). At first, she considers her job to be a " 'stopgap' between college and marriage" (Friedan 2013: 139), but then it acquires a completely different meaning and confers her an identity: "She was going to become an editor. […] If perseverance and extra work could do the trick, then Caroline would have a career" (Jaffe 2011: 140). Caroline's character aims at higher positions, facing the dilemma of having to think like a man in order to ascend in the office hierarchy: "It was good to be able to care so much about work. It must be something like the way men feel, Caroline thought, except that men have to worry so much about the money. For her the thrill was in the competition and in the achievement. But she was beginning to think about money too" (*ibid.* 141). At last, when she finally gets a promotion, Caroline faces a problem common to many other women of her time. As Steinmann exposes in her survey: "Nineteen Women of '50 said that they were paid less than men with similar educations, experiences and responsibilities" (Steinmann 2005: 104).

Figure 7: A still from *The Best of Everything* depicting Caroline Bender leaving her own office. The door displays her position: "Miss Bender: Editor. Derby Books."

Miss Farrow represents the middle-aged working woman. Throughout the novel we are made known of her affair with Mr. Bossart, everyone's boss at Fabian Publications. In a passage the narrator implies that her high position in the hierarchy of the workplace is due

to her liaison with Mr. Bossart, which, moreover, makes her untouchable. Indeed, when she comes back after her divorce, she is offered her previous position. Interesting enough, when she leaves her career to marry, she acquires the feminine traits which before were never mentioned: "She was only another woman, whom a man found feminine enough to want to take for his wife" (Jaffe 2011: 333), on the contrary, before the marriage she had the 'masculine' traits of ambition and money making. Eventually, even Caroline began to measure her career achievements in relation to those of Miss Farrow. "She would do a much better job than Miss Farrow had — anyone could — and then she would get the extra money. And she already had the expense account. She was a real editor, like Miss Farrow, like Mike. A *real editor!*" (*ibid.* 2011: 336).

The last character to be considered in the category of 'career woman' is Barbara Lemont. She represents the young divorced working mother. She needs her job in order to maintain her daughter, her mother and herself:

> 'I'm just like a man,' Barbara went on. 'I have to work like a man, fight for my job like a man, think like a man. I don't want to be a man, I want to be a woman — and I know damn well I'm not a woman at all even at my better moments, I'm just a young girl with so many responsibilities it throws me into a state of shock' (Jaffe 2011: 198-199).

For her a job is the most important means for survival, but, as reported above, the attitude she has in its respect is that of a man. Only after her affair with Sidney Carter and her promotion, she finds a new meaning and she starts to think that she "may turn out to be a successful career woman after all" (*ibid.* 310). Barbara ended up marring Sidney and quitted her job to "stay home to take care of her little girl" (*ibid.* 387), thus entering the category of the 'happy housewife.' Maybe, after having found satisfaction in her job, she might go back to it after her daughter has grown up, creating a similar scenario to that of many Women of '50: "working until they had children, then dropping out of the labor force while raising their children, then working again" (Steinmann 2005: 41).

In *The Best of Everything*, every female character aspires to a domestic and content life as 'happy housewife.' Mary Agnes is given her memorable wedding and moves to the suburbs with her husband; after her disastrous relationship with Dexter, April finds the 'perfect man' from back home and marries him; the divorced Barbara is given a second chance with divorced Sidney; even the psychologically disturbed, or just depressed, Gregg makes curtains for David Wilder Savage's kitchen, symbol of her striving for a domestic

life. On the contrary, the life of the two main career women, with the exception of Barbara, represent one the continuum of the other. Indeed, Caroline's life cycle retraces that of Miss Farrow, preferring a career to a loveless marriage. They embody the image of the "girl on the rock" previously drawn by Mike, Caroline does not fit either the category of the respectable and proper girl, nor the category of the courageous girls who breaks with tradition: " 'So you sit there on the rock, and you say, What will become of me?' " (Jaffe 2011: 112-113). The author of the novel thought it to be a cautionary tale and was surprised to have inspired many women to "come to New York and work in publishing" (*ibid*. xi) instead. If it really is a cautionary tale, then its warning might be that women could not have 'the best of everything' as quoted from the ad. They had to choose between a life as housewives or as career women, but not both.

2. 3. *The Best of Everything* — the Movie

"Aren't we the best girls? From the best homes and the best colleges?".[11]

The idea for a movie based on Rona Jaffe's novel was born together with the idea of the book itself. As a matter of fact, in the foreword to the 2011 edition of *The Best of Everything*, the author narrates which were the circumstances that led her to write the novel. She explains that, after talking to the Hollywood producer Jerry Wald who wanted a new and modern version of Kitty Foyle, Jaffe decided she was going to be the one to write it. On a later meeting between Jaffe and Wald, the author remarked: " 'I am going to write that working girl-book.' He replied that he was going to produce it" (Jaffe 2011: ix). The movie, which premiered in 1959 and was released by 20th Century-Fox, starred Hope Lange, Stephen Boyd, Suzy Parker, Martha Hyer, Diane Baker, and Joan Crawford.

The movie presents many features differing from the original 1958 novel, and even important scenes missing altogether. One of the reasons for such omissions might be the restrictions imposed by the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as Hays Code. It has been effective between 1930 and 1968 and it acted as a moral code imposing censorship to many Hollywood productions which were not morally acceptable. Indeed, *The Best of Everything* lacks most of the references to the protagonists' sexual life otherwise present in the novel. The most resounding change in this respect regards the love-making scene between Caroline and Mike Rice, which in the book represents a life-

[11] Caroline talking to Eddie. From the movie *The Best of Everything* (1h49').

changing experience for Caroline, and also, one which changes the relationship between the two. Instead, in the movie this scene is transposed in Mike watching Caroline sleeping on the couch. Even the harassment scene between Mr. Shalimar and Barbara Lemont is played behind closed doors and the audience is left to speculate, while in the novel that particular moment is explained in detail, expressing the total humiliation felt by Barbara.

The literary narration gives insights on the characters' feelings, ambitions and reactions, while in the movie the audience has to deduce it from their expressions, there is no voiceover to speak out the characters' thoughts. This, together with no particular growth on the part of the characters, gives a general impression that the events are not realistic. Despite the two nominations at the 32nd Academy Awards for Best Original Song and Best Costume Design (Color),[12] the movie has not been received positively by the critique. A review of the time which appeared on the *New York Times* says: "Whatever the book lacked in skill and substance, it could hardly have missed as a lively, colorful screen yarn. Yet it has" (Thompson 1959). In the same review, characters like Mr. Shalimar are described as caricatural. Similarly, events appear quite unrealistic, for instance "The harsh scene in which Miss Baker is whisked away by Mr. Evans toward an illegal operation is more pretentious than realistic" (*ibid.* 1959), or Mary Agnes's wedding shower, which is held at the office, and the wedding itself, to which even the executives are invited.

Another drastic change is the one regarding the characters' dynamics. First of all, the protagonists of the movie are Caroline Bender, April Morrison, and Gregg Adams, while Mary Agnes Russo and Barbara Lemont are only side characters, the latter of which could even be left out from the narration. In his review, this change has thus been commented on by Howard Thompson: "The tender romance of the nice young widow and the aging executive, the novel's most deeply felt interlude, is barely scraped. In these roles, Donald Harron and Martha Hyer briefly collide in the Fabian corridors and gape soulfully" (*ibid.* 1959). The character of Amanda Farrow takes more relevance than in the novel, probably due to the choice of actress; indeed, it is an already affirmed Joan Crawford who plays her part. Again, the New York Times' reviewer, as many other colleagues of him, noticed the greater space given to Miss Farrow: "On the other hand, the small part of Amanda Farrow,

[12] The winners of the Awards were respectively: Best Original Song - "High Hopes" from "A Hole in the Head"; and Best Costume Design (Color) - Elizabeth Haffenden for "Ben-Hur".

the sleek executive witch who torments her young charges, has been fattened and overstated, even with some suave trouping by Miss Crawford" (*ibid.* 1959).

Other two characters are absent from the movie: Mr. Bossart who is named at times, and John Cassaro. The latter has a prominent role towards the end of the novel, when Caroline's life goes helter-skelter Indeed, when she is made known of Gregg's death and of Eddie's 'betrayal,' and she realizes that she will never marry Paul Landis, John Cassaro becomes her lifeline. Instead, the movie ends with a happy and successful Caroline walking in the city with Mike Rice. In general, contrary to the novel's narration, the movie presents a more positive development in which, with the exception of the death of a 'disturbed' Gregg, the relationship of every protagonist results in a happy ending. Even the novel's 'bitchy' Miss Farrow and her relationship with Caroline is different. At first Miss Farrow shows envy and feels threatened by a promising Caroline just promoted to the position of reader:

> Caroline: As a matter of fact, he said he's been talking to you. I don't know how to thank you!
> Miss Farrow: I told Mr. Shalimar that you were not qualified, Miss Bender. You're too soft. I don't think you can stand up to a writer and say 'Your work is not good.' I don't think you have the guts (*The Best of Everything* 1959: 51'46").

At the end their relationship becomes friendly and they approach each other in equal terms without any sign of the previous animosity.

The character of Mike Rice, instead, has been completely altered. He embodies all the other missing male characters and expresses the opinion expressed by them in the novel, for instance, in the movie Mike does not approve of Caroline's ambitions to pursue a career, while in the novel he supports her talent.

> [after talking about the metaphor of the girl on the rock] Caroline: I think she knows what will become of her and she's on her way.
> Mike: Oh, her way to what, Amanda Farrow's job?
> Caroline: Maybe, anything wrong with that?
> Mike: Not a thing, that is if you want to become a ruthless, thriving, calculating woman.
> Caroline: I'm interested in my work, I wanna do that!
> Mike: Honey, you don't give a damn about your work! All you care about is your ambition.
> […]
> Caroline: How would you know? I might be better at her job than she is!
> Mike: You wouldn't be better, just younger (*The Best of Everything* 1959: 1h 01').

His relationship with Caroline is ambiguous, on the one hand, he does not support her choices like in the aforementioned dialogue, or when talking about her promotion to editor, on the other hand they are portrayed as a very close couple. For instance on the second occasion they talk to each other at the bar, it seems they have known each other for a long time, and at the end of the movie they walk away together.

The character of Paul Landis, so present in Jaffe's novel, in the movie is just a cameo. He appears as Caroline's blind date and then leaves her at the bar with Mike. Unlike in the novel, Paul does not express many opinions and is described only through Caroline's words:

> Caroline: [drunk] Shall I tell you about Paul Landis? Paul Landis is dependable, and he's steady… [confused] Eddie isn't steady…Eddie isn't ready to be steady…
> Mike: Sit down, have a seat. What else is he?
> Caroline: Paul Landis is gracious living. Shall I tell you what else? He's exactly what every girl wants to marry, exactly! Would you love to marry him… Only you can't stand him.
> Mike: Scratch him off the list. (*The Best of Everything* 1959: 44' 26")

There is no mention to his nickname as Bermuda Schwartz, nevertheless the characteristics that made him the stereotype of the 1950s' man are all there. He is portrayed as every girl's dream husband, from the perfect social class and with the perfect job.

2. 4. 'The Best of Something'

"'Do you want to do that always, or do you want to get married?'
'Can't I do both?' "[13].

Much of the study present in this chapter is based on Marion Steinmann's book *Women at Work* because it provided a detailed analysis and statements of and from real middle-class career women of the 1950s. During that decade, the attitude towards working women was ambivalent. On the one hand there was a certain rejection at seeing a middle-class woman working for a career. On the other hand, many women of the time found identity and fulfillment in pursuing a career, thus confuting the stereotype which said that "In the '50's there was only one choice. If you were a woman, you were a housewife" (Steinmann 2005: 15). The Cornell's Women of '50 are an example of successful career women who not only had a job for many years, most of them for over twenty years, but also created a family

[13] One of Caroline's dates on her future (Jaffe 2005: 72).

which supported their choice which obviously was not that of being just housewives. The reasons which drove women to pursue a career are not only of economic nature. "Most women wanted more out of life, and most cited more than one reason for working" (*ibid*. 71).

A stop to this trend was represented by the still too common sexual discrimination in the workplace. As a matter of fact, women in the same position as men were paid less and "some Women of '50 reported that they were denied jobs or promotions because they were women" (*ibid*. 106). Indeed, legislations which denied gender segregation in the workplace were approved only in 1972 with the introduction of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which did not lead to an actual application of such law. Actually, many organizations were working to ensure equality between men and women, but also to give a greater relevance to women's contribution to society. The National Manpower Council (NMC) "recognized early on that it needed study womanpower" (Meyerowitz 1987: 87) in order to expand the national industry to its fullest. Another organization which studied "women's status was the Commission on the Education of Women" (CEW) (*ibid*. 88).

