

**SINGULARLY SINGLE: CULTURAL REPRESENTATION AND EXPERIENCE OF  
THE  
'SPINSTER' AND THE UNMARRIED MOTHER IN THE LONG 1950S**

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# **SINGULARLY SINGLE: CULTURAL REPRESENTATION AND EXPERIENCE OF THE 'SPINSTER' AND THE UNMARRIED MOTHER IN THE LONG 1950S**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This is a study which investigates the forms of femininity both available to, and created by, certain unmarried women in the immediate post-war period 1945-1965 in Britain. Utilizing varied historical and literary approaches the study conducts a detailed analysis of a variety of contemporary texts and sources including film, fiction, autobiography and oral testimony, as well as archival material. It examines how portrayals of the post-war unmarried woman increasingly resisted or re-articulated traditional notions of femininity and the feminine role, and how different types of independent women ('spinsters', single-mothers, career/working women) were able to develop and explore potential femininities through the creative use of cultural texts and other opportunities available to them.

The study questions prevalent assumptions that the era was a low point for feminism, evidencing instead a contemporary awareness amongst many women that the war, and certain developments in the preceding two decades, had significantly challenged the validity of traditional gender dynamics. The study demonstrates how, as opportunities for employment and social provision expanded for post-war women, the feminine norm of the stay at home 'wife and mother' became unstable, producing conditions in which unmarried women might imagine alternative feminine identities and Second Wave Feminism might come into being.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I was once told that the process of developing a PhD thesis was akin to a long and gruelling steeplechase, and I have to admit this is rather a fitting description. During the research there have certainly been many twists and turns, ups and downs and long periods of exhaustion! However, it has not been without its pleasures and my passion for the field has only grown.

Yet, such an undertaking is only possible with the aid and support of many different people and institutions. Firstly, without the generous financial support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, I would never have had the opportunity to develop my ideas and produce this study. I am very grateful for the chance they gave me, a chance which many worthy post-graduates unfortunately never receive.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago it was possible, and indeed usual, to look back on the 1950s as an age of prosperity and achievement . . . Today we are more likely to remember the whole period as an age of illusion.<sup>1</sup>

This thesis is part of an effort to re-consider and re-write the long 1950s, especially established assumptions surrounding gender and specifically femininity. It will examine the cultural representation and experience of marginalised groups of single women in order to extend understandings of post-war gender dynamics, and challenge perceptions that, instances of and opportunities for, progressive independent feminine thought and action were rare. In this introductory chapter, I shall initially situate the research within the current historical field and then examine certain methodological, theoretical and conceptual concerns which have impacted directly upon the structure and content of the thesis.

Despite evidence that some scholars were questioning the popular celebratory image of the 'age of affluence' as early as 1970, as the above quotation would suggest, it is only recently that historians have begun to fully explore the overlooked social complexities of the initial post-war era and the origins of the myths which surround it. Up to this point, as Becky Conekin, Frank Mort and Chris Waters have highlighted, historiography had generally followed a similar format, projecting 'a series of comfortable and familiar images of the

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<sup>1</sup> Bogdanor, V. and Skidelsky R. (eds.) *The Age of Affluence: 1951-1964* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p.7.

period', images which were 'instantly recognizable, both to practicing historians and to a wider general audience'.<sup>2</sup>

The era had become synonymous with notions of political and social consensus, increased prosperity and 'traditional' values, underpinned by the nuclear family ideal and its conventional gendered roles; a conservative and stable interim period, buffered between the war torn decade of the 1940s and the perceived explosive 'permissiveness' of the 1960s. However, as Nick Thomas has recently emphasized, the immediate post-war period 'was also a period of Cold War anxiety, red scares, growing disquiet about the threat of nuclear destruction, and an ongoing debate about gender roles'.<sup>3</sup> The contemporary accounts drawn upon in books by David Kynaston have also challenged the prevalent notion of post-war consensus, illustrating in particular the tension between the official vision for the future promoted by those in power and that of the 'ordinary people'.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, most recent historians of the post-war era have felt it necessary to review established interpretations of the period, in order to challenge certain assumptions that they endorse and also to extend the field of historical enquiry. For instance, Stuart Hall concurs with the belief that post-war social change and increased affluence were 'seen as generally beneficial ("you've never had it so good!")', but in addition he *also* highlights an accompanying fear that such changes were 'eroding the traditional landmarks and undermining the sacred order and institutions of traditional society'.<sup>5</sup> Influenced by Hall's work, John Hill has argued that evidence of this concern can, in one instance, be located in post-war obsession with the "problem of youth", a

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<sup>2</sup> Conekin, B. Mort, F. and Waters, C. (eds.) *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain 1945-1964* (London, 1999), p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas, N. 'Will the real 1950s please stand up? Views of a contradictory decade', *Cultural and Social History*, 5:2 (2008), pp.227-237.

<sup>4</sup> Kynaston, D. *Austerity Britain 1945-51* (London, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Hall, S. and Jefferson, T. (eds.) *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain* (London, 1976), p.71.

notion which he explores through an analysis of contemporary film. He believes that the negative representation of the teenager prevalent at this time had 'its roots in the parent culture: its concerns with the social changes wrought by "affluence", the advent of mass culture and, more particularly, the changing role of the family and proliferation of "perverse sexualities"'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, scholars examining literary fiction of the period, especially the works of the so-called 'angry young men', demonstrate how many texts significantly critiqued the post-war settlement by debunking 'many of the supposed triumphs of post-war society' operating as 'a force of disequilibrium within consensus'.<sup>7</sup>

The most significant point of interest here, however, is a common assertion that behind these instances of post-war social ambivalence lay one principal cause; the (perceived) changing status and position of women. Yet, despite this general assertion only a relatively small number of scholars have sought to examine the period's complex gender dynamics in any detail. It is as an effort to contribute to this under-researched aspect of modern gender history that this research is justified.

The primary aim of this interdisciplinary study is to investigate the forms of femininity both available to, and created by, single women in the immediate post-war period. Utilizing both historical and literary approaches the study conducts detailed analysis of a variety of contemporary texts and sources including film, fiction, autobiography and oral testimony, as well as archival material. It examines how portrayals of the post-war single woman increasingly resisted or re-articulated traditional notions of femininity and the feminine role, and how different types of single women ('spinsters', 'unmarried-mothers',

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<sup>6</sup> Hill, J. *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963* (London, 1997), p.16.

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, D. and Haywood, I. *Brave New Causes: Women in British Post-war Fiction* (London, 1995), p.9.



‘career women’) were able to develop and explore alternative femininities from their marginalized positions within the social structure. Consequently, the study questions prevalent assumptions that the era was a low point for feminism, evidencing instead a contemporary awareness amongst many women that the war had in fact significantly challenged the validity of traditional gender dynamics. It illustrates how as opportunities for employment and consumption expanded for post-war women, the popular image of the ‘wife and mother’ became unstable, producing the conditions in which second wave feminism might come into being.

Although the selected time period precedes and exceeds the decade of the 1950s by a number of years, it could be argued that 1945-1965 is the period commonly represented and imagined as the ‘long 1950s’ - the initial post-war years and the last perceived golden-age of British society.<sup>8</sup> As Elizabeth Wilson has suggested, ‘to measure time in decades is after all simply a convenience, and there is no material reason why the flavour and atmosphere of 1957 should be radically different from 1964’.<sup>9</sup> The years 1945-1965 spanned a period of supposed traditional values, a period which preceded the influences of Harold Wilson as Prime Minister and the so-called ‘permissive’ legislation which followed his appointment in 1964.<sup>10</sup> As already noted, this era is commonly presented as one of unchallenged conservatism, an image constructed through the, at times, nostalgic interpretations of media and historians alike,<sup>11</sup> promoting ‘stories of economic growth and modernization, the decline

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<sup>8</sup> For evidence of this within popular consciousness see for example: ‘The Fifties: Was this Britain’s golden age?’ *Daily Mail* special feature (29 January 1994), pp. 24-25. For scholarly representations of this sort see the examples given in note eleven.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, E. *Only Halfway to Paradise: Women in Post-war Britain, 1945-1968* (London, 1980), p.7.

<sup>10</sup> *Sexual Offences Act* (July 1967): Legalization of private homosexual activity between consenting males over 21. *Abortion Act* (October 1967): Pregnancies can be legally terminated. *Divorce Law Reform Act* (1969): Divorce by consent.

<sup>11</sup> See for example the celebratory accounts of, Beer, S. *Modern British Politics: a Study of Parties and Pressure groups* (London, 1965) Fraser, D. *The Evolution of the British Welfare State: a History of Social Policy since*

of the empire, political consensus, affluence, the rise of the welfare state and concomitant patterns of social stability'.<sup>12</sup> Fundamental to such an image is the assumption that conventional gender roles and identities were the fully accepted norm, the firm unquestioned foundations upon which post-war society depended. John Hill emphasised over a decade ago that, 'a popular perception of the 1950s is one of a period of domestic and sexual stalemate prior to the explosion of "permissiveness" in the 1960s'.<sup>13</sup> However as this study and the following discussion of current historiographical debate will show, this is an assumption which still requires considerable revision.

### **The Historiography of Women and Perception of Femininity in the Long 1950s**

Before discussion of the current field proceeds, it must be noted that there are certain key texts which will not be discussed here, as they will be considered in greater detail in the body of the text. Instead, this section will concentrate on three key themes which have emerged from the study of femininity in the long 1950s in recent years.

The first of these themes, as the title above suggests, centres round perceptions and constructions of post-war femininity, both of the period and the present. This area of interest is concerned with the ways discursive processes generated an illusion of homogeneous femininity and, how this distortion impacted upon not only contemporary women but future studies of them. The first and arguably the most comprehensive study to examine post-war

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*the Industrial Revolution* (Basingstoke, 1984). Also consider the homely and rose tinted images of the post-war years in popular television productions such as *Heartbeat* and *The Royal*.

<sup>12</sup> Conekin, B. Mort, F. and Waters, C. (eds.) *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain 1945-1964* (London, 1999), p.4.

<sup>13</sup> Hill, J. *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963* (London, 1997), p.16.

conceptions of femininity was Elizabeth Wilson's *Only Halfway to Paradise* (1980).<sup>14</sup>

Published three decades ago, Wilson's work was initially motivated by the apparent absence in historical record and in popular memory of a post-war feminist project existing prior to the Women's Liberation Movement of the mid-1960s. However, as Wilson explains in her introduction, during her research it soon became clear that this lack of attention to, even denial of, a post-war feminism was part of a much larger contemporary issue which encompassed the category of 'the post-war woman' as a whole. As a consequence, the trajectory of her research expanded to consider not only how post-war feminist projects defined and represented 'woman' but also contemporary social policy, sociology, literature and media. Wilson examined how the discourses produced by these disparate areas operated together to contribute 'to the making of a received wisdom about the position of women'.<sup>15</sup> The narrow, inflexible and homogenising image of post-war femininity promoted by this web of discourse, Wilson argues, was so successful that it persisted as 'a truth' into consequent decades, efficiently silencing the voices and experiences 'of women battered, of women raped, of women sexually attracted to women, of women in revolt, of women despised, of women despairing'.<sup>16</sup> Women whose voices and experience were simply sidelined and ignored might also be added to Wilson's list.

However, whilst Wilson draws attention to the absence of non-conforming femininities within post-war historiography, she does not spend time addressing or rectifying this absence, and the experiences of the single woman in particular are rarely alluded to. She examines in some detail the fractures and tensions within the dominant post-war representation of woman as 'professional housewife', but she does not consider how this

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<sup>14</sup> Wilson, E. *Only Halfway to Paradise: Women in Post-war Britain, 1945-1968* (London, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p.5.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p.3.

might have affected the image of alternative feminine identities. It is therefore in response to the gaps in knowledge highlighted but not dealt with in Wilson's important work that this study functions.

Since Wilson's seminal text, there have been a handful of books published which examine the discrepancies between the heavily promoted image of post-war feminine identity and the actual experiences of many women. In her influential study *Imagining Home* (1998), Wendy Webster looks 'at the ways in which women negotiated, appropriated or opposed a range of roles and identities assigned to them within ideas of home in the period' by considering notions of race and the differing experiences of white and black women.<sup>17</sup> Webster largely explores this topic through the oral testimonies of British-born women and those women relocating their lives and families from the West Indies. Webster's study examines the effect that the white, middle-class feminine ideal had on these wives, mothers and their families and asserts that 'by the early 1960s a generation of educated women, born during or immediately after the war' had begun 'to define home as an oppressive, over-private and stultifying place for women'.<sup>18</sup>

With a similar trajectory to Webster, Claire Langhamer also explores the meanings of 'home' in the long 1950s and the ideas of domestic femininity which lie at their heart.<sup>19</sup> She argues that it is imperative that simplistic assumptions which confuse the heavily promoted privatized domestic ideal with actual contemporary experience must be challenged. Langhamer claims that if the impact and complexities of post-war discourse regarding

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<sup>17</sup> Webster, W. *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945-64* (London, 1998), p. xviii.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p.149.

<sup>19</sup> Langhamer, C. 'The meanings of Home in post-war Britain'. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40:2 (2005).

notions of 'home' are to be explored, then it is vital not only to examine how this concept was situated in public discourse, but also 'the relationship between public perception, individual desire and material reality'.<sup>20</sup> She argues that with this approach one can begin to understand that 'while domesticity might be embraced, it was rarely done so in an unmediated way: women contested and refined it to suit their own conception of "home"'.<sup>21</sup> In utilizing the concept of 'home' as a tool for historical analysis, Langhamer and Webster dispute established interpretations that conflate post-war domesticity and traditional pre-war gender roles. Langhamer concludes that 'during the middle years of the twentieth-century, gender roles were in transition, with men and women working out new ways of living within a historically-distinct family framework', and she goes on to argue that 'revision and negotiation, rather than acceptance and acquiescence, are perhaps the most helpful way of understanding gender relations in this period'.<sup>22</sup> Her assertions appear to build on Pat Thane's earlier work *Family Life and Normality in Post-War British Culture* (2003), in which contemporary awareness of the fragility of the family 'norm' and the attempts made by diverse institutions to promote and maintain it are explored.<sup>23</sup> Both these works are important because they highlight not only the fractures and tensions within dominant post-war discourse regarding notions of 'family', 'gender' and 'normality', but also the dangers of simplifying and generalising contemporary reception to such discourse. As Denise Riley has emphasized, an understanding of both the production of gendered discourse and 'its resonances in the minds and words of its targets' are vital if as historians we are to resist analogous interpretations; otherwise potentially 'we obscure the fact that there are no completely naïve

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.342.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.357.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.356.