Despite the common image of the 1950s as the years of the 'happy days' represented by quiet suburban lifestyle, they actually represent a period of transition, a sort of bridge from the post-war years and the more turbulent 1960s. The five very diverse characters of Rona Jaffe's novel *The Best of Everything* summarize the aspirations of many women of the 1950s and the already mentioned 'split character.' Indeed, the protagonists of the novel are torn between a life as wives and homemakers, and the challenges of a career. In this novel the life cycle of Mary Agnes, Barbara and April stops at marriage: from college to work, and finally to marriage which seems to be followed by a dull routine. The narrator illustrates this situation as such:

> This was where Mary Agnes and Bill had been born, and where they had grown up and met and fallen in love, and where they had gotten married, and where they would live and bring up their children. Perhaps they would move away after a year or two, to Levittown[14] or Forest Hills or even to Manhattan. It didn't matter. Wherever they lived it would be the same (Jaffe 2011: 272).

[14] created between 1947 and 1951 by Levitt & Sons, Inc., Levittown is a very famous planned community which also represents the image of conformity of the 1950s. For more informations: http://statemuseumpa.org/levittown/one/b.html

The men, on the other hand, do not show the same depth of the female characters. None of them shows any change throughout the novel and have a rather selfish attitude towards a possible future life with the female protagonists of *The Best of Everything*.

The characters of Mary Agnes and Paul Landis, mockingly called Bermuda Schwartz, are the figures which best represent the common stereotypical image we have of men and women of the 1950s. Mary Agnes's life is all about marriage and becoming a wife, and even for Paul everything a woman should be concerned about is the house and her husband, with no further interest on her working life. In opposition to the figure represented by Mary Agnes, there are Caroline and Miss Farrow, two successful career women:

> But her few moments of panic had shown her how much her work really meant to her. It had started out as a stopgap, but now it had become a way of life. It gave her a sense of value and of belonging. Perhaps that, besides ability, was what made her so good at the job that they could not now afford to lose her" (Jaffe 2011: 377).

For these two women a career was not only a means to support themselves, but above all it gave them a 'sense of value and belonging.'

Figure 8: A 1959 poster of the movie *The Best of Everything*.

The last symbol of the ambiguities of the novel is the juxtaposition between the shiny and glamorous New York City, and dark bars and run-down little apartments in which the girls lived. “Like his [Matthew Weiner, *Mad Men*'s creator] scripts, the novel is replete with five o'clock Martinis in sepulchral bars” (Cooke 2012), compared to “the girls' office at the Rockefeller Centre, then considered the epicenter of glamour” (*ibid.*). Moreover, the changing seasons add to the sense of transition and transformation of the city as mirror to the characters’ inner changes. One of the posters which advertised the 1959’s movie said: “Nakedly expose the female jungle where women fight and love their way to the top — to get the things they want!” The poster emphasizes women’s economic and sexual exploitation of men in order to achieve their goals, characteristic which actually is not presented in these terms either in the novel, nor in the movie. As the narrator tells: “Despite all the rumors about Miss Farrow and Mr. Bossart, Caroline still felt that a girl got ahead in spite of an office affair, not because of it” (Jaffe 2011: 173).

Finally, as mentioned above, in 1959 premiered the movie based on Jaffe’s novel starring actresses as Hope Lange and Joan Crawford to name a few. However, it did not achieve much success, probably because of the characters’ flat personality, and the undeveloped storyline. Moreover, the narration presented many inconsistencies in comparison to Jaffe’s novel, but also gaps in the narration. Many scenes essential to the literary narration are absent from the movie, in particular those involving sex. As a matter of fact, the movie is rather ‘sexless’ for today’s conventions, but at the time it might have gone through censorship, even if self-imposed, because of the Hays code. In general, the movie resembles a soap opera, with some misadventures and an open happy ending. On the contrary, the novel has more insights on the characters’ thoughts, and many dark moments like Gregg’s depression and death, but also April’s abortion and her relationship with an insensitive boyfriend. To conclude, women could not have ‘the best of everything,’ but had to compromise to ‘the best of something.’

3. Changing Representations of Working Women

3. 1 Working Mothers

"Those kids come first in this house, before either one of us." (23')[15]

In the postwar years many married women sought a job outside the household in order to increment the family income. "While mother marched off—indeed by the very act of marching off to work—they affirmed their devotion to family life" (Blackwelder 1997: 149). As a matter of fact, if a family wanted to keep up with the new American economy, not only working-class, but also middle-class women had to join the labor market. As stated by Carosso, "the American economy completed its transformation from a simple production economy, centered on satisfying basic human needs such as food, shelter, and clothing, to a consumer economy" (2012: 39). Therefore, women's choice to work was not as free as one might think, as we saw in the previous chapter[16], many working mothers gave their children and family as principal reason. One of the Cornell Women of '50, Jane Wigsten McGonial who went back to work in 1970, thus replied to Steinmann's question 'Why did you go to work?': "To put my competencies in action, to provide family and personal income [and to] contribute to society" (Steinmann 2005: 75). Her words summarized all the possible reasons for a woman to have a career. Nevertheless:

> The fact that in the fifties, 'more than one-third of the working women [in America] were shouldering the responsibilities for a home and children of school age along with outside jobs,' that by 1955, 'the proportion of women in the work force exceeded the highest level reached during the war,' and that 'between 1940 and 1960 the number of working wives doubled and the number of working mothers quadrupled,' became lost beneath the image of the woman-as-homemaker which the fifties projected upon the female sex (Ryan qtd. in French 1892: xiv).

Moreover, the national ideal of 'togetherness' emphasized in the postwar era promoted a family founded on a child-centered home, but also on the idea of the romantic couple (Weiss 2000: 139). This concept of 'togetherness' together with the model of a two-income family presumed a certain degree of shared responsibilities and the creation of the so-called 'companionate marriage' (Blackwelder 1997: 156). But in that decade, the actuation of a family based on equality of roles between husband and wife was far from reality, and

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[15] Mildred to her first husband Bert Pierce; from *Mildred Pierce* (1945).

[16] 2.1 "Real and Fictional Women of '50"

as Friedan stated in *The Feminine Mystique*: "Few saw the big lie of togetherness for women" (2013: 37). As a matter of fact, "despite widespread expert attention, the cultural configuration of fatherhood in the 1950s remained limited" (Weiss 2000: 92), and the gender dynamics of the household maintained the timeless division between woman homemaker and man breadwinner. At the time, the idea of a companionate marriage implied a rearrangement of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' in the couple's dynamics. "Just as recent research in the history of masculinity in the 1950s calls attention to the ways men became more domestic, middle-class women took on the less domestic role of the breadwinning mother in the decades following World War II" (*ibid.* 80). This kind of rearrangement implies not only a shifting of domestic roles, but also of authority and power. Indeed, the husband's masculinity is posed under threat not only by women's diminishing femininity, but also by their own more 'feminine' role in the family.

In addition to the restraint which the feminine mystique put on women's ambition, one of the main problems faced by working mothers in the 1950s was the absence of appropriate child-care facilities to help them balance their dual role as mother and worker. "Household help was out of reach for most middle-class families, and social services for working mothers appeared at the bottom of the national agenda. Solutions to the dilemma of household work in prescription and reality fell to the individual working mother to devise" (*ibid.* 58). It is probably for this reason that: "The bulk of the increase in labor force participation in the fifties occurred among women over forty-five—past the years when they would normally have young children at home" (Kessler-Harris 1982: 302). However, in 1954, during Eisenhower presidency, the Revenue Act passed, "establish[ing] the deductibility of child-care expenses for some employed mothers" (Hartman qtd. in Meyerowitz 1987: 85). In her survey, Marion Steinmann considered working women's feelings and thoughts on dealing both with a career and a household. Among the questions she posed to the Cornell alumnae, one asked: 'How did or does the rest of your family, if any, feel about your working, if you did?' Here are reported some of the answers:

- There appeared to be no resentment. […] Our children attended private schools (elementary, high school and college) and were aware of the costs to their parents (Steinmann 2005: 119).

- I think that as a result for my involvement my children prospered by having to think and do for themselves at times. […] They became more independent at earlier ages than many of their peers (*ibid.* 120).

- My kids never knew me not to work, but years later my older daughter said it was hard not having me home when she got home (*ibid.*).

The following question was 'How did you or do you feel about trying to balance family and career, if you did or do?' Some of the answers are shown below:

- I feel it is very difficult to give full measure to a career, children and husband. One needs a great deal of energy to avoid short changing one of the above (*ibid.* 123).

- Given the paucity of support systems for working mothers, it was exhausting and frustrating, but I was determined to do both well. I still feel some guilt about not being the 100-percent-perfect parent (*ibid.*).

- Very exhausting and very fulfilling! Worth it if one has the physical and mental and moral stamina (*ibid.* 125).

The 'split character' of women's role is evident once again in the will to be woman, mother, and worker. Actually, "experts cautioned wives with jobs about the size of the task they undertook, because in the notion of the 'two-job' marriage in the 1950s, the wife had two jobs and the husband one" (Weiss 2000: 58).

The relationship between working mother and daughter is the subject of the 1945 movie *Mildred Pierce*, which focuses in particular on a mother's determination to give her daughter everything she wanted, and on her daughter's insatiable greed. The story is a transposition, albeit with many changes, of James M. Cain's novel[17] published in 1941 with the same title. The movie, which premiered in 1945 and was directed by Michael Curtiz, mixes the genres of film noir and melodrama. Unlike Cain's novel from which it was adapted, it is characterized by the use of some specifically noir-ish features such as the flashback, and first-person narrator. Through the flashbacks Mildred, the protagonist, tells her story to the detective in order to reach the truth over Monte's murder. On the other

[17] A summary of the novel's plot can be found in Sarah Churchill's article appeared in *The Guardian* in 2011. In the novel, the story develops in chronological order and is told by a third-person narrator. "Looked at from one angle, the story is simple enough: in 1931, during the depths of the depression, a middle-class housewife in the suburbs of Los Angeles with a knack for cooking kicks out her increasingly "shiftless" and philandering husband Bert and goes to work as a waitress to support her two daughters. She builds up a thriving restaurant business, and has a passionate affair with a rich playboy named Monty, whom she eventually marries. By story's end Mildred has lost everything because of her overwhelming love for her pretentious, narcissistic and duplicitous elder daughter, Veda" (Churchwell 2011).

hand, the voiceover[18], which is told by Mildred represents an exception to the general male voice common to 'classic' film noir, underlying the unprecedented power given to a female protagonist. According to Kaplan, "The generic features of the noir thriller which locate strong women in image-producing roles […] encourage the creation of heroines whose means of struggle is precisely the manipulation of the image which centuries of female representations have provided" (1998:17).

3. 2 *Mildred Pierce* — 1945 Movie

"I'll get you everything, anything you want. I promise." (32')[19]

At the end of the first wave of feminism in the United States, after women were granted the right to vote by the approval of the Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitution, the branch of literature of the time which had women as subject delineated an image of independent and strong women. The shift from the late 1920s to the 1950s was thus observed by Betty Friedan: "The old image of the spirited career girls largely created by writers and editors who were women. […] The new image of woman as housewife-mother has been largely created by writers and editors who are men" (2013: 42)[20]. Nonetheless, Hollywood's film industry offered a second image in opposition to that of melodrama characters, also called 'weepies,' by author June Sochen, which is:

> That of the strong, Independent Woman type, also had a long, exciting history in Hollywood filmmaking prior to 1945. This genre included screen characterizations of career women, business women, entertainers, and marginal types such as gangsters' girl friends and whores. Career women films were quite common in the thirties and early forties. Rosalind Russell played 23 different professional woman roles in that period. Hepburn's whole career was based upon that characterization. Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, Kay Francis, Joan Crawford, Myrna Loy, Jean Arthur, Claudette Colbert, and numerous others played newspaper reporters, writers, lawyers, doctors, commercial artists, and nurses in the films of the period. Similarly, many played down-and-out women who had to display strength to survive (1978: 11).

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[18] [voiceover] in the quoted text is always told by Mildred.

[19] Mildred to her daughter Veda; from *Mildred Pierce* (1945).

[20] for Friedan's account on the first wave of Feminism and what led to it: *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 2013: 64-85; "The Passionate Journey").

Curtiz adaptation of Cain's novel, both titled *Mildred Pierce*, was a commercial as well as critical success, and it depicted Joan Crawford's character as that of a self-made businesswoman. This very characterization is in sharp contrast to the findings of the Women's Bureau which reported that "regardless of marital status, the vast majority of the working women surveyed provided some economic support to members of their immediate to extended family" (Blackwelder 1997: 157).

Figure 9: A still from *Mildred Pierce* (1945) depicting a very rich Mildred dressed in fur coat. This figure also presents the typical low-key lighting of classical film noir.

The narration of Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* is very different from the original novel, probably to respect the usual features of film noir. This genre, which traditionally includes movies produced between 1941 and 1958, reflects the general anxiety of the time and seeks to trace a line between right and wrong. For this reason, the characters who fall outside the standard promoted by society are punished in order to reestablish a sense of security and normalcy. In this regard, it is important to point out the sharp division that the film noir usually makes between its female characters: the dutiful housewife and the *femme fatale*. As Sochen stated: "Hollywood moviemakers, as well as most American tastemakers, have always listened to the conservatives, not the reformers. They have agreed, by their screen portrayals of women, that strong, independent women are potential disruptors of social patterns. They have lauded the sweet Marys and duly punished the naughty Eves" (1978: 19). As I will discuss later on, Mildred falls into the category of the doting mother, who loses both job and daughters for not being also the dutiful housewife;

while Veda represents the *femme fatale*, she is the vicious and greedy girl who stops at nothing to reach her goal, and for this reason she is *fatale*, deathly, both for others and for herself. Another feature of film noir present in this version of *Mildred Pierce*, and maybe the most obvious one, is the mystery plot. The ambiguous beginning of the novel represents a riddle for the audience. The narration, which is built upon flashbacks and voiceovers, aims at increasing this sense of distortion of events, as well as the spectator's impression on who is the real murderer. In this case, unlike in most film noir, here the hardboiled detective does not act as protagonist, but he is a marginal figure through which the truth is revealed.

The other genre covered by *Mildred Pierce* is melodrama which, according to Williams, "is a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and irrational truths through a dialectic of pathos and action. It is the foundation of the classical Hollywood movie" (qtd. in Mercer&Shingler 2004: 88). Important to the efficiency of melodrama is its capability to produce emotions, pathos, on the spectator which is created by the discrepancy between "the knowledge and the point of view of the spectator and the knowledge and the point of view of the characters" (Mercer&Shingler 2004: 81). In melodrama, as well as in film noir, the juxtaposition between good and evil is fundamental, and in *Mildred Pierce* the juxtaposed characters are Mildred and Veda respectively. "The good suffer as a direct consequence of their virtue, goodness and innocence, falling prey to the evil vices of the villain" (*ibid.* 85). Indeed, Mildred's sufferings are caused by her excessive zeal towards her spoiled daughter Veda who is ready even to blackmail in the name of money. The success of this movie might be linked to the fact that it combined an already famous genre of the time, melodrama, with an emerging one, film noir.[21]

The movie deals with three crucial topics for the 1950s: the status of businesswoman, the husband-wife relationship, and the mother-daughter relationship. Money is central to the development of such dynamics: who earns the money? Who spends it? And finally, does it have positive or negative repercussions on the characters' relationships? Starring actors such as Joan Crawford, Jack Carson, Zachary Scott, Ann Blyth, Eve Arden, and Bruce Bennet, "*Mildred Pierce* gained Academy Award nominations for best script and picture; Crawford won for best actress" (Spicer qtd. in Miklitsch 2014: 134-135). An

[21] *Mildred Pierce* was a "shrewd amalgamation of two previously separate genres—the murder mystery and the woman's picture—[and] was highly successful" (Spicer qtd. in Miklitsch 2014: 134-135).

article which appeared in the magazine *New Republic* right after the movie premiere, described the plot as such:

> The story of Warner Brothers' movie, "Mildred Pierce," recounts the enormous and unrewarded sacrifices that a mother (Joan Crawford) makes for her spoiled, greedy daughter (Ann Blythe). The mother, whose husband (Bruce Bennett) has left her to live with another woman, starts baking cakes and pies for the neighbors, becomes a waitress in a tearoom, opens a drive-in-restaurant, marries a society gigolo for his name, and finally tries to get her business partner (Jack Carson) convicted for the murder committed by her daughter. It ends with the girl being led away to prison and the mother beginning a new, more beautiful existence with her first husband, who has just got work in an airplane factory and whose mistress has married someone else (Farber 1945).

Mildred Pierce's focus on the image of working women in postwar American has an "important role in depicting gender distress in modern culture" (Grossman qtd. in Miklitsch 2014: 37). Indeed, it draws the line between what and how much work was deemed acceptable outside the house, and what was considered to be at the limit of women's 'masculinity.'

Curtiz's movie is among the first ones to show a crack in the image of domesticity which was being spread by society in those years, and which will get a foothold in the 1950s, thus becoming a cult. "Wartime and postwar narratives have often favored a darker outlook on the American institution of family. As hardboiled literature and film noir warned about the dark side of the American Dream, family was often a favorite context for debunking the myth of togetherness" (Carosso 2012: 73). Indeed, *Mildred Pierce* is the perfect example of failure of 'togetherness:'

> [voiceover] We lived in Corvalis street, where all the houses looked alike. Ours was number 1143. I was always in the kitchen, I felt as though I've been born in a kitchen and lived there all my life except for the two hours that took to get married. […] I married Bert when I was seventeen, I never knew any kind of life, just cooking and washing and having children, two girls, Veda and Kay (*Mildred Pierce* 1945: 20').

In this flashback Mildred's voice gives the audience the image of herself as the classic suburban housewife, but in the second part of her speech we understand that her life is not so perfect. Indeed her husband lost his job after the real estate market dropped, and she is the one who has to provide for her family by "Baking cakes and making pies for the neighbors" (*ibid.* 20'). Mildred's words express the latent unhappiness and lack of

fulfillment noticed by Friedan in the 1950s middle-class housewives, and which she called 'the problem that has no name.'[22] This problem was reported by newspapers and magazines, but only to dismiss it; for instance an article said: " 'Having too good a time… to believe that they should be unhappy.' " (Friedan 2013: 15).

Figure 10: A still from *Mildred Pierce* (1945) depicting the protagonist at the beginning of her successful career.

As stated by Brendon French in the introduction to the book *On the Verge of Revolt*, "After 1941, women in movies begin to do 'man-sized' jobs. […] Joan Crawford evolves from a housewife to the owner of a chain of successful Southern California restaurants in *Mildred Pierce* (1945)" (1982: xvi). At first, Mildred understands how difficult it was for unskilled women to find a job, but eventually she starts working as waitress in a restaurant, and she "learned the restaurant business, I learned it the hard way" (*Mildred Pierce* 1945: 36'). In this movie Mildred represents the self-made woman, thus creating a "new social type: a career wife-mother" (Sochen 1978: 13), possessing both the feminine trait of wife-mother, and the masculine one of having a career.

[22] Full chapter in: *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 2013: 9-24; "The Problem That Has No Name").

> More energetic and entrepreneurial than most, Mildred exhibited the all-American (usually male) traits of hard work, self-reliance, and perseverance. Her efforts paid off in the best Horatio Alger[23] tradition. But, and this is a major but, she was also a mother and this role required primary attention. While businessmen may or may not be fathers, businesswomen-mothers must attend to their mothering first. Thus, Mildred Pierce was blamed implicitly (and blamed herself) for her children's behavior (*ibid.* 8).

Mildred Pierce has become a successful businesswoman, which is proved also by the improvement of her lifestyle: at first she lives in a suburban house and wears simple clothes, while at the end of the movie she lives in Monte's family mansion bought by herslef, wears fashionable and expensive clothes like fur coat, and buys a car for Veda's birthday. However, "Mildred Pierce, as a successful businesswoman, probably would not have returned to the home under normal circumstances" (*ibid.* 18).

Figure 11: A still from *Mildred Pierce* (1945) depicting a 'masculinized' image of Mildred.

What we understand, though, is that Mildred's ambition is dictated by the will to appease, or better, spoil, her daughter Veda, and she does so not for personal fulfillment or to support her family as some Cornell Women of '50 did. In the second voiceover, Mildred affirms that: "Everything I touched turned into money, and I needed it, I needed it for Veda. She was becoming a young lady with expensive tastes" (*Mildred Pierce* 1945: 1h 05'). Mildred's growth in wealth was flanked by a sort of masculinization of her character. As a matter of fact, in the scene in which she returns from her journey and catches up with Ida,

[23] 19th century American author known for his "rags-to-riches' narrations.

Mildred has a 'masculine' appearance. During this conversation we understand that also her manners and habits have changed:

> Mildred: Gotta a drink handy?
> Ida: Yeah, I guess so. […] You never used to drink during the day.
> Mildred: Never used to drink at all, it's just a little habit I picked up from men. (*ibid.* 1h 21')

This redrawing of her image reflects her success as a businesswoman. Moreover, her status as single working mother represents a challenge to the 1950s cultural script of housewife-mother, therefore "Mildred Pierce had to be destroyed to eliminate any troublesome thoughts held by working mothers. Rosie the Riveter and Mildred Pierce had to go home again" (Sochen 1978: 13). The sense of normalcy so important after the war, could be managed only by maintaining the *status quo*, therefore, "the relative economic freedom given to women as part of the war effort had to be revoked, the boundaries redrawn, especially in terms of who was to fill managerial positions and other high-paying, decision-making jobs." (Nelson qtd. in Nichols 457)

For what concerns the relationship between husband and wife, in Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* the correlation is opposite to postwar standard. Mildred's first marriage fails, exposing the possibility of a consequent failure of togetherness. As a matter of fact, her economic power over Bert Pierce was a threat to his status as the family's breadwinner (Weiss 2000: 74). The first argument they face echoes the words of one of Cornell's Women of '50 who stated: "When his career faltered he was insecure and resentful of my success, then OK when he was back on track" (Steinmann 2005: 118). The frustrations of such pre-definite roles was felt on both parts: "Husbands communicated little of their work worries with their wives, who in turn kept mum about the frustrations of homemaking, childrearing, or working" (Weiss 2000: 139). Eventually, when Mildred and Bert divorced, it was because she needed to keep a complete control over her business. Indeed, "by working, women enhanced their power in marriage, particularly with regard to financial decisions" (*ibid.* 78), but, it was a double-edged sword. That is, if she and Bert stayed together, Mildred as the earner would have had to support him, even pay for his debts. After this moment she is completely independent from Bert Pierce. However, he still thinks of her as his responsibility, until he sees with his own eyes that she is capable to take care for herself: "It's about the divorce. […] When you asked for the divorce I still didn't think

that you could make it good all alone, but now I know better, you are doing all right, Mildred. You are doing fine…" (*Mildred Pierce* 1945: 1h 02').

Mildred's second husband, Monte Beragon, is both opposite and the same as Mr. Pierce. On the one hand, he too needs Mildred for her money, on the other hand, he does not feel threatened by her economic power, on the contrary, he gladly takes advantage from it. Therefore, Mildred and Monte's relationship is characterized by the transaction of money. Indeed, they first meet in the act of buying and selling Monte's real estate. "[voiceover] That's how it began, at first it bothered Mounty to take money from me, then it became a habit with him" (*Mildred Pierce* 1945: 1h 06'). The marriage between Mildred and Monte is announced on a newspaper with a picture and these words: "Business woman and Beragon heir wed" (*ibid.* 1h 32'). As we will later discuss, despite Mildred's ascent to upper-class, both Veda and Monte keep seeing her as coming from working-class, and therefore not fit for society. Monte expresses his disdain by saying: "Yes, I take money from you Mildred, but not enough to make me like kitchen or cooks, they smell of grease" (*ibid.* 1h 11').

The most recognizable difference between Mr. Pierce and Mr. Beragon are class differences, particularly revealed by their habits and attitudes:

> Thus, Monte's leisure is characterized by French *bon mots*, playing polo, gambling, drinking and seduction, while Bert plays gin with Mrs. Beiderhoff. As Mildred's business grows in success, Bert's potency decreases while Monte does not. […] Without an income, Bert plays a servile, asexual role, while Monte, also unemployed, retains his sexual attractiveness and actual status" (Nelson qtd. in Nichols 456).

Opposite to Friedan's statement which said that: "Men fell for the mystique without a murmur of dissent. It promised them mothers for the rest of their lives" (2013: 171), Monte 'fell' for Mildred's business acumen because it promised him an income for the rest of his life. This inversion of roles, together with Mildred's "unprecedented power and authority" (French 1982: xviii) had to be reversed in accord with society's standards. Therefore, the movie ends with a sort of return to domesticity: Mildred and Bert walk away together, she can resume to her role as housewife, while he has a new job to support his family. Despite the hardships faced by all the characters, the original balance has been reestablished, and justice has been made. Monte and Bert reflect Mildred's social ascent

and descent, implying that a woman could aspire to a lasting higher social status only if her husband provided for it.