<sup>23</sup> Thane, P. 'Family life and "normality" in post-war British culture' in Bessel, R. and Schumann, D. (eds.) *Life After Death: Approaches to Cultural and Social History During the 1940s and 1950s*. (Cambridge, 2003), pp.193-210.

or completely knowing linguistic subjects'.<sup>24</sup> It is in accordance with these notions that this thesis explores where the sources allow both the cultural representations of post-war femininity, focusing particularly on constructions of the 'single woman', alongside contemporary engagement with them.

Drawing similar conclusions to Langhamer and Webster, Liz Heron has edited a collection of life histories from a selection of British women (mainly academics) who grew up in the 1950s. With the benefit of an adult's hindsight these stories reflect upon the pressures put upon the female child by the gendered expectations of the period, and consider the ways in which both they and the adults around them accepted and resisted the norms they were prescribed.<sup>25</sup> Significantly, the life stories presented in this collection do not read as one might have expected; the women's childhood recollections are not jaded by memories of stifling and inflexible prescriptions of behaviour, but characterized by feelings of optimism generated by an early sense of self-worth. As Heron concludes, it would seem 'that as little girls we had a stronger sense of our own possibilities than the myths about the fifties would allow'.<sup>26</sup> This text provides further evidence that contemporary perception did not always marry neatly with either prevalent post-war gender norms or established historiography. This thesis will further an understanding of that incongruity, examining instances in which unmarried women often felt and lived contrary to the norms which sought to define and confine them.

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<sup>24</sup> Riley, D. 'Some peculiarities of social policy concerning women in wartime and postwar Britain' in Higonnet, M. R. (ed.) *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*. (London, 1987), p.271.

<sup>25</sup> Heron, L. (ed.) *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing up in the Fifties* (London, 1985).

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, p.6.

## Post-War Women, Education and Employment

Some of the most enlightening studies to contribute to post-war history recently have emerged from scholars producing histories concerned with the gendered discourse surrounding education and employment, and the implications this had for feminine identity. These specific areas of research are interesting because they provide an inroad into the complex negotiations which were occurring between post-war social policy, cultural discourse, gendered norms, contemporary experience and legacies of the past; a heated negotiation which was taking place not only within the spheres of education and employment, but throughout post-war society in general.

Stephanie Spencer in particular has been at the forefront of this area of study, examining in detail the intricacies and impact of the often conflicting ideas about which type of education and work were considered suitable for girls and women. In an article discussing the popular post-war genre of career stories aimed at adolescent girls, Spencer explores the tension between the more traditional discourses of the feminine domestic role and marginalization in the workforce, and those of expanding opportunity and the 'dual role' generated largely by the 1944 Education Act, full employment and the removal of the marriage bar in certain occupations.<sup>27</sup> Spencer claims that that these widely read stories supported the emergent dual role discourse and that alongside other sources can be used 'to explain both women's access to the labour market and the contemporary feminization of particular occupations', such as librarianship.<sup>28</sup> Spencer illustrates how the dual role model, despite its inherent assumption that full-time domesticity would be experienced by all women

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<sup>27</sup> Spencer, S. 'Women's dilemmas in post-war Britain: Career stories for adolescent girls in the 1950s.' *History of Education*, 29:4 (2000), pp.329-42.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, p.338.

at some point in their life cycle, actually challenged the dismissive notion that women's identity as workers was subsidiary. Spencer argues that 'the dual role was not the same as the marginal relation to the workforce in low-status jobs. The term 'dual' inferred that both the domestic and the employed role enjoyed the same status and demanded the same amount of commitment, albeit at different points in the life-cycle'.<sup>29</sup>

This development in perceptions of women's employment, as explored by Spencer, is pertinent to a study of post-war single women, as one might assume that a greater tolerance of women in the labour force together with expanding opportunities would have had a positive impact upon their experiences. However, as Spencer explores in more detail in her later book *Gender, Work and Education* (2005), marriage and motherhood were still constructed as the inevitable and natural trajectories for all women.<sup>30</sup> Arguably therefore, the single woman of the long 1950s was marginalized even further than her predecessor of the interwar period, as she was no longer supposedly kept from the domestic role by a lack of available mates - a factor which had ensured a degree of tolerance for the interwar spinster by representing her as a victim of war. According to the dual role discourse (if not to the women themselves), women could now 'have it all', training and gainful employment could be resumed once their natural role as mothers was no longer required full-time - what sort of woman would not take advantage of that? It would appear that the pro-natalist ideology which was intrinsic not only to notions of the dual role but post-war society as a whole could not accommodate those women who voluntarily, or not, stood outside the heterosexual family framework. As the thesis explores, the new rhetoric of expanding opportunity could often serve to marginalize the single woman further.

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, p.331.

<sup>30</sup> Spencer, S. *Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s* (New York and Basingstoke, 2005).



Sarah Aiston has also contributed important research to this area, documenting what she believes were ‘the limited, gendered career options that faced graduate women post 1945, despite the increase in both educational and employment opportunities’.<sup>31</sup> Drawing upon a variety of sources including oral testimony, in an approach similar to Spencer’s, Aiston also considers the effects normative expectations of marriage and motherhood had upon the psyche and the life decisions of university educated women.<sup>32</sup> She argues that ‘in contrast to the first generations of university educated women, later cohorts no longer transgressed conventional expectations by rejecting marriage and motherhood on the same scale as their predecessors’.<sup>33</sup> Aiston concludes that women graduates influenced, perhaps pressurized, by the normative requirements of their gender were marrying more frequently and earlier, and choosing occupations which were considered not only more appropriate, such as teaching and nursing, but those which could also accommodate their reproductive role. As a seeming consequence of this development, Aiston discovered that some interviewees had perceived female lecturers who combined family life with work as excellent role models, whereas those classed as ‘bluestockings’ - single women dedicated to their career - were considered ‘dowdy in appearance and personality’, ‘not always very feminine’, ‘frumpish’ and ‘old-fashioned’.<sup>34</sup> Although Aiston’s findings are vital to our understanding of the way idealised femininity impacted upon post-war women and their career choices, it only highlights, like Spencer’s work, the difficult and marginal position occupied by the ‘single woman’; Aiston’s research is not concerned with this figure primarily.

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<sup>31</sup> Aiston, S. ‘A good job for a girl?: The career biographies of women graduates of the University of Liverpool post-1945.’ *Twentieth Century British History*, 15:4 (2004), p. 361.

<sup>32</sup> Especially within the following article: Aiston, S. ‘A maternal identity? The family lives of British women graduates pre- and post-1945.’ *History of Education*, 34:4 (2005), pp.407-26.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, p.407.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, p.417.

However, there have been some initial attempts within the area of employment and careers to explore the relationship between post-war gender norms and constructions of specifically single femininity, and these have been made largely by Liladhar and Kerslake. The aim of their research was to understand the role of library career novels in the ‘increasing feminization of the library workforce during the 1950s and 1960s’, with a particular interest in the way these texts represented the single women employed as librarians.<sup>35</sup> Significantly, these scholars stress the multifarious meanings of ‘single’ as an identity category and illustrate their argument with an exploration of the oppositional figures of the spinster and the single woman constructed within the texts. They argue that whilst career novels ‘aimed to encourage women’s employment in libraries, paradoxically they may also have contributed to processes which led to the impoverishment of women’s career prospects’.<sup>36</sup> Their articles maintain that by drawing upon anti-spinster discourse and representing certain career women as unattractive and unmarriageable, compared to their ‘heterosexy’ colleagues who leave or remain at a junior level on marriage, the novels encouraged readers to reject an independent lifestyle and to be unambitious within the labour market. The idea that ‘single’ is a loaded and diversified label is vitally important to an understanding of single feminine experience and consequently informs the very structure and findings of this thesis, therefore, it will later be discussed more fully.

However, it must be noted that despite the obvious prejudice toward independent women as highlighted by these various scholars, the period did signify the start of a process

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<sup>35</sup> Liladhar, J. and Kerslake, E. “‘No more library classes for Catherine’: Marital status, career progression and library employment in 1950s England.’ *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 22:2 (1999), p.219. See also: Kerslake, E. and Liladhar, J. ‘Angry sentinels and businesslike women: Identity and marital status in 1950s English library career novels’ *Library History*, 17:2 (2001), pp.83-90.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, p.216.

of gender transformation which would affect the dynamics of gender irrevocably. Arnot, David and Weiner, for example, have argued that it was as a direct, if unintended, result of women's role in the modernisation of the post-war economy and the new welfare state, that many more women were able to forge meaningful careers.<sup>37</sup> They highlight that the various departments and services created by the new welfare state produced new forms of female employment, especially within the so-called 'caring professions'. However, the authors are also careful to state that this new development in 'women's work' did not at the time signal emancipation, only expansion. They maintain that women employees were manipulated to 'provide the human face of welfare', a new feminized arm of the state used to 'increase the surveillance of the population, particularly in private familial worlds'.<sup>38</sup> However, despite this assertion and the obvious gendered division of occupations, the new welfare state did provide a sphere in which many single women could not only find employment, but positions of significance as professional women, and the impact of this development upon women must not be underestimated. Although this thesis does not directly consider the employment of women within new and developing departments of social provision, it is noted that their addition to the increasing number of working women contributed greatly to a growing feminine sense of worth as agents within the public sphere. As more women joined the paid workforce, their legitimacy as employees became less contested and opportunities for the formation of identities alternative to those of convention became increasingly possible.

It must be noted that inevitably an examination of developments in gender in the long 1950s brings up questions of class. Women of various class positions are considered within

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<sup>37</sup> Arnot, M. David, M. and Weiner, G. 'Motherhood and women's work in the welfare state' in Arnot, M; David, M; Weiner, G. (eds.) *Closing the Gender Gap: Post-war Education and Social Change*. (Cambridge, 1999), p.65.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, p.58.

this study and, in most instances, their positioning does impact upon their understanding and experiences of gender. Arguably, for example, the wealthy upper/middle - class status of Angela Du-Maurier, as discussed in Chapter Four, afforded more freedom to pursue an independent lifestyle. While in contrast, marriage is desired by one working-class mother in Chapter Three, not necessarily for the social acceptance it would bring, but for the financial security it would afford. Potentially, the changes occurring within employment and later, wider opportunities for consumption enabled some women to gain (or aspire to) both the cultural and economical capital needed to alter their class positions. At the other end of the scale, women who transgressed gendered norms by having children out of wedlock could face a very dramatic fall in social status, and in Chapter Four this is suggested as a principle reason for the blanket of secrecy which surrounds middle and upper-class instances of post-war illegitimacy especially. However, as the study explores, class identity and membership were increasingly becoming less significant for many women in the period, replaced instead by a growing awareness and need for self-satisfaction and autonomy; as the boundaries of gender demarcation were blurring, so too were the traditional hierarchies of class, particularly for women.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> For discussions on class see: Savage, M. *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: the politics of method*, (Oxford, 2010) Savage, M. 'Working class identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the affluent worker study', *Sociology*, 39: 5, (2005), pp.929-94; Savage, M. Bagnall, G and Longhurst, B.L. 'Ordinary, ambivalent and defensive: Class identities in the North-West of England', *Sociology*, 35, (2001) pp.875-892; Marwick, A. *British Society since 1945*, (Harmondsworth, 1996); Todd, S. 'Affluence, Class and Crown Street: Reinvestigating the Post-War Working Class', *Contemporary British History*, 22: 4, (2008), pp. 501-518; Todd, S. 'Breadwinners and Dependents: Young working-class people in England, 1918-55', *International Review of Social History*, 52: 1, (2007), pp. 57-87; Bell, R. and Gunn, S. *Middle Classes* (London, 2002).

## The 'Single Woman' in the Long 1950s

One of the first monographs to consider the state of twentieth-century 'singleness' in any depth is Katherine Holden's *Shadow of Marriage* (2007).<sup>40</sup> The main object of this study is to examine the impact of continuities and change in marital beliefs and practices on men and women who never married in early and mid-twentieth century England. She argues that the oppositional categories of married and single are interdependent, reliant on each other for their meaning and definition. However, she believes that this relationship has been ignored in past studies and the part played by single men and women in the maintenance of the power base of marriage denied. Although Holden attempts to explore the time-specific position and experiences of both single women and bachelors, her analysis and material is dominated by the figure of the single woman, especially those categorized as spinsters. This interesting imbalance, as Holden explains, is a consequence of the differing definitions applied to, and varied connotations of, male and female singleness. The state of singleness is gender specific and therefore subject to the notions of femininity and masculinity dominant at any given time. Unlike single post-war women, who were often living in direct opposition to the gender norm of the dependent housewife-mother, single men were not considered 'fundamentally different from their married peers,' which 'may explain the relative invisibility of bachelorhood'.<sup>41</sup>

The different social positioning of single men and women not only emphasizes the precarious marginal existence of the single woman but it also illustrates the inconsistent nature of the identity category – 'single'. The 'single woman' was and is commonly defined

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<sup>40</sup> Holden, K. *Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914-1960*. (Manchester and New York, 2007), pp.1-2.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, p.9.

as a female who has either never married or is no longer married, whether through the death of a spouse or divorce, and is therefore financially independent. However, with further consideration it becomes evident that the definitional boundaries are not so easily drawn; between married and single status exist a variety of permutations. As in the research of Kerslake and Liladhar, Katherine Holden highlights in her recent work that ‘singleness’ is a ‘slippery and elusive’ label, ‘encompassing a range of different meanings both in law and in popular understanding, changing in significance over time and also in relation to gender’.<sup>42</sup>

With regard to this issue, although some scholars have drawn attention to the varied nature of ‘single’ as an identity category in any given period, it is rarely used within their work to allude to the single or unmarried mother. This is perhaps once again an issue of meaning, a consequence of the label’s historic association with notions of celibacy. However, those that have focused on this figure have argued that she, like her spinster sister, was similarly represented as ‘other’ in widespread attempts to maintain traditional hierarchies of gender and class. Janet Fink, for example, has investigated how the marginalization of single women occurred not only within cultural texts, but also within the very fabric of the new welfare state’s social policies. She illustrates how the ‘single, separated, divorced or cohabiting were regularly excluded from access to family-oriented benefits because their sexual and familial relationships were not contained within either the institution of marriage or the nuclear family form’.<sup>43</sup> For the unmarried mother in particular, Fink demonstrates how punitive post-war policies, the law and the moral frameworks which informed them, could be. She considers the precariousness of the single mother’s existence, not only as an individual

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, p.10.

<sup>43</sup> Fink, J. ‘Natural mothers, putative fathers, and innocent children: The definition and regulation of parental relationships outside marriage, in England, 1945-1959.’ *Journal of Family History*, 25:2 (2000) p.179.

shunned from 'respectable' society, but also as someone with a critically uncertain financial situation. As Fink highlights, the welfare and financial maintenance of a child born out of wedlock usually rested solely on the shoulders of the mother: 'the gendered nature of the British marriage contract operated not only to regulate women's sexuality and reproduction but also to confer fatherhood on men'.<sup>44</sup> For many single women employed full time as mothers, national assistance was the only benefit and income available to them. This was set at purely subsistence levels and women had to endure an often humiliating means test to prove their entitlement to it.<sup>45</sup> It was possible for some single women to claim affiliation orders for their illegitimate children; a legal contract which promised some financial aid from the father. However, as Fink highlights, this was often a very difficult process and the narrow definition of 'single' utilized by the authorities often denied certain individuals this opportunity. Before the 1957 Affiliation Proceedings Act, only women strictly categorized as unmarried, widowed or separated could pursue affiliation orders (and often their claims were disputed), which meant that women married after the birth of their child to a man not the father, or married women separated/divorced following the birth of a child which was not their husband's, were not entitled to claim affiliation orders for their children. Once again this issue emphasizes the incoherence of this particular label and additionally the sliding scale of respectability with which different kinds of single women would be measured. As Fink emphasises, following the legislation in 1957:

a mother's marital status was afforded less significance in decisions about the financial responsibilities of men to support their illegitimate children, although the complex and contradictory nature of the category of women described as single illustrates the legislative difficulties in this period around the definition of women's

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, p.181.

<sup>45</sup> See the work of Virginia Noble below.

sexual and maternal relationships that lay outside and across the boundaries of marriage and the nuclear family.<sup>46</sup>

In an article which expands upon that of Fink's, Virginia Noble explores in some detail the reaction of the National Assistance Board to the (increasing) claims for assistance from single mothers in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>47</sup> Noble demonstrates that despite the government's increased responsibility for public welfare and its rhetoric of inclusion, the NAB was manifestly uncomfortable with the financial maintenance of single mothers. Noble illustrates how social provision was structured around notions of the 'deserving needy' and as a consequence the single mother created a predicament. The figure of the single mother was problematic because she had exercised her sexuality and her ability to reproduce *outside* the bonds of marriage, directly challenging the foundations upon which post-war ideologies were based.<sup>48</sup> Noble explores how 'in trying to restrict the state's role in social provision, the NAB relied on and tried to extend familial obligations for women's support that had been institutionalized in family law and in the poor law'.<sup>49</sup> She also considers their use of various forms of 'persuasion, coercion, and intimidation' in an effort to prevent such women from turning to the welfare state in the first instance.<sup>50</sup> In effect, Noble's work highlights the ways in which certain types of single women suffered prejudice and penalization from the very institutions and policies which were designed to help them. Noble concludes that 'the conditions attached to benefits were used as a means of regulating the sexuality of a suspect

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<sup>46</sup>Fink, J. 'Natural mothers, putative fathers, and innocent children', p.186.

<sup>47</sup> Noble, V. "'Not the normal mode of maintenance': Bureaucratic resistance to the claims of lone women in the post-war British welfare state.' *Law and Social Inquiry*, 29:2 (2004), pp.343-372.

<sup>48</sup> The predominant ideology of this period and the gendered norms it produced will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

<sup>49</sup> Noble, V. "'Not the normal mode of mode of maintenance'", p.343.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, p.343.



class of lone women, who, if they chose to have relationships with men, could not also count on material support from the government'.<sup>51</sup>

As this review of the field has highlighted, traditional historiography of the long 1950s is increasingly being scrutinized by historians (of various methods and approaches), and prevalent assumptions which distorted and homogenized the experiences of its contemporary agents are being challenged. Feminist scholars, in particular, have begun to investigate how central women and certain constructions of femininity were to the very foundations of post-war social frameworks, and the effects this might have had upon contemporary women. Increasingly, such scholars are arguing that if we are to fully appreciate the complexities of this important transitional period, it is vital to examine the constructions of gender within every sphere of society, not only because they were central to post-war ideology, but in order to give voice to those experiences which have been marginalized by both dominant discourse of the period and subsequent historiography.

This thesis expands upon the work carried out by Holden and these other scholars by exploring in more detail the evolving cultural representation of certain 'single' feminine identities in the long 1950s - the spinster and the unmarried mother - and their reciprocal relationship with contemporary feminine experience, that is, the ways in which representation and experience interconnect. In addition, the study examines how portrayals of the post-war single woman were influenced by the fundamental societal changes witnessed in the period, and argues that certain single women were able to develop and explore alternate femininities through the creative use of the cultural texts and/or discourses available to them. This thesis

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, p.366.

not only addresses gaps in historiography as highlighted by the scholars discussed here, but also extends current interpretations through its interdisciplinary approach.

In order to explore the issues discussed above, the study is structured around a number of key research questions. What kinds of feminine identity were on offer in the long 1950s? What do cultural representations of single women tell us about the social positioning of the spinster and the single-mother within post-war society? How were single women able to resist or re-articulate the identities prescribed by post-war culture? How did single women of the immediate post-war period construct their own experiences; what kinds of discourse were available to them? When exploring these questions the study resists prevalent tendencies to clearly categorise representation, discourse and experience as repressive or progressive, acquiescent or resistant, an approach which too often simplifies and overlooks the complexities of the power dynamics at their core. Instead, consideration is given to the fractures and awkward irregularities present within this area of post-war gender history, ambiguities which plague all aspects of culture at all times but which prove vital to its very development and survival.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

Fundamentally, this study is a cultural history of meaning. It examines how the spinster and the unmarried mother were thought about in the immediate post-war period but also how they thought about themselves. In essence, it seeks to understand what it *meant* to be a spinster or unmarried mother at this time, a question inspired by two equally key motivations. Firstly, as a history the study is concerned with change, not necessarily in the purely chronological

sense, but the ways in which cultural discourses and social processes generate the phenomenon through their constant dialogue and reconstitution in a given period. Within this study, discourse is understood not simply as a ‘group of statements that belong to a single system of formation’<sup>52</sup>, but a complex network of interactions ‘socially located and permeated by forces of conflict and power’ and, therefore, a site for the constant contestation of meaning.<sup>53</sup> It seeks to understand *how* these figures were represented, how a particular image or images were produced through the competing and overlapping discourse of different institutions and agencies. Additionally, it also asks how those individuals or groups categorised as spinsters or unmarried mothers utilised or mobilised the images available to them; how did they view themselves? How might the representations on offer afford unmarried women ‘ways of understanding and telling their own stories’.<sup>54</sup> As this statement suggests, the notion of ‘experience’ is not evoked unproblematically here as a reliable way of accessing the ‘real’. It is understood as a discursive construct, a narration which draws upon historically and socially situated discourses and tropes. As Scott rightly argues, ‘it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience’ and, therefore, such accounts must be viewed as interpretations requiring interpretation.<sup>55</sup>

Secondly, influenced by a feminist agenda the study simultaneously seeks to explore *why* these single feminine figures were constructed in these particular ways at this particular time. What purpose did the prevalent images serve and to whom? Were particular and perhaps differently re-worked representations drawn upon to accommodate specific agendas within the various spheres inherent to post-war society? Foucault has led us to think about power as a de-centred yet unequally dispersed and accessible force, therefore, this study examines why some representations were more prevalent than others, as well as the material and subjective

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<sup>52</sup> Foucault, M. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London, 2004 [1968]), p.121.

<sup>53</sup> Gunn, S. *History and Cultural Theory* (London and New York, 2006), p.81

<sup>54</sup> Holden, K. *The Shadow of Marriage*, p.20.

<sup>55</sup> Butler, J. and Scott, J. (eds.) *Feminists Theorize the Political* (London and New York, 1992), p. 26

effects this had for those women living outside the boundaries of heterosexual marriage.<sup>56</sup>

This form of research is in essence what Joan Scott and Judith Butler call a ‘critical interrogation of the exclusionary operations by which “positions” are established’.<sup>57</sup>

However, of equal interest to this study is knowledge of the extent to which these unmarried women could resist or re-articulate the proffered identities which sought to confine and define them. What powers of agency did these women possess - or perhaps one should say were able to access - within the ‘limited cultural repertoire’ available to them?<sup>58</sup> As with most feminist studies, this thesis is also driven by a desire to make known the histories of a marginalised group of individuals who are often overlooked and sidelined, not only during the period of interest but also subsequently by many historians.

In a key article entitled ‘The Problem with Cultural History’, Peter Mandler emphasised that many critics perceived such historiographies as this one as lacking rigorous methodological and theoretical frameworks, as being ‘simply a matter of surfing through the web of representations sampling it ad lib, and interpreting it ditto’.<sup>59</sup> During the time when historians first began to engage with the ‘cultural turn’ influencing the discipline this may perhaps have been the case; as Mandler himself admits he too was initially caught up in the liberating promises of this epistemological development.<sup>60</sup> However, in recent years a more sophisticated understanding of the complex processes involved in the generation of meaning has necessarily developed, as historians increasingly realise ‘that our evidence of it is partial, and that our attempts to extract and reproduce meaning from the past especially are mediated

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<sup>56</sup> For discussion of Foucault’s influence upon conceptions of ‘power’ see: Burchell, G; Gordon, C; Miller, J. P. (eds.) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago, 1991).

<sup>57</sup> Butler, J. and Scott, J. (eds.) *Feminists Theorize the Political* (London, New York, 1992), p.xiv.

<sup>58</sup> Walkowitz, J. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London, 1992), p.9.

<sup>59</sup> Mandler, P. ‘The problem with Cultural History,’ *Cultural and Social History*, 1:1 (2004), p.95.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p.95.

by a whole host of inadequacies and half understandings'.<sup>61</sup> Alongside scholars from diverse disciplines, but especially with those of the literary field with whom cultural historians have an ongoing dialogue, we continue to recognise the changeable and temporally specific status of categories and concepts, yet our methods of analysis of them have become more stringent. This form of post-structuralist textual analysis is not just occupied with textual description (how texts tell their stories), but 'seeks to understand the ways in which these forms of representation take place, the assumptions behind them and the kinds of sense-making about the world that they reveal'.<sup>62</sup> It does not necessarily analyse texts and sources in order to judge how realistic they might be or dismiss them due to bias. As David Silverman reiterates, this method is 'more concerned with the *processes* through which texts depict "reality" than with whether such texts contain true or false statements'; it recognises that people interpret reality in different ways and this a key interest of the approach.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, it does not prioritise the material of one type of source over another, although it does appreciate that not all texts are produced and consumed in the same way. As Richard Howells rightly argues the use of 'polysemic texts calls for polysemic methodologies', and consequently, the interpretive approach to a source will ultimately be dictated by the material and its particular form.<sup>64</sup> For example, when analysing the material contained within an oral testimony or a life history, there are issues surrounding memory and notions of experience to be considered which are not relevant in the same way to the analysis of a novel. Similarly, if a valid textual/visual analysis of an image is to take place, such as within a magazine or film, there are certain areas of the analytical method which require supplementation and adaptation if the idiosyncrasies of the image's construction are to be appreciated. However, as all the texts to

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p.94.

<sup>62</sup> McKee, A. *Textual Analysis: A Beginners Guide* (London and New Delhi, 2003), p.17.

<sup>63</sup> My italics. Silverman, D. 'Analysing talk and text' in Denzin, N. And Lincoln, Y. (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (London and New Delhi, 2000), p.236.

<sup>64</sup> Howells, R. *Visual Culture* (Cambridge, 2003), p.126.

be examined are considered time-specific products of culture, the tenets of poststructuralist textual analysis, as outlined above, will form the basis of their interrogation.

With regard to the films considered in this study, it must further be noted that they are not all products of native film-makers. The 1964 production *Hush. . .Hush, Sweet Charlotte* examined in Chapter Four came from a Hollywood studio and featured the famous Hollywood star, Bette Davis. However, despite this American pedigree, it is still a pertinent artefact of post-war British culture.<sup>65</sup> Paul Swann emphasises that during the long 1950s ‘the cinema occupied a position in people’s lives as a major institution, analogous in some respects to the central role of television today’.<sup>66</sup> The films being shown at the cinemas, visited by many on a weekly basis, were not generally the offerings of the national film industry, but the big budget movies of America; the American movie could account for up to 70% of all films shown in one year in the 1950s.<sup>67</sup> Consequently, American film and particularly the stars it produced, played an important role in the construction, development and resistance to British gender norms; much loved stars like Bette Davis provided the mannequin upon which models of femininity could be judged and imagined.

Of course, with regard to the complex issue of consumption the scholar must also be mindful of her own specific temporal and ideological position when examining the sources. Again, although complete objectivity is unattainable, there are certainly methodological practices which can reduce the influences of a twenty-first century bias. Analysis of diverse forms of text and employment of an interdisciplinary approach are vital to the construction of

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<sup>65</sup> Aldrich, R. (dir.) *Hush. . .Hush, Sweet Charlotte* ( USA, 1964).

<sup>66</sup> Swann, P. *The Hollywood Feature Film in Post-war Britain* (London and Sydney, 1987) pp. 2-3.

<sup>67</sup> See: Porter, V. and S. Harper, ‘Throbbing hearts and smart repartee: The reception of American films in 1950s Britain’ *Media history*, 4:2 (1998) pp.175-193.

an informed and balanced cultural history. The development of meaning and construction of femininities are not restricted to a certain kind of text or source; they are bounced back and forth in an endless dialogue between a plethora of agencies and domains past, present and future, evolving (and perhaps devolving) as the agendas of these agencies/domains change over time. If one is to gain any sense of this process and its consequences for the cultural representation of the spinster and unmarried mother in the long 1950s, it is essential that analysis does not stop at the documents of post-war officialdom but continues to take into account the images reproduced in magazines, film, fiction and academic studies, as well as those produced by the women themselves in oral testimony and autobiography. Judith Walkowitz terms this expansive historical approach as mapping out 'a dense cultural grid', a method she agrees is critical in order for the historian to contextually anchor her arguments and interpretation of the sources.<sup>68</sup> It is for this reason that the following chapter is concerned with exploring post-war discourses of femininity more generally, so that representations of the single woman can be understood as part of a wider field of gender construction. Examining post-war imaginings of femininity and in particular its ideals is vital to a full appreciation of the reasons why the figure of the single woman was so problematic, and why some representations of her were mobilised over others.