Mildred's role as mother is the third and last relevant topic of the movie. Indeed, *Mildred Pierce*'s narrative evolves around the protagonist's effort to please her daughter Veda in every possible way. Since the beginning of the flashback, the audience is presented with a view of a child-centered home in which the mother is willing to sacrifice everything for her daughters Veda and Kay. She makes it clear to her husband Bert Pierce with a first allusion to a separation: "Those kids come first in this house, before either one of us. […] I'm determined to do the best I can for them, if I can't do it with you, I'll do it without you." (*Mildred Pierce* 1945: 23'). When they get a separation the reaction of Mildred's daughters is opposite from one another. If Kay cried herself to sleep, Veda's selfishness and greed are immediately shown in a conversation with her mother:

> Veda: You could marry him [Wally] if you wanted to.
> Mildred: But I'm not in love with him.
> Veda: What if you married him, then maybe we could have a maid like we used to, and a limousine, and maybe a new house.
> […]
> Mildred: I want you to have nice things, and you'll have them. Wait and see. I'll get you everything, anything you want. I promise.
> Veda: How?
> Mildred: I don't know, but I will, I promise. (*ibid.* 32').

Through the whole movie Veda takes advantage of her mother's parental love and does not stop at anything in order to achieve her goal, which is to have an upper-class lifestyle. "Throughout the film Veda's methods for getting ahead in the world are ruthless, devious, and cut-throat. […] Mildred, on the other hand, is generous and honest, and in terms of business and familial interactions is unlike any other characters, especially Veda" (Nelson qtd. in Nichols 456). In addition to her chain of restaurants, by buying Monte's family mansion, Mildred could meet Veda's expectations of a upper-class lifestyle, Monte's lifestyle. Indeed, "Veda doesn't fetishize particular objects, she does plant a big kiss on a ten-thousand-dollar check, expending on purchasing power the emotional energy that she withholds from actual purchases" (Jurca 2002: 41).

Despite her obvious middle-class origins, Veda feels she belongs to the upper class and she expects to live as such. As long as her working mother satisfies her every wish, she

ignores Mildred's ascent as a wealthy businesswoman, and in the worst moments she expresses her disdain:

> Veda: Why do you think I want this money so badly? […] With this money I can get away from you. From you and your chickens and your pies and kitchens and everything that smells of grease. I can get away from this shack with its cheap furniture, and this town […] and its women that wear uniforms and its men that wear overalls.
> Mildred: Veda, I think I'm really seeing you for the first time in my life, and you are cheap horrible.
> Veda: You think just because you made a little money you can get a new hairdo and some expensive clothes and turn yourself into a lady? But you can't, because you'll never be anything but a common frump, whose father lived over a grocery store and whose mother took in washing (*Mildred Pierce* 1945: 1h 19').

Even before this episode, Mildred starts to recognize Veda's real character and with it she starts to put the blame on herself as mother. As Betty Friedan points out: "By some strange distortion of logic, all the neuroses of children past and presenter blamed on the independence and individuality of this new generation of American girls—independence and individuality which the housewives of the previous generation had never had" (2013: 159). Mildred best represents this new generation of independent working women:

> Mildred: Look, Monte, I worked long and hard trying to give Veda the things I never had. I've done without a lot of things, including happiness sometimes, because I wanted her to have everything. Now I'm losing her, she's drifting away from me. She hardly speaks to me anymore, except to ask for money or make fun at me in French because I work for a living (*Mildred Pierce* 1945: 1h 11').

In her article on Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce*, Pamela Robertson underlines the same concept of 'blame it on the mothers' posed under accusation by Friedan, and which was taken from Freud's analysis: "Mildred insists on her blame and error for the events to come. Silverman notes that the female voice generally reveals a 'remarkable facility for self-disparagement and self-incrimination—for putting the blame on Mame.' Without coercion, it takes the responsibility and 'lack' onto itself" (Robertson 1990: 45).

What is not shown in the movie is the Mildred's everyday relationship with Veda. Therefore the audience is left assuming that all her time is spent managing the restaurants and leaving Veda to herself even at her birthday party. Some Women of '50 reveal the complexities of tending both to a career and to a family. To give a more precise example, I will report again some answers from Steinmann's book. One of them affirmed that: "I feel

it is very difficult to give full measure to a career, children and husband. One needs a great deal of energy to avoid short changing one of the above" (2005: 123); another stated that: "My kids never knew me not to work, but years later my older daughter said it was hard not having me home when she got home" (*ibid.* 120). In *Mildred Pierce* the home is replaced by the restaurant, and as such, Veda snubs it as the symbol of her mother's ascent from rags to riches. "Through Mildred's labors and throughout her narrative, in other words, business is transformed into something like a second home, to the extent that the restaurant replaces the house […] as the domestic center of the film" (Jurca 2002: 34).

Finally, here is the answer to the original questions on who earns, who spends the money, and how does this diversification between earner and spender contributes to the characters relationships. It is clear that the earner is the protagonist, Mildred Pierce. She represents the businesswoman who ascended from unskilled waitress, and homemaker before that, to successful owner of a chain of restaurants. She provides not only for her daughter, but also for her lover, later to become husband. Indeed, the spenders are the aforementioned figures of Veda and Monte, who will never 'lower' himself to work, but neither willing to lose his expensive lifestyle. As a result, Mildred's relationship with both of them is strictly linked to the transition of money, by the expression of love in a material way. Therefore, Veda and Monte represent both a scapegoat and a warning: "The problem with Veda [and I would argue, as well as with Monte] is that she wants too much. In the postwar period the consequences of excessiveness were potentially devastating" (*ibid.* 43). The negative repercussions on the part of the greedy ones are reflected in the tragic ending of the movie.

3. 3 *Mildred Pierce* - 2011 Miniseries

"I got a job. […] Somebody had to."[24]

In March 2011, HBO presented a new adaptation of Cain's novel *Mildred Pierce*, under direction of Todd Haynes: "It's an adaptation of a 1941 domestic-life drama (which became a noir murder thriller in a 1945 movie), that at once updates the story (in attitude, naturalistic style and sexual frankness) and pays doting attention to the details, mannerisms and tropes of 1930s America and 1940s films" (Poniewozik 2011). Starring Kate Winslet

[24] Mildred to her husband Bert; from *Mildred Pierce* (2011 miniseries); (CD1 - Part Two: 08').

as title character, Brian F. O'Byrne, Guy Pearce, and Evan Rachel Wood, the five-hour production shed a new light on the original 1941 narrative, leaving out all the film noir features of Curtiz's movie of 1945. In this version, "almost every scene and snatch of dialogue is taken from the book," as a sort of tribute to Cain's novel (Stanley 2011). Of course, the main plot is similar to that of the movie starring Joan Crawford:

> The title character (Winslet) tosses out her cheating husband, Bert (Brian F. O'Byrne) and is left to fend herself and two daughters in the midst of the Great Depression. After finding a job as a waitress, Mildred opens first one, then a chain, of restaurants. At the same time she takes a lover, Monty Beragon (Guy Pearce), a rich playboy. Her real troublesome relationship is with her eldest daughter Veda (played as a girl by Morgan Turner and as a young woman by Evan Rachel Wood), a brilliant, status-conscious girl (Poniewozik 2011)[25].

Contrary to Curtiz's rendition of Cain's novel, Haynes's miniseries "has the luxury of the time, he tells you more, much more, about the day-to-day, hour-by-hour nature of Mildred Pierce's life" (Bradshaw 2011). Indeed, both the characterization and the relationship among characters is more subtle and naturalistic. "The attention to historical detail is astonishing, the performances outstanding, and the finished product is visually gorgeous, steeped in a golden sepia tone" (Churchwell 2011).

In the HBO miniseries, Mildred's ascent from rags to riches is depicted step by step, from the physical rejection of having to work for a living, to her taking notes on how to manage a restaurant, from asking for legal advice to Wally, to designate other people to do her work, finally becoming the owner of a business, and not a simple worker. In the 1950s, "as in the thirties, even those who supported wage-earning for women made a sharp distinction between the need to work and the desire to do so" (Kessler-Harris 1982: 296), and Mildred being a 'grass widow,'[26] definitely needs to work in order to provide for food, shelter, and much more for her daughters. In the Depression era it was difficult to obtain a job with academic skills, let alone without any specific knowledge but that of a housewife. In a scene, which resembles the much more comic episode[27] from the sit-com *I Love Lucy*, Mildred goes to an employment agency:

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[25] personal adaptation from James Poniewozik's article.

[26] Grass widow: a woman divorced or separated from her husband (from http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/grass%20widow).

[27] see Chapter 1. 3.3 (the episode in question is from *I Love* Lucy; E01 S02 "Job Switching").

Mildred: I wrote down receptionist, but that's not all I can do.

Agency clerk: I go by the cards: stenographers, secretaries, laboratory assistants, nurses, chemists. I mean, some of these girls have PhDs, ScDs. Bookkeeper, salespeople. All laid off. Sitting by their phones hoping and praying I'll call. I won't call. What I'm trying to tell you is… you haven't got a chance" (*Mildred Pierce* 2011: CD1 - Part One; 13').

Figure 12: A still from the first scene of *Mildred Pierce* (2011) depicting the protagonist baking cakes. This figure creates a parallel with Figure 8.

As a matter of fact, the only job offered to her, according to her competences, is that of housekeeper which she rejects. Later, as in the 1945 movie, Mildred finds a job as a waitress, but her pride as middle-class homemaker makes her physically ill at the idea of taking any kind of job. "The long sequences showing Mildred's swallowing her pride and gradually learn how to survive as a waitress in a crummy restaurant are brilliant" (Bradshaw 2011). As the following dialogue reveals:

Mildred: I've taken a job.

Lucy: [exited] A job! What kind of job?

Mildred: Just a job.

Lucy: Then I hope for your sake you picked a $5 house and not a two.

Mildred: I'm a waitress. In a hash house.

Lucy: Sort of rhymes up the same way. […] I kept wondering to myself why you didn't try something like this. […] Suppose you did get a job as a saleswoman. Who's buying any goods? You'd be standing around some store all day, just waiting for the chance to make a living and never making it. People eat, though. Even now (*Mildred Pierce* 2011: CD1 - Part One; 51').

It is not the kind of job which makes a difference in Mildred's opinion, but the simple fact that she has to work to support herself and her family. However, Lucy's acumen for the right job for Mildred at the right time, is the key factor for Mildred's success as a businesswoman. The moment which signs the changing of pace in her life is on her last day as waitress. She meets the thirty-three-years-old Monty and spends the afternoon with him at his beach house in Santa Barbara; when they return to the city she lights up the sign of her first restaurant named 'Mildred's'. On that same day, however, her younger daughter Ray falls sick and dies.

Veda's characterization is more subtle and at the same time more precise. As for Mildred, the spectator witnesses Veda's more and more corrupted character. The first sign of her high self-esteem is shown in the scene in which Mildred reveals to Veda her job as waitress:

> Mildred: It so happens that I have taken a job in a restaurant in Hollywood.
> Veda: As a what?
> Mildred: As a waitress, as you well know. […] So you and your sister can eat and have a place to live, and a few clothes on your backs! I've taken the only kind of job I can get.
> […]
> Veda: Aren't the pies bad enough? Did you have to go and degrade us all by becoming a waitress! (*ibid.* - Part Two; 18').

Figure 13: A still from *Mildred Pierce* (2011) depicting the mother-daughter relationship between Mildred and Veda, the former always looking after the latter.

Like in the same scene played in Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce*, Mildred slaps Veda, but unlike in Curtiz's movie, the two reconcile, and Veda even admits: "I'm sorry I acted so horribly. I think it's just wonderful, just wonderful what you are planning. Truly I do" (*ibid.* - Part Two; 21'). A completely different portrait of Veda is presented later in the series, after Veda and Mildred quarrel again and Veda decides to live on her own supporting herself with her earnings as classic singer. Mildred decides to go see Veda's teacher, Mr. Treviso, to pay for Veda's lessons in her stead. Mr. Treviso's opinion on Veda's character is clear:

> Mr. Treviso: [with an Italian accent] She's not good singer. Is great singer.
> Mildred: She's a wonderful girl.
> Mr. Treviso: No, is wonderful singer. The girl is something else. […] I tell you, is snake, is bitch, is coloratura[28] (*ibid.* CD2 - Part Five; 04').

Despite all the arguments between mother and daughter, Mildred cannot stay away from Veda, establishing a morbid relationship which turns into a weakness, even in the characterization. "Where Mildred as a character is rich and multifaceted, Veda—a budding aesthete who grows into a musical prodigy—is just an absolute monster: entitled, cruel, narcissistic, dishonest and hurtful for its own sake" (Poniewozik 2011).