### **The Idea of Being 'Single': Defining 'Singleness'**

Meaning itself is always haunted by other layers and levels of meaning, there are deferrals from prior meanings, residues and traces hanging like a cloud.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Walkowitz, J. *City of Dreadful Delight*, p.5.

<sup>69</sup> McRobbie, A. *The Uses of Cultural Studies* (London and New Delhi, 2006) p.28.

In this quotation, Angela McRobbie succinctly highlights the significant legacies which past productions of meaning can leave upon those of the present. As the consideration of Holden's work emphasised, the category 'single', like any other identity label, is fraught with fractures and tensions which deny the possibility of a single ahistorical definition or use. Of course, in addition to this umbrella term there are also numerous words of a similar meaning which are used often interchangeably when referring to a woman of single status, such as spinster, unmarried, independent or career woman. These labels, like 'single', are all riddled with the ghosts of past usage and often carry and confer additional meanings to the primary ones they are used for in a given period. They may even at times be employed intentionally to invoke these past connotations. As a process this is certainly something to be considered in more detail in the following chapters. However, before analysis begins it will be helpful to briefly consider the definitional issues that some of these terms generate and to clarify their use within this study.

Feminine sexuality has always been at the centre of the meanings given to words used to describe a single woman. Unlike the masculine equivalent of the 'bachelor', which is concerned with a man's marital, rather than his sexual, status, the terms 'spinster' and 'old maid' have also historically denoted virginity. According to [Deletion] the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) the term spinster was originally 'appended to names of women originally to denote their occupation, but subsequently (from the seventeenth century) as the proper legal designation of one still unmarried'.<sup>70</sup> As a woman's sexuality was only legitimised within the bonds of heterosexual matrimony, it was therefore assumed that the respectable unmarried women would remain ignorant of the sexual act. Sheila Jeffreys argues that, this element of the definition of 'spinster' became increasingly important during the 1920s, as a

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<sup>70</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, vol. xvi (Oxford, 1989), pp. 243-244.



consequence of the eroticising of the married woman by inter-war sexologists.<sup>71</sup> She maintains that ‘the definition of spinsters was changing at this time. Whilst previously the word spinster had simply meant unmarried woman, it was coming to mean, specifically, women who had not done sexual intercourse with men’.<sup>72</sup> Such words in periods as the 1920s and 1950s were not simple descriptive terms, but tools utilised in the containment of female sexuality; they demanded (and assumed) that the recipient remain celibate or risk earning an alternative label of feminine disgrace. In addition, as the study will explore, these labels progressively evoked derogatory images of the women they were used to describe; they carried assumptions not only about their sexuality but the perceived essential nature of their being. Katherine Holden emphasises this point arguing that, the terms ‘old-maid’ and ‘spinster’ became ‘a location for personality traits widely believed to be unattractive’.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, any women these terms identified were instantly dismissed as unlikeable and unmarriageable. This is evident in the second entry which appears for ‘spinster’ in the *OED*; it reads ‘a woman still unmarried; *esp.* one beyond the usual age for marriage, an old maid’.<sup>74</sup> The entry’s use of the term ‘usual’ implies that the spinster’s unwedded state is *unusual*, perhaps even unnatural. It implies that she is not like other, ‘normal’ women. Consequently, any flippant use of these terms must clearly be avoided and in this study they will only be utilised when their historical usage is under examination.

Until recently the term ‘single’ also carried connotations of celibacy when used to describe a woman, as the *OED* and the *Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary* concur, the

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<sup>71</sup> Jeffreys, S. *The Spinster and her Enemies: Femininity and Sexuality, 1880-1930* (Melbourne, 1997), p.166.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p.175.

<sup>73</sup> Holden, K.. *The Shadow of Marriage*, p.7.

<sup>74</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. xvi, pp.243-244.

latter dictionary even suggesting that to be single also precluded romantic relations.<sup>75</sup> With this in mind, one can begin to understand why the term was never used in the long 1950s to refer to an unmarried woman with a child. This figure presented a paradox: she was of single status but was clearly no longer a virgin and for this reason the label ‘single mother’ or ‘single parent’ could not be used, it would have been a contradiction in terms. According to the *OED*, it was not until the final year of the 1960s, once the word’s additional past meaning of celibacy had faded, that it could be applied to those with children.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, in accordance with the conventions of the immediate post-war period, a single unwedded woman with a child shall only ever be referenced as an unmarried mother in this study.

Due to the constraints of the thesis length, it has only been possible to examine the representations and experiences of those single women who have never married and then only those who were artificially categorised under the titles of ‘spinster’ and ‘unmarried mother’. However, it cannot be emphasised enough that the inadequate and homogenising notion of singleness hides the lives and experiences of a diversity of women (and men). As previously suggested, it is often assumed that the common factor which identified the ‘single woman’ from all others was the fact that she had either never married or was no longer married, whether through the death of a spouse or divorce and was therefore financially independent. Yet, consider the woman separated from or abandoned by her husband during the long 1950s, still married but living alone and raising her children independently (whether in receipt of financial support from her spouse or not). Was she not a single woman? Or, what of the many women who lived in long-term, loving and supportive relationships with other women, would they have classed themselves as single women?

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<sup>75</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. xv, p.518; *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, Third Edition, (Cambridge, 2008), pp.1341 and 1395.

<sup>76</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. xv, p.518.

However, the aim of this research is not to reject or castigate the use of analytic terms or categories such as ‘single’ (this after all, would be unrealistic and impractical), but to position them at the centre of study in order to interrogate their discursive construction and inadequacies and ‘resignify or appropriate them for specific ends’.<sup>77</sup> It is hoped, therefore, that this study not only contributes to the field of post-war gender and cultural history but that it goes some way to exposing the formative and exclusionary power of categorization and more generally discourse in the construction of sexual difference. As Butler and Scott have emphasized, such work is vital because if we do not interrogate the differential and exclusionary means through which ‘foundational’ notions and categories such as ‘woman’, ‘agency’, ‘single’, ‘experience’ are constituted, then we can never ‘expose the silent violence of these concepts as they have operated not merely to marginalize certain groups, but to erase and exclude them from the notion of ‘community’ altogether, indeed, to establish *exclusion* as the very precondition and possibility for ‘community’?’<sup>78</sup>

## Summary of Structure

In order to explore the questions and issues raised here, the thesis is structured in the following way. Initially, as previously discussed, the next chapter examines constructions of femininity in the long 1950s more generally. In particular, it pays close attention to dominant gender ideals of the period, in order that the social and cultural positioning of unmarried mothers and spinsters might be understood more fully. It considers what was expected of women and the naturalised traits they were expected to embody.

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<sup>77</sup> Butler, J. and Scott, J. (eds.) *Feminists Theorize the Political*, p.xiii.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p.xiv.

Subsequent to this examination, the two following chapters concentrate solely on the figure of the unmarried mother. The first of these explores the changing approach to, and representations of this figure, arguing that traditional punitive attitudes originally informed by the Church were giving way to new, though equally damaging ideas by ‘expert authorities’ - child psychologists such as John Bowlby and D. W. Winnicott. It considers the state’s approach to these women and their children, and the possible impact older and new ideas about illegitimate pregnancy had upon their provision. Additionally, it analyses evidence that within popular culture there existed a growing sympathy for the position of these women. Discussion of the effects of this and other discourses upon the experiences of unmarried mothers form the final element of this section.

Chapter Four, leading on from the former, develops ideas that some unmarried women were increasingly able, and willing, to establish alternative family structures. It argues that despite continued prejudice and financial difficulty, women were keeping their babies, and that often with the aid of friends and family and the small amount of national assistance they could claim, they were finding happiness and satisfaction in the care and development of their families. The chapter maintains that ‘class’ played an important part in the outcome of an illegitimate pregnancy, an issue recognised by certain authors of the period, who utilised the event of unplanned pregnancy to firstly, expose the prejudices and limitations of classed and gendered norms, and secondly, to explore the potential of a feminine independence possible without such constraints.

Chapters Five and Six focus on the figure and experiences of single women categorised under the label of ‘spinster’. The first of these initially explores an older model of single femininity the ‘old maid’, its historical usages and meanings, and then its appropriation and critique within certain post-war cultural texts. This chapter then considers the differences between this older stereotype and newer constructions of single femininity and the influences these representations had upon the women they sought to categorise. Through analysis of autobiographies, tracts and novels by these women, it argues that many ‘spinsters’ were negating their marginalised and limited position within post-war society, and constructing alternative identities through their activities within the imagined ‘public’, as opposed to ‘private’ sphere.

Once again, the penultimate chapter expands upon certain ideas and themes briefly discussed within the former, primarily, the impact of increasing acceptance and opportunity for employment upon the representation and experience of ‘spinsters’. It argues that, despite persisting homogenisation and prejudice from certain quarters, the opportunity for single women to pursue a working identity in the public eye was a significant and empowering development, if they had the ability to embrace it. The perceived danger of this new model of the single working woman did generate considerable criticism, however, the chapter illustrates that, for many women, the satisfaction gained from this alternative feminine identity far outweighed the threat of social censure.

As is the convention, the thesis will then conclude with a final chapter which will summarise and emphasise the main findings and arguments of each section discussed here.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **A 'New Look' for Post-war Femininity in the Long 1950s? The Feminine Ideal, Modernity and Maternity**

As argued by the historians discussed in the previous chapter, this was an era witnessing 'a revitalization of family life' following the social and cultural dislocations engendered by total war and the subsequent fragmentation of the Empire.<sup>1</sup> The protection of the family unit was not only held aloft as a principal reason for war, but promoted as the very key to post-war reconstruction and the only route back to 'normality'. As women were, or had the potential to be, key figures within this idealised family unit, as the conventional homemakers, bearers and carers of children, their role was positioned at the heart of this discourse and any social policy which resulted from it; their competence and dedication to the reproductive and domestic role had become of prime national importance. Elizabeth Wilson emphasises that 'in the post-war period marriage and family were essential parts of a vision of the social democratic society'.<sup>2</sup> White British women, as will be discussed, were not only perceived as producers of the nation's population but also the cultural reproducers of the 'nation' as an 'imagined community'.<sup>3</sup>

However, as this chapter will outline, the prolific pro-natalist discourse which homogenized all women as wives and mothers was paradoxically under a growing threat from the increasing and vital economic role of women in the nation's fragile industry. Despite the fact, as Denise Riley argues, that women's war work was often 'characterized as

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<sup>1</sup> Dijkstra, S. 'Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan: The politics of omission.' *Feminist Studies*, 6:2 (1980) pp.290-303, p.291.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, E. *Only Halfway to Paradise: Women in Postwar Britain 1945-1968* (London, 1980) p.108.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities* (London, 1983).

an exceptional and valiant effort from which women would thankfully sink away in peacetime', the numbers of women, especially married women in paid employment continued to swell after the cessation of hostilities.<sup>4</sup> In their statistics compiled from data collected by the O.E.C.D, Margaret Walsh and Chris Wrigley have illustrated that in 1946 there were 13% more women in paid employment than there had been before the war.<sup>5</sup> Almost a decade later in 1955 the percentage of women in the labour force had risen to 45.9% of all women of working age (15-64), and by 1965 this number had increased to 51%.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, as Kathleen Paul has indicated, this increase in 'womanpower' was a development not wholly discouraged by certain elements of the state.<sup>7</sup> The consequence, however, was disparity. The heavily promoted cultural model of domestic femininity was being consistently undermined by the actual experiences of women, resulting in a proliferation of different voices negotiating or zealously reasserting the 'true' ideal of femininity. It is perhaps in response to the *instability* of the category of 'woman', during this period, that the image of domestic femininity was so vigorously asserted. The promotion of this was generated not through smug conservatism but feelings of anxiety generated by the fundamental changes occurring within society.

Such ambiguity, evidenced within official and popular discourse alike, did not stem completely from the disturbance of wartime experience, some would argue, but had its roots in the years before the Second World War. Alison Light, for example, maintains that the interwar period witnessed 'a continual alarm over the meaning of gender difference'

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<sup>4</sup> Riley, D. 'Some peculiarities of social policy concerning women in wartime and postwar Britain' in Higonnet, M. R. (ed.) *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*. (London, 1987), p.261.

<sup>5</sup> Walsh, M and C. Wrigley 'Womanpower: The transformation of the labour force in the UK and the USA since 1945' *Refresh*, 30: Summer, 2001, p.1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Table 1, p.2.

<sup>7</sup> Paul, K. *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Post-war Era* (Ithaca and London, 1997).

generated in part, she claims, by a contemporary re-definition of English identity.<sup>8</sup> Light maintains that the 1920s and 1930s ‘saw a move away from formerly heroic and officially masculine public rhetoric of national destiny . . . to an Englishness at once less imperial and more inward-looking, more domestic and more private – and in terms of prewar standards, more “feminine”’.<sup>9</sup> This re-focus resulted in the formulation of new patterns of domestic life and ideas about ‘home’, consumerism, citizenship, companionate marriage, contraception, and the ‘professional housewife’, which increasingly impacted upon the ways femininity was conceived. Judy Giles, in her analysis of these developments, proposes that the period is significant as a ‘moment when the forces of modernization . . . transformed domestic life and, in doing so, produced opportunities for change that were beneficial for millions of women’.<sup>10</sup> Giles argues that although these developments did not wholly revolutionize the boundaries between gendered spheres of activity, they did afford many women a route to citizenship by recognizing the validity of their activities within the domestic sphere, and as a consequence ‘appeared to offer the dignity and self-esteem that was so often perceived as missing from the lives of their mothers and grandmothers’.<sup>11</sup>

Such scholars are in no way suggesting that the period was a radically liberating time for women. It is recognized that notions of femininity were still heavily circumscribed by conventional beliefs in a division of labour based upon sexual difference. However, they argue that to define the interwar years as complacently traditional and anti-progressive in its perceptions of gender is to ignore the fissures and conflicts present within contemporary discourse and thus the foundations of ambiguity which would pervade the constructions of

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<sup>8</sup> Light, A. *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London, 1991) p.8.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p.8.

<sup>10</sup> Giles, J. *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford and New York, 2004) pp.4 -5.

<sup>11</sup> Giles, J. *The Parlour and the Suburb*, p.11.



gender in later years. As Langhamer argues ‘while home-life in the 1950s was not an unproblematic return to earlier patterns, neither was it sufficiently distinct from interwar experiences to be viewed as a ‘new’ model of living.’<sup>12</sup>

The aim of this chapter, therefore, will be to chart and explore key developments in the discourse surrounding the role of women in the long 1950s, much of which had its roots in the inter-war years, in order to gain an understanding of the representations of feminine identity being constructed by both official and popular post-war texts. This chapter will examine the role women were expected to play in post-war reconstruction, in order that further chapters might explore how the celebration of one manifestation of feminine identity impacted upon the legitimacy of others.

### **‘Family’, Population Fears and the ‘Beveridge Report’**

I believe it is in the building up of home life that our future greatness depends. This setting, the solidarity in families, is still the best ideal of life, it is here that the old, young and middle-aged get each other’s point of view. A happy home and family life is the bulwark of a Nation.<sup>13</sup>

Although the post-war domestic ideal of the nuclear family living in a new home of their own was not, and could never be, a universal experience, it was an image consistently evoked during this period by a diversity of sources and, evidenced by the view recorded by this female Mass Observation contributor, it was somewhat influential. Before the end of war was

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<sup>12</sup> Langhamer, C. ‘The meanings of home in postwar Britain.’ p.362.

<sup>13</sup> Mass Observation Archives, File Report 1616, 3 March 1943, p.9 quoted in Langhamer, C. ‘The meanings of home in postwar Britain.’ p.344.

foreseeable the ‘home-centred family’ was already being hailed as the key to post-war reconstruction and in 1942 this notion was crystallized by William Beveridge with the aid of an interdepartmental committee, in a report entitled *Social Insurance and Allied Services*.<sup>14</sup> The stated premise of the report was to diagnose flaws within the structures of social provision and offer solutions in order to ‘make want under any circumstances unnecessary’.<sup>15</sup> In short, the report supported the notion of a new ‘Welfare State’, a State which would nurture its citizens from the point of conception to their death. Whether the report or its proposals were a success is not necessarily of interest here. However, the gendered language and invocations of femininity integral to the text can contribute greatly to an understanding of how women were represented and perceived during these years.

In the first pages of the report, bold words identify the text with reform, equalitarianism, modernity – the future; this was a report (it was claimed) which would not be tainted by past prejudices:

. . . any proposals for the future, while they should use to the full the experience gathered in the past, should not be restricted by consideration of sectional interests established in the obtaining of that experience. Now, when the war is abolishing landmarks of every kind, is the opportunity for using experience in a clear field. A revolutionary moment in the world’s history is a time for revolutions, not for patching.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Beveridge, W. *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (London: HMSO, 1942).

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p.9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p.6.

However, whilst the sentiments of the report were admirable, and many of its suggestions advocated genuine social improvement, its representations of ‘modern’ femininity were problematic and at times arguably regressive. For, pervading and influencing all proposals made in this report was an established fear that the British population was not regenerating itself, a factor which contributed greatly to a contemporary fixation with the concept of femininity and the social role of women.

As the research of Sally Alexander and Carl Chinn has shown, this panic regarding population numbers had originated in the interwar period.<sup>17</sup> These years had witnessed a significant shift in attitudes toward marriage and motherhood and, although most women had not rejected domesticity and motherhood entirely, many were increasingly controlling their fertility - ‘resolved to have fewer children’ - in order that they might avoid the financial drain and drudgery associated with multiple pregnancies and births.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, a trend for smaller families was established and, in addition to the increasing proportion of the population in retirement, theories regarding national decline proliferated.

What became known as the ‘Beveridge Report’ was produced at the height of the concern regarding national survival and identifies itself as part of this discourse in the opening pages. The report argued that consideration of the birth rate ‘should dominate planning’ because it was assured that ‘unless this rate is raised very materially in the near future, a rapid and continuous decline of the population cannot be prevented’, and therefore

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<sup>17</sup> Alexander, S. ‘Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s’ in Feldman, D. and Jones, G. S. (eds.) *Metropolis – London: Histories and Representations since 1800* (London, 1989) pp.245-271; Chinn, C. *They Worked All Their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor in England, 1850-1939* (Manchester, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Bingham, A. review essay ‘ “An era of domesticity?” Histories of women and gender in interwar Britain’ *Cultural and Social History*, 1:2, 2004, p. 226.

believed it ‘imperative to give first place in social expenditure to the care of childhood and to the safeguarding of maternity’.<sup>19</sup> It is clear from this statement, that this particular issue not only impacted upon the proposals presented within the text but that it fundamentally informed the types of provision the report was advising the government to make. The implications this had for the construction of femininity promoted within the text were significant, as all women were homogenized under the category of housewife and mother, their citizenship status arguably reliant upon their reproductive capacities. Success in this role was presented by Beveridge as no less than essential to the survival of the Nation: ‘. . . in the next thirty years housewives as mothers have vital work to do in ensuring the adequate continuance of the British race and of British ideals in the world’.<sup>20</sup>

As a consequence of this attitude, much of the report was engaged with endorsing and assisting the ‘work’ of housewives, who the report demanded be recognized ‘as a distinct insurance class of occupied persons with benefits adjusted to their special needs’.<sup>21</sup> The plan for Social Security envisaged these housewives as part of a man and wife *team* working together on behalf of their family and the wider community and, as such it, ‘treats a man’s contributions as made on behalf of himself and his wife, as for a team, each of whose partners is equally essential’.<sup>22</sup> Although this was in some ways a positive financial development for hardworking housewives and a justified recognition of their unpaid labour, the report perpetuated the idea that women would usually be economically dependent on their

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<sup>19</sup> Beveridge, W. *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, p.8.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p.53.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p.15.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p.49.

husbands. Consequently, as Jane Lewis has argued, this notion 'became embodied in the post-war social security legislation which in turn had a prescriptive effect'.<sup>23</sup>

The report's attempt to represent a wife's unpaid housework as a similarly valuable occupation to her husband's employment draws upon the feminist discourse of the inter-war years which posited women as 'equal but different'.<sup>24</sup> However, any positive gains which may have resulted from such a notion were generally overshadowed by the detrimentally narrow constructions of femininity that it allowed. As already discussed, the numbers of post-war women, especially married women in paid employment, were growing, yet their identity as 'workers' within industry was problematic. As Denise Riley argues 'women when named as a sex by the formulation of social policy cannot escape being the incarnation of gender as strange or temporary workers; nor can they escape being seen as hovering on the edge of maternity'.<sup>25</sup> Although the report acknowledged that many women, including married women were in paid employment, their identity as workers was disregarded as insignificant to their assumed primary role and identity as wives and mothers:

Unless there are children, the housewives' earnings in general are a means, not of subsistence but of a standard of living above subsistence . . . the children's allowances proposed in paras. 410-425 will make this true in most cases in future, even where there are children. . . . her home is provided for her either by her husband's earnings

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<sup>23</sup> Lewis, J 'Gender and family politics the 1940s and the 1980s' in Lewis, J. *Women in Britain Since 1945: Women, Family, Work and the State in the Post-War Years* (Oxford, 1992) p.21.

<sup>24</sup> See for example: Brooke, S. 'A new world for women? Abortion law reform in Britain during the 1930s', *The American Historical Review*, 106:2, (2001). Accessed 28 November 2005, [www.jstor.org/journals/00028762.html](http://www.jstor.org/journals/00028762.html).

<sup>25</sup> Riley, D. 'Some peculiarities of social policy concerning women in wartime and postwar Britain' p.261

or benefit if his earning is interrupted. She has not as a rule as strong a motive as others for returning to paid work as rapidly as possible.<sup>26</sup>

This statement conveys the assumption that, not only are all married women ‘housewives’ and the dependants of their husbands, but also that their motivation for paid work exists from a desire for additional, unessential commodities. Unlike the employment of their husbands, which was constructed as a necessary, ‘natural’, identity-giving *vocation*, a married woman’s employment was a secondary, usually unnecessary act, ‘liable to interruption by childbirth’ - her primary and ‘natural’ vocation.<sup>27</sup> This notion is translated into the proposals made by the report regarding the benefits of employed married women who, like their husbands, may be making national insurance contributions, although the report states they must not be obliged to do so. Such women, Beveridge argued, should be entitled to a higher rate of maternity benefit as they must not be placed under any economic pressure to return to work too soon, because ‘in the national interest it is important that the interruption be as complete as possible’.<sup>28</sup> However, as a consequence of these special rates paid during maternity leave, the recipients would receive lower rates of unemployment and disability benefit. Foreseeing that this proposal could be questioned as unjust, the report maintained that ‘the case for it is strong, both on practical grounds and in equity’.<sup>29</sup> It argued that ‘subsistence benefit for housewives who are also gainfully occupied need not cover their rent’ and, after all, maternity benefit ‘is obviously the most important of all the benefits required by housewives gainfully employed’.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Beveridge, W. *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p.49.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, p.49.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, p.51.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, p.51.

Although the report openly affirmed its main trajectory was to explore ‘means of reversing the recent course of the birth rate’, its attitude toward social provision for children born out of wedlock and their mothers was ambiguous and subtly critical. Despite alarmist statements about British population numbers, it was clear that the report would not condone or intentionally aid the replenishment of the nation outside the boundaries of what was considered the ‘natural’ and respectable family format:

On the one hand, it may be said that, in the interests of the child, grant and benefit should be paid where appropriate, irrespective of the marital relations of the parents. Against this it may be said that the interest of the State is not in getting children born, but in getting them born in conditions which secure to them the proper domestic environment and care.<sup>31</sup>

According to the report, the legitimacy of a woman’s claim to maternity grant and benefit could only be clearly established when her dependency upon a man was once again recognized. For a single woman this was not through marriage but through a man officially claiming her as a dependant. However, should the father of her child have a legal wife this could be challenged, and further, she would not be entitled to any widow’s, guardian benefits or retirement pension other than that accrued through her own contributions. The message conveyed by the report was clear. If a woman chose to exercise her sexuality and reproductive capacities outside the confines of marriage, she could not be assured of the financial support of the State.

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid*, p.135.

As the report candidly declared, ‘the Plan for Social Security puts a premium on marriage’. It would appear that, in the eyes of Beveridge and his advisors, the institution of marriage and its traditional organization of gender were key to national success.<sup>32</sup> Beveridge wanted to increase the numbers of births within Britain, but he wanted these to occur within the margins of a particular moral framework, a framework which dictated that women must give themselves wholeheartedly to the role of *wife* and *mother*. As Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield emphasize, the public discussion surrounding the falling birth rate ‘had obvious implications for ideas about motherhood . . . but also contained a number of implications for models of marriage *appropriate* to a situation where women were to be encouraged officially to have children’.<sup>33</sup>

Following the Beveridge Report, the main official text to engage with the issue of a falling birth rate was the research of the Royal Commission on Population which reported in 1949.<sup>34</sup> This text, like the former, contributed to the rhetoric of post-war British Pro-natalism and ‘was concerned with improving the material conditions of motherhood in order to promote it as a function’.<sup>35</sup> Ironically, by the time the Commission had concluded, the post-war ‘baby boom’ had already begun to build momentum. However, this fact does not negate the significance of the report’s contribution to notions of post-war femininity.

Although the primary aim of the Commission was clearly to examine ways in which women might be induced to have larger families, it did not assume that a simple,

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> My italics. Finch, J. and P. Summerfield, ‘Social reconstruction and the emergence of companionate marriage, 1945-59’ in Clark, D. (ed.) *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change* (London and New York, 1991) pp.8-9.

<sup>34</sup> Royal Commission on Population. Report Cmd. 7695 (London: HMSO, 1949).

<sup>35</sup> Finch, J. and P. Summerfield, ‘Social reconstruction and the emergence of companionate marriage’ p.9.



unproblematic return to traditional gender frameworks would be the answer. The Commission's attitude toward the increasing number of gainfully employed women was arguably more tolerant and encouraging than that of the Beveridge Report. The report acknowledged the changes (if gradual and uneven) in women's experience and equated these developments with post-war modernity and progress:

. . . it is clear that in general women today are not prepared to accept, as most women in Victorian times accepted, a married life of continuous preoccupation with housework and care of children, and that the more independent status and wider interests of women today, which are part of the ideals of the community as a whole, are not compatible with repeated and excessive childbearing. The question is whether they can be reconciled with an average size family at least large enough to maintain the population.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the alarmist tones of the report and its predictions of national extinction, it was highly critical of the attempts of similarly anxious European countries 'to narrow the range of women's interests and to "bring women back into the home"'.<sup>37</sup> Such a policy, it was argued, 'not only runs against the democratic conception of individual freedom, but in Great Britain it would be a rebuking of the tide'.<sup>38</sup> However, although the report supported the increasing involvement of women in the cultural and economic life of the nation, it continued to position women at the centre of the family unit and home. Women's participation in public life was not considered a potential alternative to the role of housewife and mother but an additional element of feminine experience. The report argued that 'a deliberate effort should be made to

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<sup>36</sup> Royal Commission on Population, p.148.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p. 159.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, p. 159.

devise adjustments that would render it easier for women to *combine* motherhood and the care of a home with outside activities’.<sup>39</sup>

In alignment with the representation of femininity conveyed within the Beveridge Report, the Royal Commission continued to homogenize and categorise all women as wives and mothers. The report appeared to believe not only that the role of motherhood was inevitable and instinctive to all women, but also that with the aid of State provision this natural feminine instinct would provide the very solution to the population issue:

We believe that the instinctive desire for a family and the realization of its lasting satisfactions may be relied upon, given reasonable social conditions, to ensure that families will be of sufficient size to replace the population from one generation to another.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, in addition to the provision of ‘Home Helps’, nurseries and holidays for mothers, the report’s Biological and Medical Committee also recommended the need for training schools in infant and child health, the lack of which, they claimed, ‘is perhaps the worst gap in our present system of maternal and child welfare services’.<sup>41</sup> They argued that all health visitors, midwives, district nurses and medical students must extend their knowledge at these facilities because ‘these people when trained are in their practice essentially teachers of mothers’.<sup>42</sup> As Jane Lewis highlights, ‘the concentration on the mother and on her importance as the chief agent of socialization was by no means new, but many more mothers were now considered

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<sup>39</sup> My italics, *ibid*, p. 160.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*, p. 160.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, p. 199.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, p. 199.

capable of benefiting from the efforts of local government officials to educate them to perform their role properly'.<sup>43</sup> Such a proposal questioned the assertion that all women were instinctive mothers - biologically equipped to assume the role of parent - and as a consequence it destabilized this norm.