Mildred's relationship with the men of her life is also more studied and realistic: "As the story unfolds, Mildred masters her business in a man's world, and she manages the men in her world" (*ibid.* 2011). First, her affair with Wally, which could only be assumed in Curtiz's movie of 1945, is thoroughly developed in Haynes's miniseries, together with Wally's sly business interactions. "In comparison to Bert and Monte (lower-class and aristocracy), Wally seems representative of an upwardly mobile middle-class, but of a specific cut-throat kind. […] Wally Fay is crucially instrumental to the economic impotence of both Bert and Monte, and finally Mildred" (Nelson qtd. in Nichols 456). Second, at the beginning of the relationship between Mildred and Monty, one could detect some degree of affection and his real selfish self is disclosed as the plot develops, while in the previous version of *Mildred Pierce* Monty's greed was clear since the beginning. In the third part of the miniseries Mildred's 'unhealthy' relationships with Veda and Monty start to degenerate, beginning to show the characters for what they really are.

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[28] Coloratura: a soprano with a high and agile voice (from: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coloratura).

> Veda: You actually believe that he'd marry you?
> Mildred: Yes! If I were willing.
> Veda: […] Stupid, don't you know what he sees in you?
> Mildred: About what you see, I think.
> Veda: No, it's your legs.
> Mildred: What?! He said that to you?
> Veda: Why shouldn't he? We're very good friends, and I hope I have a mature point of view on such matters. Really, he speaks very nicely of your legs. And he has a theory about them. He says that a gingham apron is the greatest provocation ever invented by woman for the torture of man. And that the very best legs are found in kitchens not in drawing rooms. 'Never take the mistress if you can get the maid' is how he puts it. Not that he would consider them his equals, *per se*. Try as he will at his slumming, his shoes are custom-made.
> Mildred: They ought to. They cost me enough. You didn't know that, didn't you?
> Veda: You buy his shoes?
> Mildred: His shoes and his shirts and his drinks and everything else he's needed over the last four months. Including his polo dues! […] No Miss Pierce, it's not my legs he likes me for, it's for my money! And as long as it's that, we'll see who's the valet and who's the boss. […] And I say there'll be no more money for you, not one cent, until you take back everything you've said, and apologize for it! (*Mildred Pierce* 2011: CD1 - Part Three; 48').

In the previous dialogue more than in any other scene we can understand the extent to which Mildred pays for Monty's lifestyle, treating him as her "paid gigolo," (*ibid.* 2011: CD1 - Part Three; 40') as Monty himself puts it. Despite a moment of separation between Monty and Mildred, they end up marrying, but his motives for doing so are the same exposed by the previous dialogue. As a matter of fact, Monty is secretly having an affair with a ruthless Veda whom he will eventually marry. The third man of Mildred's life is Bert, who should be considered the first from a chronological point of view, him being her fist husband. They "maintain a mutually respectful friendship" (Poniewozik 2011) and are supportive of one another's decisions. For instance, toward the end of the narration, Mildred asks for suggestions regarding her possible bankruptcy, and he sustains that: "Veda's the one costing you money, and she's the one making it. She's got to kick in. There's all there is to it" (*Mildred Pierce* 2011: CD2 - Part Five; 54'). More openly than in the 1945 film noir, at the end Bert and Mildred remarry, and sustain each other both economically and morally after Veda's departed for good.

"Mildred is surrounded by weak men and fiercely supportive women" (Stanley 2011). Indeed, unlikely the 1945 movie in which Mildred had only the marginal support of her

working partner Ida, and who, in more than one occasion, was depicted as broke and lonely, in Haynes's miniseries she can count on her neighbor Lucy, Mrs. Gessler. Since the very beginning Lucy reveals herself to be a good friend. She is the first to help Mildred in the moments of great difficulty: "So what are you gonna do? You just joined the biggest army on earth. You're the great American institution that never gets mentioned on the 4th of July speech—a grass widow, with two small children to raise on your own" (*Mildred Pierce* 2011: CD1 - Part One; 08'). While Ida is nothing more than a business partner who later will take up Mildred's position as owner of the restaurants, Lucy ceaselessly incites Mildred not to give up to despair, not only for the sake of her daughters, but also to make use of her knowledge as homemaker in the business world. According to Poniewozik, "Haynes is trying some interesting things here, in particular, making a film that wants to update the picture of a generation of women from the way Hollywood portrayed them in, well, movies like Mildred Pierce" (2011). These women, including Veda, give the spectators a different portrayal femininity, far from Friedan's image of "the housewife heroines [who] are forever young, because their own image *ends* in childbirth" (2013: 34). Actually, Mildred's image exists in relation to her daughters' well-being, and, at the death of her younger daughter Ray, Veda's success becomes her priority and only way of life.

3. 4 A Mother's Quest

"When women stayed home, she worked."[29]

Both in the 1945 *Mildred Pierce* movie, and in the miniseries of 2011, money is the catalyst force which drives characters' interactions and choices, reflecting the worries of the Depression era in which Cain's novel is set. Mildred's indulgence in her new status of wealthy businesswoman, and particularly "Mildred's indulgence of Veda is seen as particularly objectionable given wartime privations and results in her own emotional and financial ruin" (Jurca 2002: 40). Mildred's economic situation is in neat contrast to the later wartime propaganda which said: "Use it up, Wear it out, Make it do, Or do without" (Colman 1995: 9). As a matter of fact, in an article of 1955 "*Life* magazine identified a 'revolution in consumer purchasing,' where 'instead of saving for years to afford major purchases, consumers buy on credit and enjoy the goods while they pay for

[29] from *Mildred Pierce* (2011) Trailer #2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oufmYeBbyIU

them.' " (Cohen qtd. in Carosso 2012: 52). The plot of *Mildred Pierce* reflects women's conditions from before World War II to the postwar years; Mildred's status as housewife who earns some extra money could be compared to women's status before the war. Mildred's career as businesswoman could be associated to women's wartime effort at the home front, while the ending reflects society's expectations for former working women to go back to their role as wife and homemakers. But in the postwar era more and more mothers sought a job, indeed, "beginning in the 1950s middle-class women took on employment as an extension rather than an abdication of their parental responsibilities" (Blackwelder 1997: 148). Nevertheless, even before 1945 the figure of career women was present in Hollywood productions, played by Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck to name a few.

In Curtiz's movie of 1945, "that took shameless liberties with the plot, characters and settings" (Stanley 2011) of James M. Cain's 1941 novel, the features both of film noir and melodrama are undeniable. The preponderant theme of the former genre, which is the distinction between right and wrong, and the triumph of justice, is developed in the juxtaposition between the dedicated Mildred and the greedy Veda and Monte. Their relationship is dictated by the earning and spending of money, Mildred being the earner, and Veda and Monte the careless spenders, respectively. For this reason, "Veda and Monte are the logical scapegoats of *Mildred Pierce*, the characters who pose the biggest threat to American business" (Jurca 2002: 44-45). Also the latter genre, the melodrama, is displayed throughout the visual narration. Indeed, the distance between spectator and character is represented by pathos. Mildred's climb from middle-class almost-broke housewife to wealthy owner of a chain of restaurants attracted the public consent towards the American Dream. In order to do so, the character of Mildred undergoes a shifting towards the more masculine figure of the self-made business[wo]man. Due to her challenge to society's role division between husband breadwinner and wife homemaker, the protagonist's fate is to eventually fall back into place. As a matter of fact, throughout the whole story, the aforementioned roles are inverted: the woman has an income and supports both her daughters and her husband-to-be, while the man, Monte, accepts his 'feminine' role by bringing Veda to his social dates and parties. For what concerns Veda, her relationship with her mother is strictly linked to Mildred's capability to provide for money. Mildred's self-

sacrifice is repaid by Veda's selfishness, which, in turn, is generally blamed only on Mildred.

Considering all the characteristics subverted by Curtiz, Haynes's miniseries is more authentic in comparison to the novel, and, thanks to its five-hour duration, it acquires a more naturalistic pace. "Haynes is feminist in a way that Cain is not. Through the acting and especially his signature mise-en-scène, the director foregrounds a sympathy for Mildred's desolation that is somewhat different from the more disinterested tone of Cain's novel" (Miklitsch 2014: 57 nl). Mildred's struggle to obtain an acceptable income to satisfy her daughter is shown gradually, from her basic need to feed her family, to the purchase of more and more expensive gifts. Similarly, Veda's degeneration undergoes a subtle change, which at times diverts even the spectator. Towards the end of the miniseries, for instance, when Mildred tries to strangle her daughter, Veda takes advantage of the situation to cease an unfruitful contract and thereafter sign a new and more profitable one. With the exception of Bert Pierce, even the men in Mildred's life take advantage of her success. On the one hand, Monty openly takes money from her, on the other hand, Wally schemes so that Mildred will eventually lose the ownership of her chain of restaurants.

Figure 14: A still from *Mildred Pierce* (2011) depicting Mildred as a hard-working woman, learning the restaurant business "the hard way."

Nevertheless, “Mildred is not long a victim and she isn’t always sympathetic” (Stanley 2011). The figure of Mildred depicts the condition of many tireless middle-class women who, both during the Depression and in the postwar era, sought to give a better lifestyle to their children, in order to give them what the parents themselves could not have. For what concerns Mildred, she was driven to a career by sheer need, but for many other women, “consumer desires propelled mothers to supplement the family income” (Blackwelder 1997: 148). The shift of economic power in the family dynamics which this new context brought about, implied a redefinition of roles both between husband and wife, and between parents and their children. As a matter of fact, together with economic power, comes a different decisional power concerning the education and the upbringing of the children. Despite the negative ending, what the three versions of *Mildred Pierce* obtained is to call into question the pre-set roles and social rules which defined men and women’s place in a society which considered domesticity and tradition as a cult.

4. Gender, Higher Education, and Work in the 1950s

4. 1 Educating Housewives

"It isn't too smart for a girl to be smart."[30]

The decade of the 1950s witnessed a drop in women's college enrollment, "from 47 per cent in 1920 to 35 per cent in 1958.[31] A century earlier, women had fought for higher education; now girls went to college to get a husband" (Friedan 2013: 10). Like in the debate concerning women's career, the same trend of what I would call 'regression of feminism' happened in education. While "most of the leading feminists were […] driven by a complex of motives to educate themselves and smash the empty image"[32] (*ibid.* 79), their daughters turned up representing that very image of emptiness. One of the steps to reverse this trend was represented by the measures taken by the NMC (National Manpower Council), recommendations of which "emerged in an environment of ongoing Cold War debate over secondary and higher education for women in the United States" (Blackwelder 1997: 171). Indeed, the NMC, as well as Betty Friedan, noticed that a good portion of national brainpower was being wasted by not considering women's capabilities. With this regard, a chapter of Friedan's book focused on the role played by education in women's choice of a career, and the consequent part played by the so-called sex-directed educators.[33]

According to Friedan, "the sex-directed educator promotes a girl's adjustment by dissuading her from any but the 'normal' commitment to marriage and the family" (2013: 143). By doing so, such educators direct girls to the kind of education that society deemed proper for them, that is 'feminine' academic subjects. In the following interview which Friedan did while researching for her book, she asked a student which were the most exiting courses for the 1950s' students:

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[30] from Friedan 2013: 146.

[31] for Census data regarding education from 1950 to 2000: https://www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/censusatlas/pdf/10_Education.pdf
In particular, the atlas of the United States regarding the percentage of men and women 25 and older with 4 years of college or higher: pages 164-165.

[32] for Friedan's complete study on the subject see Chapter 4 of *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 2013: 64-85; "The Passionate Journey").

[33] for Friedan's complete study on the subject see Chapter 7 of *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 2013: 126-153; "The Sex-Directed Educators").

> ‘What courses are people exited about now?’ I asked a blonde senior in cap and gown. Nuclear physics, maybe? Modern art? The civilizations of Africa? Looking at me as if I were some prehistoric dinosaur, she said: ‘Girls don’t get exited about things like that anymore. We don’t want careers. Our parents expect us to go to college. Everybody goes. You’re a social outcast at home if you don’t. But a girl who got serious about anything she studied—like wanting to go on and do research—would be peculiar, unfeminine. I guess everybody wants to graduate with a diamond ring on her finger. That’s the important thing’ (*ibid.* 128).

This young woman’s words express the aspiration of the majority of women to domesticity, and their fear of not being feminine enough. Similarly, other women educated in the 1950s revealed that their choice of a career was based on social and parental expectations, knowing that their job would be a stopgap between college and marriage.[34] “They know they’re not going to use their education. They’ll be wives and mothers” (Friedan 2013: 56). The correlation between early marriages and drop of the values of education, was registered even on the “Report on Womanpower Conference” held in New York on January 16-17, 1956: “The falling age of marriage and the preoccupation of high school students with this goal, it was pointed out, seriously affects their performance in school” (“Report on Womanpower” 1956: 16).