The notion that women required official guidance on their role as mother and homemaker was further supported in the report's critique of the school curriculum. The text acknowledged that 'the teaching of the practical crafts of home-making – cookery, dress-making, child-care, household repairs' was to an extent provided for, but it lamented that 'the facilities are inadequate and not nearly enough is done.'<sup>44</sup> In contradiction to the report's earlier celebration of the nation's democratic conception of individual freedom, it was openly reproachful of 'the tendency in many schools . . . to grudge time given to these subjects, particularly by brighter pupils', a tendency which was emphasized by the 'wider opportunities of careers for women'.<sup>45</sup> Further, with an attitude that echoed an established derision toward the 'blue-stockingspinster', it concluded with the suggestion that 'the preponderance of unmarried women teachers tends to a depreciation of subjects that relate to marriage and family life'.<sup>46</sup> As will be examined in further chapters, this statement conveyed a common fear that other models of femininity posed a direct threat to the established ideal, and therefore, the success of the British nation as a whole.

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<sup>43</sup> My italics, Lewis, J 'Gender and family politics the 1940s and the 1980s' p.23.

<sup>44</sup> Royal Commission on Population, p. 211.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*, p. 211.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, p. 211. For discussion of contemporary perceptions of the unmarried professional woman see for example: Kerslake, E. and Liladhar, J. 'Angry sentinels and businesslike women: Identity and marital status in 1950s English library career novels' *Library History*, 17:2 (2001), pp.83-90.

Despite the report's acknowledgment of expanding feminine experience and suggestions to accommodate the growing participation of married women in the public sphere, it admonished any instances in which it perceived that the primary, biological feminine role was being eclipsed. Considering the Royal Commission's debate about the possible combination of motherhood and paid employment, it could be argued that, unlike the Beveridge Report, this later report pre-empted the concept of the 'dual role' as defined by contemporary sociologists Myrdal and Klein.<sup>47</sup> However, contrary to the model promoted by Myrdal and Klein, which perceived the two roles to be of equal status (if held at different stages of one's life), the Royal Commission indisputably regarded home-maker and mother as the principal female role.

Fundamentally informed by a prevailing fear that current trends in family limitation would lead to national extinction, these two reports constructed and promoted a narrow vision of feminine identity which centred round a woman's potential to reproduce. This representation was further compounded by the period's idealization of the family unit of which the mother figure was key – as child-bearer, carer, consumer and homemaker. Although the two reports acknowledged the increasing paid employment of women and the latter suggested that more might be done to aid the combination of employment and motherhood, their resolve that femininity was defined by the potential for motherhood was unshaken.

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<sup>47</sup> Myrdal, A. and V. Klein. *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work* (London, 1968 [1956]).

## **The Cult of Child Psychology: Bowlby, Winnicott and Spence**

Through an increasing diversity of post-war media the image of the ‘normal’ family was presented as a small, comfortable and increasingly insular unit. Pat Thane has argued that ‘in Britain as elsewhere, it was a norm in which there was considerable social investment’ and as a result ‘great efforts were made to preserve it in the form of marriage and childcare manuals, marriage guidance and child counselling agencies’, cultural vehicles which were ‘all to some degree and increasingly informed by psychology and psychoanalysis’.<sup>48</sup> This is a significant point as it could be argued that it was largely through the comprehensive dissemination of pro-natalist theories from this field that the image of an unchallenged traditionally gendered post-war society was created. For, at the heart of the work produced by professionals such as John Bowlby, D. W. Winnicott and J. C. Spence in their various reports, lectures, radio broadcasts and paperbacks is an insistent emphasis that women as wives and mothers are, and must be, dedicated to their domestic and maternal role. As a consequence, ‘post-1968 feminism has grown up with a depiction of a mass return of women to the home after 1945, engineered by governmental deployment of maternal deprivation theories’.<sup>49</sup> However, as Denise Riley stresses, ‘this depiction misleads not only in that it assumes a collusion between the state and psychology’ but ‘it also colours our understanding of the “state” in relation to the “family”, so as to preserve a falsely unitary sense of both’.<sup>50</sup> As explored in the initial chapter, although a particular ideological model may have been prevalent within the recorded discourses of a certain historical moment, it must not be assumed that its doctrines were universally prescribed or that they were a direct indication of individual experience.

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<sup>48</sup> Thane P. ‘Family life and “normality” in postwar British culture’ in Bessel, R. and D. Schumann (eds.) *Life after Death. Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s* (Cambridge, 2003), p.198.

<sup>49</sup> Riley, D. *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (London: Virago, 1983) p.154.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, p.154.

However, at the same time it would also be wrong to presume that ideological models such as that of the post-war psychologists and psychoanalysts were entirely ineffectual.

Anxiety surrounding the development of delinquent and maladjusted children permeated a variety of contemporary media both official and popular. Beside the work of the professionals, one only has to consider the rash of films featuring the crimes and exploits of teenage tearaways to appreciate the significance this issue had within post-war society. For example, in the film *The Blue Lamp* (1950) a popular police constable is shot by a young criminal attempting to carry out a robbery, and in *Beat Girl* (1959) a teenager in revolt against her father and step-mother becomes involved in the underground club scene and seedy world of strip clubs<sup>51</sup>. It was a theme also continued in literature, in novels such as *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1959), in which a young man sent to a reformatory for stealing contemplates the events which have led to his incarceration, before his final act of rebellion against the system which has placed him there.<sup>52</sup> Maternal deprivation was constructed as the enemy of social reconstruction and was regularly blamed for a cornucopia of problems including ‘retarded development, anxiety and guilt feelings, promiscuity, instability and divorce – even for stunted growth’.<sup>53</sup> In view of the prevalence of such theories within the long 1950s and the connotations these had for notions of femininity, it is essential to consider the work of certain key contributors if a full understanding of the influences upon post-war gender representation is to be gained. After all, as Riley argues, ‘an ideology is not reassuringly without “effects” simply because it isn’t wholeheartedly subscribed to’.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Dearden, B. (dir.) *The Blue Lamp* (UK, 1950); Greville, E. (dir.) *Beat Girl* (UK, 1959).

<sup>52</sup> Sillitoe, A. *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (London, 1959).

<sup>53</sup> Lewis, P. *The Fifties* (London, 1978) p.45.

<sup>54</sup> Riley, D. *War in the Nursery*, p.153.

The views conveyed within the works of Bowlby, Winnicott and Spence, were promoted not only officially, for example, in a report to the World Health Organisation as in the case of Bowlby, or to workers of the National Children's Home as in the case of Spence, but were also reproduced for popular consumption in the form of cheap paperbacks or radio programmes.<sup>55</sup> Such efforts to advise and educate the general public were not the product of a handful of zealous professionals, but part of a wider and increasing official interest in the dynamics and success of the post-war family, a trend which could be construed partly as a 'knee jerk' response to the changes occurring to the conventional feminine role. With regard to the texts produced by the authors in question this notion appears valid when the tone of their work is considered; the statements expressed are not evidence of confident complacency but attempts at persuasive argument.

The principal assumption which governed and united the work of these three authors was an unshakable belief that the role of a married woman should be in the home as the producer and care giver of children, that an innate biological predisposition encouraged her to assume this role of the home-maker. In the opinion of the medically trained Spence, this was

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<sup>55</sup> Bowlby, J. *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (Harmondsworth, 1963 [1953]). This book as the preface explains, is a simplified and abridged version of a report compiled by the author entitled *Maternal Care and Mental Health*. Bowlby was working on behalf of the World Health Organisation who published the report in 1951 and submitted it to the Social Commission of the United Nations as had been requested. According to figures recorded by Penguin, this text sold in the first six months of its publication on average 1,000 copies every month. It was still being published over ten years later, when in 1964 it was selling 5,000 copies a year in America alone. (Figures from: University of Bristol Special Collections, Penguin Archive, DM1107/A271). Spence, J. C. *The Purpose of the Family: A Guide to the Care of Children* (London, 1947 [1946]) this text was initially presented as a lecture after Spence was invited to speak at the Annual Convocation of the National Children's Home, July 8<sup>th</sup> 1946.

Winnicott, D. W. *The Child, the Family and the Outside World* (Harmondsworth, 1964 [1957]). As Winnicott acknowledges in the initial pages, much of the book was based on talks broadcast by the B.B.C between the 1940s and 1950s. Like Bowlby's work this book proved extremely popular, between June 1964 when it was first published by Penguin and July 1967 it had sold 48,927 copies. (Figures from: University of Bristol Special Collections, Penguin Archive, DM1107/A271).

as much a woman's biological function 'as the preservation of the germ plasm within her ovaries'.<sup>56</sup> Similarly resolute was their conviction that, should a mother not fully commit all her time and energy to the care of her child, then the child would suffer irreparable mental harm and distress, and consequently, so would society at large. However, their emphatic assertions appear to be underscored by anxiety, anxiety generated perhaps, from a fear that conventional gender norms could never really be fully reinstated. As a consequence, each of the authors in different ways appears to employ the tactic of guilt-making in their effort to win over the reader and this is created through their invocation of the 'naturally good' mother - the standard to which every reader is invited to measure herself. This figure does not require the intervention of professionals because she has fully embraced her biological identity and consequently has all the knowledge and instincts required to protect the health of her child. According to Winnicott, this figure – 'the ordinary good mother knows without being told that . . . nothing must interfere with the continuity of the relationship between the child and herself'.<sup>57</sup> In a similar way Bowlby challenged his readers by asserting that the required 'provision of constant attention night and day, seven days a week and 365 days in the year, is possible only for a woman who derives profound satisfaction from seeing her child grow from baby hood, through the many phases of childhood, to become an independent man of woman'.<sup>58</sup> The message conveyed by such statements is clear: if as a mother you were not dedicating your time entirely to parenthood, you were not only an unnatural, unloving, failing parent but your child was being deprived. Arguably, these are claims that few parents would take lightly.

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<sup>56</sup> Spence, J. C. *The Purpose of the Family*, p.34.

<sup>57</sup> Winnicott, D. W. *The Child, the Family and the Outside World*, p.109.

<sup>58</sup> Bowlby, J. *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, p.76.



Spence employed this argument even further as he claimed that, not only were women increasingly failing in the 'art' of motherhood, they were failing in their rejection of large families. He claimed that although the 'practical art' of motherhood 'may be highly developed in a woman who has no children of her own . . . it is seen at its best when a mother reaches her *maturity* with an experience of six or seven children behind her'.<sup>59</sup> Not only did Spence maintain that the best mothers were those with a large number of children, he also argued that the experience made them more morally upstanding, altruistic people. Spence illustrated this point by using the example of a homeless child, arguing that, 'it is no uncommon thing for a mother who has ten children to come immediately forward to undertake this responsibility, when the woman with a single child will stand aside'.<sup>60</sup> He further developed his critique of the mothers of small families by asserting that not only were they depriving their children of the socialization provided by numerous siblings, but they were perverting the true meaning of marriage.<sup>61</sup> Spence insinuated that parents with few children are too self-interested - failing in their role as members of a society, unlike the parents of larger families who were rightly 'regarding their marriage as a social contract, and not as an erotic episode.'<sup>62</sup>

Although Winnicott did not berate the mother of the smaller modern family as directly as Spence, he did appear to concur with many of his peer's ideas. Like Spence, Winnicott strongly believed that only through complete devotion to motherhood and the domestic sphere could a woman fully develop her potential, her identity, and reach maturity. He questioned the validity of the expanding feminine role, arguing that 'talk about women

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<sup>59</sup> My italics, Spence, J. C. *The Purpose of the Family*, p.49.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*, p.56.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid*, p.64.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid*, p.64.

not wanting to be housewives seems to me to ignore one thing, that nowhere else but in her own home is a woman in such command. Only in her own home is she free, if she has the courage, to spread herself, to find her whole self'.<sup>63</sup> Like Spence, Winnicott blamed the established trend of smaller families on the growing selfishness of parents. He argued that, 'if people like to speak in terms of money, let them, but I really think that what they doubt is whether they are able to support a large family without losing too much personal freedom'.<sup>64</sup> These two professionals did not appear to welcome any changes to traditional feminine norms. They envisioned family limitation and expanding opportunities as a social and cultural death knell or in the words of Spence, 'a mutation of prime biological importance'.<sup>65</sup>

Although Bowlby's work did not engage with the issue of family limitation, his opinions regarding the conventional family structure and its integral gendered roles stood shoulder to shoulder with those of his peers. Bowlby agreed that any changes to the 'natural home group' would be fundamentally disastrous and even references Spence when arguing this point: 'As Sir James Spence has pointed out . . . one of the principal purposes of the family is the preservation of the art of parenthood. Unless this art is preserved, a function as necessary to the preservation of society as the production of food will fall into decay'.<sup>66</sup>

However, Bowlby spent much more time than his colleagues exploring what he believed to be the causes and effects of the breakdown in the traditional family unit. Although Bowlby, like Spence and Winnicott, emphasised the pivotal role of the mother in the care of the child - rarely acknowledging the presence of the father - his main interest lay in the

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<sup>63</sup> Winnicott, D. W. *The Child, the Family and the Outside World*, p.120.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, p.131.

<sup>65</sup> Spence, J. C. *The Purpose of the Family*, p.63.

<sup>66</sup> Bowlby, J. *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, p.78.

critique of those families who were without this figure. According to Bowlby, the main causes of a dysfunctional 'natural home group', apart from the full-time employment of a mother, all entail the lack of the male figure; separation, divorce and illegitimacy being the principal causes of the broken home. In Bowlby's opinion, 'any family suffering from one or more of these conditions must be regarded as a possible source of deprived children'.<sup>67</sup>

Although he disregarded the contribution of fathers in the rearing of children as irrelevant, he argued that their role as financial providers was essential because it enabled mothers to 'devote themselves unrestrictedly' to their biological role as carers.<sup>68</sup> In addition, Bowlby also claimed that husbands were necessary for the love and companionship they provide, that 'they support the mother emotionally and help her maintain that harmonious contented mood in the atmosphere of which the infant thrives'.<sup>69</sup> Bowlby's representation of marriage not only strongly supported the gendered concept of separate spheres, but his romantic and homogenizing model denied any possibility that the husband or the marriage itself may be the cause of misery and dysfunction.

In view of the fervent emphasis placed upon the requirement of continuous mothering for the mental health of the child, it might be assumed that the connotations for unmarried or single mothers would be generally positive, despite Bowlby's assertions. If the importance of the mother's presence was officially recognized to be 'as important for mental health as are vitamins and proteins for physical health', then surely the mother's marital status was a secondary consideration?<sup>70</sup> However, central to the theories of successful mothering produced by these professionals was the often unarticulated assumption that the mother was

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<sup>67</sup> *ibid*, p.84.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, p.13.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid*, p.13.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid*, p.182.

in a stable marriage, because without complete financial support the women could not provide the full-time care that was being demanded from them and possibly more importantly, their reproductive capacities and thus their sexuality had not been legitimized by wedlock. For Bowlby especially, the issue of illegitimacy was paramount because in his view, women who gave birth out of wedlock were not only a key source of deprived children but a source of unstable individuals - their pregnancies a symptom of their psychological deficits. For Bowlby and others, despite their fears for population numbers, the pregnancies of unmarried women would never be a cause for celebration because as subsequent chapters will explore, they stood in direct opposition to the projected gendered order of modern post-war Britain.

The representation of femininity conveyed and promoted by these professionals was limited and inflexible. Although they each had their different styles of address and particular points to press, they were unified in their assertions that women as married mothers or potential mothers must be fully committed to the domestic role as their 'biological predisposition' demanded. It seems unlikely that their primary agenda was to intentionally keep women from the public sphere, yet this was an implication of the theories they espoused - a woman could not work or have outside interests if she did not want to raise a delinquent individual. The significance of this body of work in the formation of dominant post-war ideology and gender norms must not be underestimated because in a time of change and instability these authors were seen to be offering solutions to what was considered by some inevitable social decay. As emphasised previously, post-war social changes and increasing

affluence were generally thought of as positive developments, yet, their impact upon cultural conventions and especially gendered norms were often perceived with anxiety.<sup>71</sup>

### **The ‘Popular’ Face of Femininity: Representations of the Post-war Woman in Women’s Magazines and Film**

In 1953 the coronation of Elizabeth II was witnessed not only by the official audience present within Westminster Abbey, but also by the millions of people who watched the elaborate ceremony on the new televisions purchased by themselves, friends, neighbours or family. This coronation was remarkable for many reasons; it characterized the fractured mood of post-war Britain, illustrating clearly the negotiation which was occurring between traditions of the past and the forces of modernity: ‘this amalgamation of the traditional and the self-consciously modern – of the past with what was to come – was captured in the idea of the Coronation as making a return to the future – a fresh start which recalled earlier moments of Britain’s national greatness’.<sup>72</sup> Central to this symbolic scene was the figure of the young Queen herself. On a personal level her situation represented that of so many of her female subjects; she was symbolic of the changes occurring in notions of femininity and the conventional feminine role. Christine Geraghty highlights the significance of this occasion, emphasizing that, as Elizabeth’s ‘husband and the men of the establishment knelt before her, it was clear that a woman was taking on the highest symbolic role of the state; she was the most troublesome of creatures, a woman who went out to work’.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> See for example, Hall, S. and Jefferson, T. (eds.) *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Postwar Britain* (London, 1976).

<sup>72</sup> Conekin, B. Mort, F. Waters, C. (eds.) *Moments of Modernity*, p.1.

<sup>73</sup> Geraghty, C. *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the ‘New Look’* (London, 1999), p.156.

The national broadcasting of the coronation aside, it is often assumed that popular media such as film and women's magazines were intentionally dismissive of the changing feminine role, preferring instead to promote and prescribe the traditional identity of wife and mother. Marjorie Ferguson, for example, argues that for the magazines 'female priorities were clear; a woman's world was finite, bounded by the traditional task division which assigns child and home-care exclusively to her'.<sup>74</sup> She even argues this point further by claiming that the periodicals were not only supporters of conventional gender norms but a medium through which political agendas were realized; their publications a contribution 'to the post-war economic and political ends of encouraging the female labour force back to kitchen concerns and the homemaker role'.<sup>75</sup> Ros Ballaster also endorses this notion claiming that, 'women found little support in the magazines' for increasing employment opportunities, which advocated instead 'an exclusive concentration on homemaking as the feminine norm'.<sup>76</sup> Sue Aspinall, in her early work on the role of women in post-war British film, also confirms this trend, finding that 'a particular style of realism [employed by the successful Ealing Studios] was in fact closely allied to a traditional, conservative attitude to women and marriage'.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, John Hill ultimately characterizes the 'New Wave' films of his study as largely reactionary, arguing that 'by and large, such films end by reproducing an ideology of marital and procreative sexuality'.<sup>78</sup>

With regard to the general trends of film-making in the post-war era, Christine Geraghty and Melanie Bell-Williams concur that the family and its gender specific roles were

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<sup>74</sup> Ferguson, M. *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity* (London, 1983), p.55.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>76</sup> Ballaster et al. *Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine* (London, 1991), p.122.

<sup>77</sup> Aspinall, S. 'Women, realism and reality in British films 1943-1953' in Curran, J and Porter, V. (eds.) *British Cinema History* (Totowa and New Jersey, 1983).

<sup>78</sup> Hill, J. 'Working-class realism and sexual reaction: Some theses on the British New Wave' quoted in Zavarzadeh, M. *Seeing Films Politically* (New York, 1991), p.80.

a popular, much represented theme.<sup>79</sup> However, they challenge theoretical frameworks which categorize such films as either progressive or conventional arguing instead for a more nuanced analysis which considers the fractures, fissures and contradictions integral to their construction. This is an approach which should also be applied to the analysis of the heavily critiqued women's magazines, for despite their reputation as stalwart upholders of convention like the films, they were not devoid of the ambivalent dialogue surrounding post-war femininity and a brief exploration of their content evidences this influence. Through consideration of a small sample of material from two main women's magazines alongside an appraisal of the 'heroines' in a selection of films, it soon becomes clear that notions of femininity were far from finite.

In 1945 a play by Noel Coward (written in 1935) was adapted for the screen as *Brief Encounter*.<sup>80</sup> Arguably, this film epitomizes popular notions of the early post-war British movie: the main characters are strictly middle-class with clipped English accents, their social roles and identities are clearly demarcated by their biological sex and despite the challenges made to the status quo, morality and a sense of duty win through in the end. Yet, in spite of the film's seeming conventionality, it contains many points of significant contradiction. The film is centred round the experiences of a suburban housewife called Laura (Celia Johnson), who is silently recalling the events of the past weeks to her oblivious husband whilst they are quietly preoccupied with their individual pursuits late one evening. Laura's story begins when purely by chance she meets a married man called Alec (Trevor Howard) at the train station while she is waiting to return home after her weekly shopping trip in the town. By

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<sup>79</sup> Bell-Williams, M. 'Gender and modernity in postwar British cinema; a case study of *Young Wives' Tale* (1951)' *Women's History Review*, 16:2 (2007), pp.227-243; Geraghty, C. *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'* (London, 1999).

<sup>80</sup> Lean, D. (dir.) *Brief Encounter* (UK, 1945).

coincidence on subsequent trips to the town the pair meet again and thus begins a brief yet intense romantic affair. Laura's narration, not only conveys clearly the ecstasy she feels when they realize their love is reciprocal but also the almost simultaneous feelings of guilt, shame and degradation which accompany this realization. These feelings are generated by her awareness that her love for another man would not only hurt her husband and family, but would destroy her respectable identity as a housewife and mother. This comprehension is evident when Laura narrowly escapes being seen at the apartment of Alec's friend and colleague. After some initial doubt, Laura had decided to meet with Alec at the empty apartment, the insinuation being that they might physically consummate their love for one another. However, shortly after her arrival the friend returns home and Laura is forced to flee down a fire escape. Laura is disgusted by the situation and runs hysterically through the rain to a nearby park, where she contemplates the potential start of her demise, punctuated by her smoking in public which she acknowledges as disreputable and the instance in which she is approached by a policeman. This event marks the end of the affair for Laura and shortly after this she meets with Alec and tells him that they must end their relationship. She challenged his attitude that love was the only issue of real importance, arguing instead that 'it isn't all that really matters, other things matter too, self-respect matters and decency'. The decision to leave Alec was clearly heartbreaking for Laura and she very nearly ends her misery by contemplating suicide in front of a train. However, ultimately her sense of duty over rules her feelings of romantic love and she returns home to her husband and family. The obvious interpretation of this conclusion is that, in a time of social and cultural upheaval women must be resolute in their sense of right and wrong if the fundamental moral framework on which post-war society is dependent is to survive. Within the film the volatile, self-destructive feelings which accompany romantic love are juxtaposed with the solid, dependable,



reassuring habits of married life and the film, like *Laura*, it could be argued, advocates the latter.

However, there are enough ambiguities within the film to allow an alternative interpretation. Alison Light argues that the film 'is shaped by retrospective, not only in its long flashback to the ill-starred affair, but also in its evocation of a settled life before the war which could now itself take on the appearance of a lost love'.<sup>81</sup> Yet the film at times seems less like nostalgic reminiscence, than a critique of an out of date, smothering and controlling moral framework. Despite the fact that the film offers no other acceptable solution to the dilemma Laura finds herself in, other than a return to her marriage, the film leaves its audience with a hollow sense of resolution; Laura's return does not create the feelings of satisfaction usually associated with a typical 'happy ending'. Perhaps the feelings of loss the 'heroine' generates in the final scenes are a further warning of the connotations of such affairs, or alternatively, the film could be highlighting the irrationality of a dominant set of norms which deprives people of true happiness in favour of the often superficial stability of marriage. This concept of irrationality is also reflected in the representation of the other housewives within the film, with whom Laura is acquainted and who witness her in Alec's company. These women are portrayed as having shallow, prying, frivolous characters, the depth of their relationship with Laura a mere shadow compared to that which she has with Alec, yet it is the inevitably judgmental opinion of these women and people like them which largely informs Laura's decision to leave Alec. As a consequence the film appears to engender empathy in its audience for the unfairness of Laura's dilemma, a feeling which is certainly amplified by the first person narration.

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<sup>81</sup> Light, A. *Forever England*, p.209.

Another film with very a similar theme, but which raises a different set of questions is the 1947 production of *It Always Rains on Sunday*.<sup>82</sup> Unlike the critically acclaimed and award winning *Brief Encounter*, this film has been described as Ealing's 'own spiv film', with one contemporary reviewer of the Cinematograph Exhibitor's Association declaring it 'an unsavoury film . . . with appeal only to those with very broad minds'.<sup>83</sup> Yet, despite such reviews it did attract audiences of the period, and went on to become Ealing's box office hit of the year.<sup>84</sup> The central plot within the film focuses upon a single dramatic day in the life of an embittered housewife called Rose (Googie Withers), who lives in the old and dilapidated Bethnal Green area of London in the immediate post-war period. Rose lives with her husband, George, who is older than her, and his teenage daughters from a previous marriage; the couple also have a son of their own called Alfie. Like Laura in the previous film, Rose is placed into a position where she must make a life-changing decision; should she guided by her passion and leave her family for her criminal lover or remain with those who need and depend on her.

Rose's morning initially begins like any other. However, whilst she is getting ready to go about her usual chores her husband informs her that Tommy Swann (John McCallum), an old boyfriend, has escaped from prison. The news shocks Rose into silence, and unobserved by her husband she starts to recall her time with Tommy before he was arrested. Her memories convey a youthful, glamorous and happy Rose as she remembers them visiting the country away from the noise, drudgery and dirt of the city, a scene which generates a sense of

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<sup>82</sup> Hamer, R. (dir.) *It Always Rains on Sunday* (UK, 1947).

<sup>83</sup> Murphy, R. *Sixties British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1992) p.156; Reviewer quoted in Sharp, D. 'It Always Rains on Sunday' BFI Screenonline: The Definitive Guide to Britain's Film and TV history, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk>, accessed 23/10/09.

<sup>84</sup> Sharp, D. 'It Always Rains on Sunday', BFI Screenonline

hope and opportunity. However, the optimism which characterizes this memory and which is illustrated in the younger Rose's demeanour is consequently destroyed with a subsequent memory of Tommy's arrest. It could be argued that this particular memory represents the beginning of Rose's transition from the happy and free girl of her youth to the stony-faced, resentful yet resigned housewife that she has become, a notion which is highlighted by her husband's interruption of her thoughts, when he enquires what she's making for breakfast; the banality of her present situation is juxtaposed with the memories of romance and excitement of her youth.

Consequently, Rose's composure is then pushed to the limit when she goes to the family air raid shelter to retrieve something and discovers that Tommy Swann is hiding there. Following the encounter she quickly regains her self-control and instead of shouting for help she promises to come back and tell him when the family have gone out so that he might come inside to dry his clothes and eat. The unexpected reminder of how her life may have taken a different path affects Rose greatly and the bitterness it invokes is released in yet another acerbic attack upon her undeserving, hardworking step daughter, Doris, on her return. With the family's exit from the house, Rose further risks detection and therefore her reputation, by allowing Tommy to rest in her bedroom for the remainder of the day and there are a number of moments when he is almost discovered. However, Rose's eagerness to aid her former lover and her restrained happiness at his presence are tempered when she offers him the hidden engagement ring he had given her in the past as a source of money. Tommy does not recognize the obviously treasured ring and Rose realizes in that moment that their affair had not meant the same to him as it did to her, and that he had returned to her not out of love but in desperation. When Tommy suggests that Rose might flee with him to South Africa, her decision has already been made; she will remain with the dull yet dependable George and

resume her place within the family. This decision, and the film's representation of Tommy as dangerous, selfish and violent, is legitimized and vindicated in the final scenes when Tommy hits Rose and escapes, as she begs him to give himself up to the authorities when they are discovered. The polarized characters of Tommy and George within the film represent a woman's choice between the dangers of individual desire and duty to social stability. The representation of Tommy as treacherous and volatile acts as a warning against the dangers of superficial romance in favour of the stability of matrimony, and stresses the importance for the post-war woman of choosing the right kind of man. This is a concept which is further emphasized in the sub plots involving Rose's stepdaughters Doris and Vi, who are involved with a respectable mechanic and a married musician respectively.