However, despite many women did not correspond to the general image of homebound students drawn by Friedan, many other represented the exception to the rule, and Steinmann’s survey[35] is an example of that:

> Obviously we Cornell Women of ’50 are not typical of all American women. In 1950 only about five per cent of American women graduated from college, according to the Census Bureau, (compared to about 25 percent today), and most did not attend Ivy League universities. […] I submit, however, that the Cornell Women of ’50 probably *are* typical of other women college graduates of our day (2005: 40).

Like them, many other women graduated from The Seven Sisters[36], which “were designed to provide an Ivy League education for women” (Friedan 2013: 21n.). Indeed, as

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[34] “I always thought that I would be a secretary, because of social and parental conditioning. I thought it was all I could hope to attain since I was going to marry and have babies. It wasn’t necessary to go to college, so I could always work as a secretary until I met a man” (Blackwelder 1997: 170).

[35] A list of all the degrees earned by the Cornell Women of ’50 can be found in *Women at Work: Demolishing the Myth of the 1950s* (Steinmann 2005: 83-95).

[36] Consortium of colleges including Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Smith, Radcliffe, Vassar, and Wellesley.

Steinmann points out, despite Cornell's anticoedism, "out of all 344 who graduated, at least 110—nearly a third of the Class [of 1950]—earned at least 134 graduate degrees" (2005: 17). Certainly, the limited number concerning women's enrollment to Ivy League universities represented a major cause of arrest for women's academic careers. But, while before the war women were bound to female-only colleges, starting in the postwar years "more women were able to seek and achieve admission as the university expanded. Women, as their number increased, became a visible presence on the campus. […] They objected to the restrictive admission policies based on their sex" (Williams Conable 1977: 144). Even in the report pertaining the NMC's conference on womanpower, was stated the still unequal education between girls and boys ("Report on Womanpower" 1956: 11).

After World War II the government's particular attention on higher education proved to be a winning move. Indeed, the acquisition of a higher education represented a means to climb the social ladder. As Lazerson explains in his article, the benefits of a higher degree were dual: "Every occupation seeking to increase its prestige and income made going to college and beyond the requirement for entry. For countless Americans, college was the route upward" (1998: 65). Therefore, on the one hand, companies were being provided with highly specialized workers, on the other hand, such workers acquired a higher wage and, with it, a higher social status. Women played an important role for what concerns paid work. In the aforementioned NMC's conference, there is a special focus on the importance of women's education in relation to their different roles: "The very fact that women have more than one role today underscores the need for more, not less, education for girls, if they are to be intelligent persons in whatever role they are called upon to play" ("Report on Womanpower" 1956: 15).

Mike Newell's 2003 movie titled *Mona Lisa Smile*, set in 1953, gives an example of the time's sex-directed education at a "fictional Wellesley College," as stated by the President of the real Wellesley college (Chapman Walsh 2004), which also figures among the colleges part of The Seven Sisters consortium. It also gives an insight on topics as early marriages, so common in the 1950s, and on the dilemma of choosing between family, and an academic or professional career. The protagonist of the movie, Wellesley's new Art History teacher Katherine Watson, played by Julia Roberts, soon discovers that "almost to a person, her brilliant, privileged students have no postgraduate ambitions beyond settling down with Mr. Right, having babies and baking sugar cakes for hubby" (Holden 2003).

Despite the fact that, for some critics, "the film made no claim to historical accuracy" (Chapman Walsh 2004), the topics which it faces and the archetypes it presents are indeed relevant to the development of this thesis since the protagonists of *Mona Lisa Smile* are young middle-class women in the 1950s.

4. 2 *Mona Lisa Smile*

"All women must be educated to be housewives."[37]

The first colleges for women in the United States were founded in the Nineteenth century in order to give women a higher education which since then was only a man's priority. The aforementioned Seven Sisters were the most known women's colleges and were affiliated to men's Ivy League colleges. The first women's college to be founded was Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1837 (later it will become Mount Holyoke College) and, as all the other six colleges except Vassar and Radcliffe, is still a private women's college. The movie *Mona Lisa Smile*, which premiered in 2003, is set at Wellesley College, funded in 1870 to "prepare women for '…great conflicts, for vast reforms in social life' " (from Wellesley College Webpage). For what shows through the movie, Wellesley College is represented as the opposite of this description, indeed it is depicted as conservative and very bound to its traditions. The protagonist, Katherine Watson (Julia Roberts), is the element that instills doubt in the students to break not only with the college's traditions, but with society's expectations on women as well.

In *Mona Lisa Smile* we can identify many references to the 1950s. For instance, Katherine's flatmate and colleague, Miss Nancy Abbey (Marcia Gay Harden), spends her evenings watching TV, and the first program to be shown is one of the episodes of *I Love Lucy*, which I analyzed in the first chapter of this thesis.[38] In the banter between Miss Abbey and the other flatmate, the college nurse Miss Amanda Armstrong (Juliet Stevenson), the former expresses her love for the sitcom, despite Lucy being a communist, while the latter affirms: "The only thing red about Lucy is her hair. Even that's fake, Desi said that" (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 13'). Another detail of the period can be seen in the scene in which the college's gates are closed, implying that the girls had a curfew to

[37] from Friedan 2013: 134.

[38] the episode in question is S03 E02: "The Girls Go Into Business." See Chapter 1. 3.5 of this thesis titled "Businesswomen."

respect. Also, to give the audience an idea of the historical background, during the credits, we are shown some original footage from the 1950s television programs and commercials. However, I would agree with the author of the article which appeared in *The Guardian* who pointed out that: "The revealing montage of the newsreel material on the polite subjugation of women after the Second World War […] might have been better placed at the beginning" (French 2004). Indeed, the images of 1950s commercials, the election of Mrs. America as the best wife in the nation, and the advertising of Levittown, might have helped the contemporary spectator to have a more realistic idea of the standards of the time.

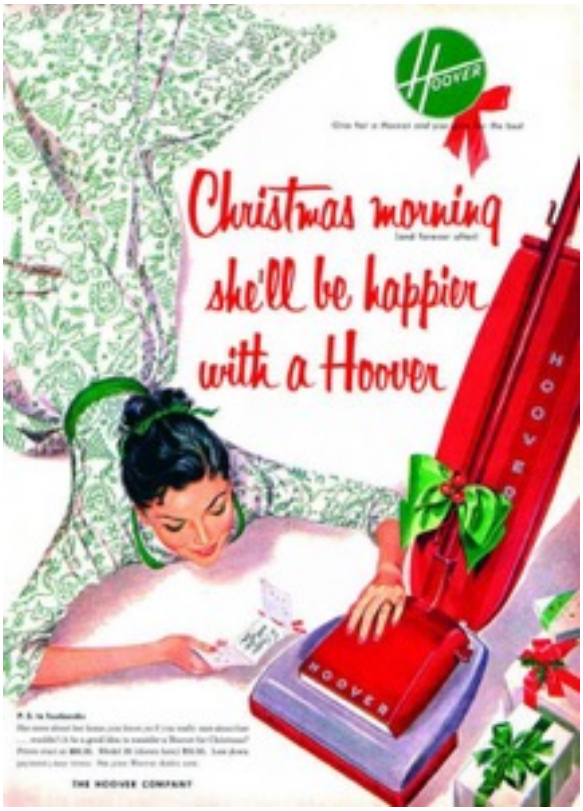

Figure 15: One of the adds appearing in the credits of *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003).

In the opening and throughout the movie there are four voiceovers told by the student Betty Warren (Kirsten Dunst) which correspond to three articles on the college's newspaper. The first and the last voiceover represent a single article, thus starting the movie with an illusion of flashback. During the first voiceover we are presented with the image of Katherine, the protagonist, studying some slides on the train that will take her to the new workplace. One of the slides depicts Pablo Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,* "the painter's big break with traditional modes of representation" (Tamny 2004), thus

making a parallel with the main topic of the movie. Indeed, such topic is mentioned in the opening voiceover:

> All her life she had wanted to teach at Wellesley college, so when a position opened in the Art History department she pursued it single-mindedly until she was hired. It was whispered that Katherine Watson, a first year teacher from the Oakland state, made up in brains what she lacked in pedigree. Which was why this bohemian from California was on her way to the most conservative college in the nation. But Katherine Watson didn't come to Wellesley to fit in, she came to Wellesley because she wanted to make a difference (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 01').

This voiceover prepares the ground for the development of the narration of the entire movie. Katherine's character is immediately drawn, its accuracy is due to the flashback nature of this specific narration because the opening voiceover/article will merge with the one at the ending.

In *Mona Lisa Smile* each student character faces an inner struggle which has to do, in one way or another, with the social conventions of the time. As depicted in the article which appeared in the *Chicago Reader*, Katherine's pupils are represented as such: "Kirsten Dunst as the WASP princess, Julia Stiles as the sensible overreacher, Ginnifer Goodwin as the eager naif, and Maggie Gyllenhaal as the wild Jewess" (Tamny 2004). But the two figures which are more in opposition regarding women's future goals and society's standards are Betty Warren and Joan Brandwyn (Julia Stiles). Indeed, while the former keeps fighting to defend her traditions, the latter appears to be considering the options presented her by Katherine. The examples of Betty's convictions are the two articles enunciated by the voiceover during the movie, one of which says:

> Wellesley girls who are married have become quite adept at balancing their obligations. […] While our mothers were called to the workforce to our Lady Liberty, it is our duty, nay, obligation, to reclaim our place in the home. Bearing the children that will carry our traditions into the future. One must pause to consider why Miss Katherine Watson, instructor in the Art History department, has decided to declare war on the holy sacrament of marriage. Her subversive and political teaching encourage our Wellesley girls to reject the roles they were born to fill (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 1h07').

This voiceover expresses the fundamental characteristic of the feminine mystique, which is women's sole definition as wives and mothers, and therefore, everything Betty Friedan rejected. For most of the movie, the character of Betty Warren personifies the very woman

portrayed by the feminine mystique, for instance, in the scene in which she shows Joan her new laundry room, Joan congratulates her because now she has "everything [she's] ever dreamed of" (*ibid.* 50').

Betty's early marriage is another 'trend' of the 1950s. Sure enough, "a higher percentage of people were married and the median age of marriage was lower (just under twenty-three for men, and just over twenty for women) in the 1950s than at any time since 1800" (Carosso 2012: 72). Katherine is against such early marriages because they interfere with the students' academic achievements, and surprisingly, it will be Joan, and not Betty, to prove her partly wrong. In part, the college's lack of rigor is to blame for students' low respect with regards to the completion of women's education after marriage. As for Mary Agnes's behavior before her marriage in *The Best of Everything*,[39] also in Betty's case:

> Connie: Most of the faculties turn their heads when married students miss a class or two…
> Katherine: Then why not get married as freshmen? That way you can graduate without actually ever stepping foot on campus.
> Betty: Don't disregard our traditions just because you are subversive (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 1h01').

In the previous dialogue, the two points of view are clear, on the one hand, Katherine does not approve both of the college's unwritten regulations, and of the student's complying with them. On the other hand, Betty makes it clear that Katherine should not challenge such traditions in the name of her subversive ideals. One of the paradoxes in *Mona Lisa Smile* is between Wellesley's unwritten affirmation of the 'cult of domesticity,' and its actual value enunciated at the ceremony for the beginning of the academic year. In fact, during this ceremony Joan, as student representative affirms: "I am everywoman. [I seek] to awaken my spirit through hard work and dedicate my life to knowledge" (*ibid.* 03').

The traditional element in the movie is represented not only by the character of Betty Warren and other students like her, but also by the college president Jocelyn Carr (Marian Seldes), by Mrs. Warren, the president of the alumnae association (Donna Mitchell), and by Miss Nancy Abbey. Indeed, their positions into the academic community reflect their

[39] "Most of the time Mary Agnes arrived late at the office or left early, and the powers that governed the typing pool, ever respectful of love and romance, pretended not to notice" (*The Best of Everything* (Jaffe 2005: 253).

social convictions.[40] On the one hand, the college president embodies the college's traditions and ideals of education which she must defend. As a matter of fact, as representative of Wellesley, she is the one complaining against Katherine's liberal methods: "I've been getting some calls about your teaching methods, Katherine. They're a little unorthodox for Wellesley. We're traditionalists, Katherine" (*ibid.* 48'). Mrs. Warren's figure is very similar to that of the college president, "she is the embodiment of every upright social convention of the era" (Tamny 2004).

Figure 16: A still from *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003) depicting one of Miss Abbey's classes on "speech, elocution, and poise." Here all the students wear aprons and take notes on how to organize dinners for their husbands.

On the other, Miss Abbey, teaching "speech, elocution and pose" (*ibid.* 13'), represents the teacher who chose a career over housewifery. Her image, which could be easily related to Friedan's description of the 1950s alternative to housewives, meaning "the old-maid

[40] As far as these two characters are concerned, I would agree with Tamny's article which states that: "One of the worst tendencies of period films is to dole out the archetypes rather than develop characters" (Tamny 2004).

high-school teacher"[41] (2013: 60), is made even clearer in the scene which takes place at Wellesley's Spring party. There Miss Abbey tells Connie (Ginnifer Goodwin) she reminds her of herself when she was her age, and so, Connie realizes how her own life might turn out to be. In addition to that, one of Miss Abbey's lessons in which she warns her students to "keep your cool and understand that the [husband's] boss is probably testing you as much as your husband" (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 27') revokes not only the episode of *I Love Lucy* titled "Lucy's Schedule,"[42] but also a young woman's words reported by Betty Friedan: "The wife is awfully important for the husband's career" (Friedan 2013: 130).

In her role as mentor for the Wellesley girls, Katherine is endowed with a lot of power over their education, and therefore on the development of their character as adults. According to the real president of Wellesley, "the early version of the script […] emphasized the intelligence of Wellesley students and their close mentoring relationships with dedicated faculty: two of the College's paramount strengths" (Chapman Walsh 2004). The most distinct mentor-student relationship in *Mona Lisa Smile*, is that between Katherine and Joan because it is characterized by the mutual challenge and respect of values. For instance, Katherine gives a C to Joan's paper because it does not express her impressions and her thought. In addition to that, Katherine encourages Joan not to dismiss the idea of a future career just because she is going to get married after college.

> Katherine: It [Joan's file] says here that you're pre-law. What law school are you gonna go to?
> Joan: I hadn't really thought about that, I mean, after I graduate I plan on getting married.
> Katherine: And then?
> Joan: [confused] And then I'll be married.
> Katherine: You can do both. Just for fun, if you could go to any law school in the country, which would it be?
> Joan: Yale. They keep five slots open for women, one unofficially for a Wellesley girl.
> Katherine: But you haven't really thought about it (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 34').

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[41] "The only other kind of women I knew, growing up, were the old-maid high-school teachers; the librarian; the one woman doctor in our own town, who cut her hair like a man; and a few of my college professors. None of these women lived in the warm center of life as I had known it at home. Many had not married or had children. I dreaded being like them, even the ones who taught me truly to respect my own mind and use it , to feel that I had a part in the world" (Friedan 2013: 60).

[42] see Chapter 1. 3.2 of this thesis titled "Who Runs the Household?"

As I mentioned, the challenge is mutual because, despite considering Katherine's suggestions that she "can bake the cake and eat it too" (*ibid.* 1h31'), Joan chooses family over a career in law. Doing so, the movie makes a suggestion to the contemporary audience to give the proper relevance to the "Occupation: Housewife."

> Joan: It was my choice, not to go. He would have supported it.
> Katherine: But you don't have to choose.
> Joan: No, I have to. I want a home, I want a family. That's not something I'll sacrifice. […] Do you think I'll wake up one morning and regret not being a lawyer?
> Katherine: Yes, I'm afraid that you will.
> Joan: Not as much as I'd regret not having a family, not being here to raise them. I know exactly what I'm doing and it doesn't make me any less smart (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 1h31').

Indeed, for Joan as well as "for many Women of '50, raising their own children was a choice, a matter of conviction" (Steinmann 2005: 26), and not a social obligation.

As pointed out in the first voiceover, Katherine "didn't come to Wellesley to fit in, she came to Wellesley because she wanted to make a difference" (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 01'). To do so in the 1950s, as well as today, she had to challenge the social conventions which threaten a person's individual freedom. Through her methods "she begins to challenge them [her students] in a Socratic fashion, forcing them to ask questions about art that direct them towards interrogating the condition of their own lives" (French 2004). While the first image of break with conventions is introduced by Picasso's slide at the very beginning of the movie, it goes further by presenting Katherine's lesson on Van Gogh:

> Giselle: Van Gogh by numbers?!
> Katherine: Ironic, isn't it? Look at what we have done to the man who refused to conform his ideals to popular taste, who refused to compromise his integrity. We have put him in a tiny box and asked you to copy him. So, the choice is yours, ladies. You can conform to what other people expect, or…
> Betty: [just arrived] I know, be ourselves. (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 1h).

Katherine's high expectations towards those young women are met only towards the end of the movie. Her last provocation to the Wellesley girls is by showing them what kind of woman's image their contemporaries were producing by showing them ads:[43] "What will the future scholar see when they study us. A portrait of women today. […] I give up! The

[43] see Figure 15.

smartest girls in the country" (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 1h09'). Those words echo a woman who was interviewed by Betty Friedan saying: " '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' " (2013: 31). Friedan's accusation, and Katherine's too, is on the one hand, towards the 'waste' of such high educated women, and on the other, to the impossibility for a woman to develop an identity beyond that of homemaker. Katherine's expectations were of teaching to "tomorrow's leaders, not their wives!" (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 1h12'). Only at times of crisis the government turned its propaganda to exploit women's brainpower as well, in fact, "concerned with 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.' " (Friedan 2013: 11).

The Wellesley girls' image from the 1950s, and by extension that of the other female students of the same period, is portrayed by the movie trailer as one of conformity to traditions and return to domesticity. Among shots from the movie, the narrator of the trailer traces the picture of the highly educated housewives-to-be: "They were the brightest students in the country. […] But in a world of wealth and privilege, getting an education means finding a husband" (from *Mona Lisa Smile* Trailer: 18"). Katherine's place is that of the educator who challenges not only teaching methods, but also society's impositions. In this regard, she is opposed to Friedan's sex-directed educators: "To the educator, bent on women's growth to autonomy, such marriage is 'regressive.' To the sex-directed educator, it is femininity fulfilled" (Friedan 2013: 147).

4. 3 1950s Alumnae

"I saw the girls sitting in the classes knitting and I thought that was really stupid."[44]

In *Mona Lisa Smile* I analyzed the interactions among fictional characters drawn *a posteriori* by contemporary screen-players. By comparing the lives of actual alumnae from women's colleges and the movie *Mona Lisa Smile*, though, I could find both similarities and differences. The study case I chose comes from the Class of 1951 Pembroke College, specifically, the alumna named Polly Welts Kaufman who was interviewed about her life,

[44] from a 1988 interview to Polly Welts Kaufman, Pembroke (Brown) Class of 1951; (Schneider 2000: 10).

education, and career by Louise M. Newman on February 9, 1988.[45] Her mother, "a roaring Twenties person" (Schneider 2000: 3), graduated from Smith college and had a higher education than her husband, but she never worked until he died. Moreover, growing up with three boys, her brother and two cousins, Polly "was the only female [in her] generation" but never thought of men as smarter than women. Of course, this is only one case, but it refutes the general idea held by contemporaries, that the women of the 1950s, but also of the pre-war period, had a lower education than men, or even of women being at the complete mercy of men. Indeed, even in *Mona Lisa Smile*, the character played by Julia Roberts gives a similar answer to her colleague Mr. Dunbar:

> Mr. Dunbar: You know, if you were mine I never would have let you go.
> Katherine: I wouldn't have asked your permission.
> Mr. Dunbar: Yeah, they say you're progressive. A forward thinker, are you? (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 30').

The general assumption is that only men had decisional power over women's lives, but 1950s' women were more free than that, despite the limitations both in the academic and professional world.

Figure 17: Polly Adams Welts (Kaufman), Haverhill, Massachussets.
A. B. American Civilization.
(Burn Mael 1951).

[45] The complete transcription of the interview can be found at: http://www.brown.edu/initiatives/women-speak/interviews/decades/1950s

Like the colleges which were part of the Seven Sisters consortium, Pembroke College was created at the end of the Nineteenth century in order to provide women an education similar to that of their male peers at Brown College, with which it merged in 1971.[46] At the beginning of the Twentieth century, Pembroke College became coeducational, pulling alongside male and female students. According to Polly's interview, the little classes were evenly balanced between men and women, and there was no shyness or pulling back on the part of women when it came to express their opinions.

> Polly Kaufman: I always spoke up. […] I was very independent and so I probably didn't notice it. I mean, I saw the girls sitting in the classes knitting and I thought that was really stupid.
> Louise Newman: They knitted?
> Polly Kaufman: In American Literature, I remember them knitting and I thought that was really stupid. They didn't in every, they didn't in my American Civilization classes.
> Louise Newman: They were too small? They only knit in large classes?
> Polly Kaufman: I don't know, maybe that was it. That was the biggest class I can remember and also that was English Literature, which a lot of kids took. I mean, it was literature which a lot of women took. So my history classes were a little more serious than that. There were more men in them. I always liked having men in my classes.
> Louise Newman: Why?
> Polly Kaufman: […] I think that maybe that, in a way, it may be that they did take it more seriously. I'm not sure about that, but those women were knitting (Schneider 2000: 10-11).

Sure enough, not every woman took her education as seriously as Polly did. For many of them college was just a stopgap between high school and marriage, at the same way as it represented a stopgap both for some Cornell's Women of '50 and for the protagonists of Rona Jaffe's novel *The Best of Everything*.[47]

As a student, Polly Welts (Kaufman) might have been very different from the Wellesley girls depicted in *Mona Lisa Smile*. Her social class was not the same as the fictional characters of Betty Warren or Joan Brandwyn. Belonging to a not economically stable family, her father's business failed, Polly "always had the feeling that [she] had to look out for [herself]" (Schneider 2000: 7). However, despite considering herself "solidly from a Yankee middle-class because [her] family had been in Essex country for 350 years" (*ibid.*

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[46] for a more detailed history of Brown and Pembroke Colleges: http://www.brown.edu/about/history

[47] see Chapter 2. 2.3 of this thesis titled "A Woman's Career."

17), she recognized the economic difference among the students at Pembroke. Indeed, in order to pay for her tuition fees, Polly worked as waitress at the college's restaurant: "There was a 'gracious living' thing going on, and the waitresses definitely were a different group" (*ibid.* 16-17). In the interview Polly gets to talk about fashion as well.

> Louise Newman: Were there ways of distinguishing classes among female students by how they dressed or what they wore?
> Polly Kaufman: Oh, yes. I'm sure there was the cashmere sweater crowd. I'm sure of that. But my mother knit my sweaters.
> Louise Newman: They wore cashmere sweaters, they wore pearls. I take it, they just had more money and it showed in their clothes (*ibid.* 27).

They wore skirts and sweaters with little white collars, they also wore pearls but little to no make-up. The clothing proved also the different economical status of the single students.

Another subject discussed in the interview is what I would call as Polly's "husband-hunting." She met her husband, who "was third generation Brown" (Schneider 2000: 12), in October of her freshmen year, and they had similar interests. Both of them edited their colleges' journals, Polly *The Pembroke Record*, while her husband the *Brown Daily Herald*. Also Polly's mother-in-law went to Pembroke college, and was Class of 1912. From what transpires from her narration, though, it seems as if not having a fiancé was a burden:

> The new crop of Pembrokers were really rushed, and so I must have had thirty dates in that first semester. And, they were all twirls because they were all my age and they just hadn't grown up yet. And, I was despairing because I knew that I had to find a husband while I was here because I would never have another opportunity, I was convinced of that, so I just was really discouraged because I wanted to get it out of the way so I could get on with my studies, which was what really interested me (*ibid.* 11).

Despite the reasons which drove Polly to find a husband quickly, it turns out that they had an equal marriage, he was supportive of her career decisions to the point of moving West in order for her to find a job. Also economically they pooled together their earnings, without any apparent threat to masculinity. They alternated careers (*ibid.* 39), and therefore Polly's income was not simply and additional one, but it weighted on the family balance as much as her husband's.

Even though at the eyes of her husband Polly's career was as important as that of a man, she pointed out some inequalities between the sexes that she encountered both in her

academic and professional careers. As pointed out in the 1956 NMC conference on womanpower, although the differences between men and women, both in the academic and professional worlds, are growing smaller, they are still not equal to one another ("Report on Womanpower" 1956: 4 and 11). First, and similarly to *Mona Lisa Smile* fictional Wellesley, but probably also with the real one, Pembroke girls had a curfew while men did not. In part for fun, and in part angry for the double standard:

> [Polly and her fiancé] brought out a fake edition of the *Brown Daily Herald*. He and I did it together and the lead story was that when the Wriston Quadrangle opened, the men would have to be in at 2:00 because they had an extra half an hour because they had to take the women home, of course. The men would have a system of 'lates' and have to be in at 2:00AM from then on" (Schneider 2000: 15).

Figure 18: *Pembroke Record* staff.
RECORD BOARD: Pat Kelsey, Jeanne Silver, Polly Welts, Marige Roll, Terry Schnepf, Pat Randall.
(Brun Mael 1951).

Another example of double standard between men and women was in the reception of the two newspapers of the colleges: while the *Pembroke Record* was read only by the Pembroke's students and was printed once a week, the *Brown Daily Herald* came out daily and was read both by Pembroke's girls and by the men of Brown. For what concerns the professional world, Polly Kaufman's career had a stop when she went to the Providence School Department to ask which were the requirement to finally start working as a teacher, "they told [her] that because [she] was going to get married they wouldn't even interview

[her]. This was in 1951" (*ibid.* 28). Therefore, as mutually agreed with her husband, in 1952 they moved West and Polly started her Master's degree at the University of Washington.

Similarly to many women of the Class of 1950 who answered to Steinmann's survey, Polly Welts Kaufman wanted to work to use at best her education and potentialities. Indeed, since the beginning of the interview she admitted that she wanted to go to college because she wanted to become a teacher, therefore: "It wasn't so much that I wanted to earn the money, it was that I wanted to have a job. And, it was a wonderful job" (*ibid.* 30). The answers of some Women of '50 were alike:

> 'I went to work at a time I didn't have to,' says Sonia Pressman (later Fuentes), 'because I wanted to use my abilities and education.' Sonia earned a law degree in 1957.
> Harriet Washburn (later Pellar), a government major, worked 'to put my government studies into practice.' Harriet worked for the State Department in Washington, D.C., then for the U.S. Foreign Service in Bahia, Brazil.
> Florence Maragakes Roukis worked 'to put into practice everything I learned. It was exiting.' Florence had majored in nutrition and management, and she managed the Kirby Allen restaurant on Madison Avenue in New York City until she had her first child in 1954.
> Frances Duncan Stowe worked 'to justify the education in a challenging field.' From 1950 to 1953 Frances was an assistant agent for Cornell Cooperative Extension in Madison County, N.Y. (Steinmann 2005: 69).

In her interview, Polly gives details also on her earnings as editor of the *Pembroke Alumna*. She admits that it was the perfect chance to go back East and "settle down" (Schneider 2000: 29). For the eleven years in which her children were pre-schoolers, she asked for and obtained a part-time position. She was paid $1000 a year and had to put out four issues, while the editor of the *Brown Alumni Monthly* worked full-time and put out eight issues. Moreover, Polly affirms that she "worked her way up to $2000" (*ibid.* 29). What is assumed in this part of the interview, is the different economic scale between the income of men and women, despite the same kind of job.

Polly's experience at Pembroke had been eye-opening, there she became a liberal, and there she affirmed her feminism: "I'm sure I was always a feminist, but that was what turned me into being a real feminist because I kept saying, 'Why are these women, what are these women doing? They've graduated from college and they aren't doing anything with their lives' " (*ibid.* 30). Indeed, the majority of middle-class women completing their

education ended up leading a life as housewives and homemakers, but according to Friedan the choice between a career and family is due both to the students as well as their educators: “The fact is, girls today and those responsible for their education do face a choice. They just decide between adjustment, conformity, avoidance of conflict, therapy—or individuality, human identity, education in the truest sense, with all its pains of growth” (2013: 146). With her work, Polly could address women on such topics, one of her articles was titled “What do you do with an educated mind?”, but she also published an article by Margaret Mead, whom Friedan harshly critiqued, which said: “Is college compatible with marriage?”. (Schneider 2000: 30). What stroke Polly, though, was the very low number of women professors in colleges, and that nothing was being done to change that. She came to understand two things: that Brown and Pembroke were “social system[s], not academic system[s]” (*ibid.* 32), and that, the very college which brought about her personal change were not liberal at all. Only in 1977, after five years of proposals of change to the colleges did she received a satisfying answer by Dr. Swearer, the new President of Brown saying: “We are seeking a full-time director for the Sarah Doyle Women’s Center and we’ve taken steps to fill the Nancy Duke Lewis chair” (*ibid.* 36).

4. 4 1950s Women’s Education

“I graduated in ’51, and an awful lot of women did marry quite soon.”[48]

The topic of women’s education in the 1950s is very similar to that of women’s career in the same period. Indeed, the general image we have nowadays is the one passed on by society’s standards of the time. As I analyzed in the previous chapters, when it comes to careers, many women represent the exception to the rule which portrayed women as homemakers, wives and mothers. Such exception, instead, gave women a highly specialized and fulfilling career outside the home, without denying their other role as housewives. This same pattern can be witnessed regarding women’s education. For instance, in her interview, Polly Welts Kaufman affirmed: “I graduated in ’51, and an awful lot of women did marry quite soon” (Schneider 2000: 14), but many other women enrolled to the ‘Ivy League for women,’ meaning the Seven Sisters colleges. Despite the good

[48] from a 1988 interview to Polly Welts Kaufman, Pembroke (Brown) Class of 1951; (Schneider 2000: 14).

premise of such colleges, which is to give women an education equal to men's, I noticed a downside. By the division of colleges in women's and men's, they promoted an education based on gender segregation.

According to Friedan, part of the blame for girls' race home goes to the sex-directed educators, who applied a functional method: "The whole point of functional education often seems to be: what 51 per cent of the population does today, 100 per cent should do tomorrow" (2013: 143). To invert the trend of teaching girls only 'feminine subjects,'

> Labor market analysts and federal bureaucrats of the 1950s, cognizant of the nation's dependence on female labor, urged restructuring of girls' secondary education to encourage goals beyond homemaking and clerical work. Educators sought to include more girls in college preparatory courses and to train women for technical careers and the professions (Blackwelder 1997: 171).

The social pressures on women's image urged them to change their ambition in order to follow the 'cultural script' of femininity, suburbanization, and homogenization. For instance, "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" (Friedan 2013: 11). What the majority of 1950s female students sought during their college years was to find a husband.

These themes are all tackled in *Mona Lisa Smile*. In the concluding footage, there were even some clips from the national contest of Mrs. America, which rewarded the wife who could put on diapers, prepare a convertible sofa-bed, and clean the floor better and faster than the other contestants. In contrast with this image of perfect housewife, so common in the 1950s that it represented the decade, the spectator is presented with the character of a new progressive teacher, Katherine, who challenges the college's as well as society's traditions. Katherine's image as educator is in opposition to the sex-directed educators: "It takes a very daring educator today to attack the sex-directed line, for he must challenge, in essence, the conventional image of femininity" (Friedan 2013: 149-150). The voiceovers present in the movie, instead, are a critique to those new methods, and a strong defense of women's roles of wives and mothers. The character who personifies the feminine mystique is that of Betty Warren who is properly raised by her mother's suggestions: "A good wife lets her husband think that everything is his idea. Even if it's not" (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003:

25'). A scene which further affirms Betty's embodiment of the mystique, is that in which she and her husband pose for some pictures, mimicking the commercials which will later appear in the credits.

Figure 19: A still from *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003) depicting Betty and her husband taking pictures. She represents the perfect young housewife, while he represent the businessman.

One of the features which distinguishes *Mona Lisa Smile* as contemporary can be found in the way in which it finally inverts the protagonists' goals. The traditionalist Betty eventually gets a divorce from her not-so-perfect husband and a not-so-perfect life as housewife, while the more open-minded Joan, who highly valued Katherine's classes, ultimately gives up a career as a lawyer in favor of a family. Despite the focus of the movie is not on feminine or unfeminine subjects, but rather on innovative methods, it tells the spectator that in the 1950s it was women's choice whether they wanted to pursue a career or to go back home: "The choice—and the responsibility—for the race back home was finally their own" (Friedan 2013: 153). It also considered the third option open to women, that they could "bake the cake and eat it too" (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 1h31'). Despite the "lurking duplicity in that loaded word 'bake'" (Holden 2003), which alluded to the housewife's stereotyped habit of endlessly baking cakes for the family, this idiom implied

the possibility for women to combine their two careers: the one of housewife, and the one of professional worker.

The real students of 1950s tell a similar story, but they also underline the many differences between men and women's education. The interview to a Pembroke alumna class of 1951, reveals that in some cases women achieved higher educations than their husbands or male relatives. However, in coeducational colleges, the classes with a higher number of men in it were taken more seriously both by the students, who didn't sit there knitting, and by their professors. Also the reception of the college sheets met a double standard: while the *Pembroke Record* was read only by Pembrokers, the *Brown Daily Herald* was read by the members of the whole campus, meaning both Pembroke and Brown students. Despite the different economic scale between men and women holding the same role, many alumnae were not discouraged to seek a job, on the contrary, they wanted to pursue a career in order to best use their education. According to Polly Welts Kaufman, her college experience has been eye-opening as it taught her to think critically, but it also revealed her the unfairness of the academic world, in effect, until the 1970s the colleges had very few women professors, and few measures were taken to change this negative trend.

Conclusion

Through all the visual and literary materials studied in this thesis, I could show how different from the rule the image of the American woman actually was in the 1950s. Indeed, despite the general pull from society to put "Rosie the Riveter"[49] (French 2004) back home, both literature and the cinema did not fail to produce figures of independent and successful women. The protagonists of *Mildred Pierce* and *The Best of Everything* are an example of that. Mildred, as a successful owner of a chain of restaurants and also a single mother, challenges the male authority both into the family and in the business world. She is both breadwinner and homemaker, and in her relationship with men she is the one with the power. For her, her career is a means to achieve authority over the others. For Caroline Bender, instead, her career is the chief means to independence and personal growth. She "was beginning to realize more and more that in the business world one's ability was judged by the amount of money one made" (Jaffe 2005: 364). Both for Betty Friedan, and for many Women of '50, the element which establishes a woman's independence is money, and therefore, a career.

This reasoning also counts on a completely different kind of woman, the housewife. As a matter of fact, in the sit-com *I Love Lucy* I showed that for Lucy, and in general for many American housewives, their economic independence was limited by the husband's consent. The only way for Lucy to be economically independent is by earning some money by herself. "While working-class and African-American women had been juggling these roles for decades, the middle-class working mother was news in the 1950s, and again twenty years later. Public concern over the 'two-job wife' in the 1950s foreshadowed the 'superwoman' discussion of the 1970s" (Weiss 2000: 59). Society's censure on independent women, though, was present in the aforementioned literary and cinematic sources. For instance, Lucy's tendencies to stray from the rules was always restrained, so that every episode would end with the restoration of the *status quo*: husband breadwinner and wife homemaker. In Mildred's case, her great independence and power over men cost her the loss of both daughters, and finally the *status quo ante* is attained only by Mildred giving up her career and reclaiming her first husband. The majority of the chosen

[49] In his article on *The Guardian,* French states that "Rosie the Riveter had to become Rosie the Housewife" (French 2004).

documents "show that whatever we do, our characters and lives are shaped for better and for worse by the pressures and ethos of the times we grow up in" (French 2004).

For this reason, in the more recent movie *Mona Lisa Smile*, the women's outcome to the percepts of the 1950s is subversive. Katherine, the teacher, leaves for Europe and an unknown future, while Betty and Joan's fates are switched. Indeed, this movie depicts the 1950s through a modern and positive point of view. Here the figure of the teacher brings subversion to the rules of the college and in the way the students see their future. Katherine explains her students that they can "Bake the cake and eat it too" (*Mona Lisa Smile* 2003: 1h 31'), and not simply follow society's expectations. She is the element that challenges the cultural scripts of the time: "such impositions of gender 'scripts' had to be interrogated and challenged by activists, writers and, ultimately, in the lives of ordinary people" (Campbell and Neil 2012: 228). The original documentation I selected, such as Steinmann's survey, and the interview to a Pembroke alumna, are the perfect example of 'ordinary people' becoming 'extraordinary' by representing the exception to the rule. For these women education and a career did not render them less feminine, and were compatible with their role within the family.

As stated by Meyerowitz's introductory essay: "More generally, it seems, postwar culture was not as inextricably tied to the domestic ideal as Betty Friedan and some historians have implied." (Meyerowitz 1987: 8-9) In fact, during the 1950s the so-called 'return to domesticity' which was promoted by society en large, was counteracted by the commitment of semi-official bodies as the National Manpower Council (NMC), and the Commission on the Education of Women (CEW). These organizations sought to empower women so that they could participate in the national labor market, and use at best their higher education. Despite a substantial difference between men and women both in education and paycheck, the Cornell Women of '50, and Pembroke's alumnae succeed in confuting society's stereotype of 1950s middle-class women, in a way that their literary and cinematic counterparts could not do. Finally, by using the aforementioned sources, which are real-life documents, and cinematic and literary products, I intended to shed light on the image of middle-class working women in the 1950s, as opposed to the mainstream figure of the 'happy housewife.'

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