However, despite the narrative's conventional support of marriage as the only legitimate arena for the expression of feminine sexuality, the film raises questions about the nature of a woman's domestic role which traditionally accompanies it. As with the previous film, the narrative unfolds through the heroine's viewpoint, and the audience is party to the realities of Rose's situation as she goes about the mundane rituals of her daily life as a housewife. Rose's bleak and isolated existence is reflected in the shots of the dilapidated urban landscape in which she lives and her detachment from the events of the outside world and the community are represented by her continuous presence within the house. Throughout the film Rose never leaves the confines of her home until she is removed from it unconscious after her desperate suicide attempt, a fact which is symbolised by the caged bird which her husband whistles to when he passes in the kitchen. George's complete ignorance or maybe denial of the changes in Rose's behaviour that fateful day is perhaps an attempt to reflect wider society's unsympathetic attitude towards the dissatisfactory, narrow life that the housewife is forced to lead. Rose's suicide attempt could be interpreted not as the usual

punishment for the transgressive female, but as a thought provoking reminder of the limited choices available to the unhappy and desperate housewife. John Hill argues that the film was imagining a post-war 'construction of a new stability in which the woman will accept her proper place', but alternatively perhaps the film was questioning the personal sacrifice that this 'proper place' demanded.<sup>85</sup>

Interestingly, the theme of monotony, limitation and the role of the housewife is a topic dealt with in an early 1960s issue of *Woman's Weekly*.<sup>86</sup> Despite the different historical context, a similar message is still being produced. Discussion of the subject appears in a regular feature within the magazine titled 'The Man Who Sees' or alternatively 'The Friend Who Understands' and, as the title suggests, it is a feature which proffers advice on a variety of topics. Unlike the 'agony aunt' figure of the problem page, such as Evelyn Home of *Woman*, the male author of this item is anonymous and it is he and the magazine, not a reader's letter, which select the subject for debate. In this case, the article begins by discussing the example of Ailsa, a housewife with three children who has confided recently to the author that she was feeling depressed. He recalls the conversation: 'she supposed she should be ashamed of herself . . . knew she had a great deal to be thankful for. But the monotony of life had "got her down"'.<sup>87</sup> The statement conveys a reticence by the housewife to complain about her situation. Like Rose in *It Always Rains on Sundays*, this housewife displays a dutiful if dissatisfied resignation to her position; for a post-war married mother to openly criticize her presumed *natural* role, would be to invite accusations of deviancy and failure. Significantly, the article does not actually negate Ailsa's complaint, instead it concurs that a life spent engaged in the same routine will always create boredom and it even

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<sup>85</sup> Hill, J. *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963* (London, 1986) p.71.

<sup>86</sup> 'The friend who understands', *Woman's Weekly*, January 16<sup>th</sup> 1960, (London), p.45.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid*, p.45.

challenges its readers by demanding ‘couldn’t you be bored and busy at the same time, if you were always doing the same things?’<sup>88</sup> However, any empathy the article displays for the monotony of the housewife’s role is tempered by an assertion that it is a situation women have created themselves, arguing that ‘our lives are just as humdrum as we make them’.<sup>89</sup> The article does not equate the occupation of housewifery with limited diversity, but considers dissatisfied housewives as victims of their own lack of imagination, claiming ‘they have fallen into the habit of too narrow a field, trodden always in the same way’.<sup>90</sup> The article maintains that women are too unrealistic in their ideas about what constitutes an ‘escape from the monotony’, asserting that ‘the housewife dreams of sudden access of wealth and a world cruise, with a glamorous wardrobe; and the office worker visualizes a handsome millionaire husband or a film producer who will transport her to a world of change and colour and excitement’.<sup>91</sup> Although, notably, this statement does not homogenize all women under the banner of housewife, it does contain a number of assumptions about post-war femininity. Firstly, it perpetuates the notion that women are essentially materialistic creatures, their ambitions limited to the acquisition of wealth and the unrestricted opportunities for consumption that such wealth would facilitate. With regard to the office worker – the single woman of whom the article speaks, their dreams of wealth are tied to their supposed desire for marriage. This assumption correlates with the gendered discourse explored earlier; in which a woman’s identity is inextricably linked to her biological function as a producer of children and therefore desire for a partner and provider. Significant by its absence is any reference to an ambition which lies outside the prescribed sphere of feminine activity, even the dream of movie stardom falls within the remit of acceptable feminine behaviour – as it is an artistic occupation. The solution offered by the article for the tedium of housewifery

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<sup>88</sup> *ibid*, p.45.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid*, p.45.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid*, p.45.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid*, p.45.

conveys an almost irrevocable finality about the position once it has been assumed; there are no alternatives to this identity and role, one just has to make the best of it: 'A housewife cannot "run out on her home and family. But within her framework of "musts," the domestic round, the housewife can also use her imagination. No day need be exactly like the other, and so prove intolerably dull.'<sup>92</sup>

However, the assumption that all women were by nature and desire destined for a domestic role is not universally reflected within popular women's magazines. In an article published by *Woman* in May 1947, a variety of problems surrounding women and paid employment are explored.<sup>93</sup> The article shows that a diversity of differently situated women were engaged with this issue and the magazine in its response is positive and thoughtful. The article quotes, for example, from a letter received from a young woman, who with her sister is willing to move from her rural home to an industrial district in order to contribute to the production drive. However, she laments the lack of governmental provision which facilitated such mobility during wartime and calls for its re-installation indefinitely. She argues that 'if this were done, going to the industrial districts to work – and live – would not seem so impossible to us'.<sup>94</sup> The article agrees with her demands and acknowledges that women's response to such changes 'would be surprising'.<sup>95</sup> Similarly, the article refers to the complaint of a married mother who is unable to continue her part-time job due to the closing of the day nursery she had used once the war had ended. Mrs Robertson, the author of the letter, emphasizes her eagerness to work, but maintains that her activities are limited not by the demands of the gendered norm, but by the practicalities of child-care and she claims that until

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<sup>92</sup> *ibid*, p.45.

<sup>93</sup> 'Shall I try for the job?' *Woman*, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1947, (London).

<sup>94</sup> *ibid*, p.10.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid*, p.10.

the government finance these facilities once again there will never be a sufficient number. The article quietly advocates this view, responding with ‘Mrs Robertson has the right idea’.<sup>96</sup> The article is equally supportive of a ‘career girl’s’ worry that should she leave her good job in a non-priority firm to work within one of the government’s priority industries, she may not be able to return at a later date and claim her pension. The article concurs that this ‘is a problem that must be worrying many career girls’ and argues that the only way women will volunteer for work in these industries is if they are assured that the prospects and conditions are equal to those in their present occupations.<sup>97</sup> Although the article’s responses to each of these letters may appear reserved, their very publication acknowledges the shift in attitude regarding ideas of acceptable feminine behaviour.

Although the women’s magazines of the long 1950s did not overtly and consistently produce material that challenged the domestic feminine ideal, it is wrong to wholly categorise such texts as vehicles of convention and oppression. In this last case at least they provided a forum in which women might express their views and worries about paid employment, and the significance of this should not be underestimated.

Through this brief consideration of the gendered discourse produced through diverse texts of the post-war period, it is clear that notions of femininity were not undisputed and clearly defined but, ambiguous, indistinct and in contestation. The seemingly irrevocable domestic feminine ideal constructed by prevalent pro-natalist rhetoric intersected with both public and private concerns, entangled and imbibed into contemporary notions of nation, citizenship, modernity, work and the ‘home’. The role of women as wives and mothers was

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<sup>96</sup> *ibid*, p.10.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid*, p.10.



positioned at the centre of post-war reconstruction and deemed the lynchpin of national success. While such discourses ‘acknowledged other features of women’s lives, all endorsed the gendering of the space of the home in the form that had emerged as a feature of the modern world’.<sup>98</sup> As Johnson and Lloyd emphasise, women were said to be responsible, ‘by nature’, for domestic life, and as such, for the management of the physical and emotional requirements of their families that had been relegated to this sphere.’<sup>99</sup>

However, while this particular conceptualisation of femininity persisted it was not left completely unchallenged. The expanding opportunities for paid employment created initially by the ravaged national economy and then later by the increasing demand for luxury consumables, directly opposed the limiting doctrines of pro-natalist discourse and offered women further spheres of agency. Inevitably, the gendered ideal did not, and could not, represent the experiences of many women and it was consistently undermined allowing fractures to appear in its construction and alternative femininities to be explored. The question with which this study is ultimately interested is, how might this instability of the gendered norm have affected the perception and representation of *single women* in particular? Whilst the figure of the housewife and her duties were under negotiation, the expression of female sexuality and production of children were still strictly fixed within the boundaries of marriage. As the brief yet prejudicial treatment of the unmarried mother within the texts of Bowlby and the Royal Commission conveyed, women who contravened the policing framework of matrimony were often in danger of being branded morally and psychologically deficient; a danger to the social structure. However, with the increasing research into the family and the great emphasis placed upon ‘maternal love’ was the position of such women

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<sup>98</sup> Johnson, L and Lloyd, J. *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife* (Oxford and New York, 2004), p.150.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid*, p.150.

altered, perhaps even strengthened; were they able to negotiate a space for themselves and their babies within society? On the opposite side of the spectrum from the sexualised figure of the unmarried mother is the 'spinster'; how was she perceived within a society of near universal marriage? Like the earlier figure of the 'blue-stockingspinster' was the post-war spinster represented as a figure of derision and humour, a repressed and bitter individual destined to a life of loneliness? Or, with increasing diversification of employment and perhaps a greater acceptance of women in the workplace were unmarried women able to construct respectable identities as professionals, perhaps even choosing a life of independence over the restrictions of family life? Now that the specificities of the post-war feminine ideal have been explored, subsequent chapters can now consider how alternative feminine identities were represented in contrast to it. Although fraught with ambiguities, how did the prevalence of one model of femininity impact upon the formation of others?

## CHAPTER TWO

### A Cause of Contention: The Unmarried Mother

As suggested in the previous chapter, discourse on the reproductive trends of British society existed as a recurring and important theme during the post-war period and the cultural consequences of this interest were many. Arguably, one of the most significant effects was the general reassertion of a moral framework which maintained that there existed right and wrong arenas for sexual reproduction and the function of feminine sexuality. Such ideas were not only evidenced within governmental policies but traversed the diverse spheres of post-war society, both official and popular. This widely accepted code of sexual conduct was clearly defined and is particularly exemplified in the founding principles upon which the National Marriage Guidance Council (N.M.G.C) based its practises at the time. The first of these principles as illustrated in a memorandum circulated by the N.M.G.C in 1946 emphasises that contemporary notions of sexual practice and reproduction were intrinsically linked to, and bound by notions of national identity and survival:

- 1) That the safeguarding of the family unit as the basis of our community life is of vital importance to the future welfare of the nation.
- 2) That the right foundation for this unit is permanent monogamous marriage, which alone provides satisfactory conditions for the birth and upbringing of children, for the expression of the function of sex, and for a secure relationship between man and woman.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Pamphlet – ‘Memorandum on the work of the Marriage Guidance Council’ (1946) , National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child Collection, The Women’s Library: London Metropolitan University, 5/OPF/10/4, Box 133a.

Yet, through their extensive interview and survey work Mass Observation (M.O.) researchers did record at the time a certain level of incongruity between this national ideal and actual sexual behaviour, in addition to a general consensus that attitudes towards sex were changing ‘towards greater openness and frankness’.<sup>2</sup> However, in one M.O. report it was also stressed that although sex was increasingly and widely perceived to be ‘a desirable and healthy function’, the majority of respondents continued to assert that it must only occur within ‘conventionally accepted bonds’, a qualification which was ‘all important’.<sup>3</sup> With regard to the continuance of this traditional attitude amongst its interviewees, the report surmised that as historically ‘religion and social convention have set up standards of sex behaviour . . . for many people sex becomes frightening and undesirable if it transgresses these barriers.’<sup>4</sup>

As a consequence of this prevalent support for traditional moral and sexual codes (renewed perhaps by prevalent notions of wartime ‘moral slackness’), it follows that there were also many attempts to understand and control those behaviours which fell outside the limits of the accepted sexual paradigm.<sup>5</sup> Barron emphasises that, consequently, ‘multifaceted efforts to deter, regulate and punish extramarital sexuality were layered onto existing social and economic structures of inequality’.<sup>6</sup> Alongside homosexuality, unmarried motherhood, in particular, was constructed as one of the main threats to the prescribed norm, a norm in which feminine sexuality was always confined within the boundaries of heterosexual matrimony.

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<sup>2</sup> Originally established in 1937 as a social research organisation, Mass Observation sought to examine and record the lives of ordinary British people through both interview and observation as well as a panel of diarists. M.O. Transcript – ‘The Position Today’ Article summarising findings of National Survey on Attitudes to Sex sent by Mass Observation to the Sunday Pictorial (May 1949), M.O. Collection: Sexual Behaviour 1939-1950. Mass Observation Archive: University of Sussex, TC12, Box 2, File D.

<sup>3</sup> Transcript – ‘The Private Life of John Bull’ (No Date), M.O. Collection – Sexual Behaviour 1939-1950. Mass Observation Archive: University of Sussex, TC12, Box 2, File D.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> M.O. Transcript – ‘The Position Today’, TC12, Box 2, File D.

<sup>6</sup> Barron, D.L. ‘Sex and single girls in the twentieth-century city’ *Journal of Urban history*, 25, (1999), p839.

The reproductive capacities of a woman celebrated by pro-natalist ideology of the period were, in the instance of illegitimate pregnancy, a cause for dismay and often disgrace. Such pregnancies were evidence of feminine transgression and additionally provided society with the supposed problem of potentially defective and maladjusted children.

Considering the inflexibility of the dominant sexual code which proliferated, it might be expected that such a figure could expect universal demonization, yet instead there surprisingly exists a clear disparity and tension between both representations on offer and the experiences of many women. The unmarried mother was never presented as a welcomed member of society by the various voices who considered her position, but neither was she completely or unilaterally condemned and ostracised. It cannot be denied nor should it be ignored that many women and girls did suffer horrific treatment and prejudice as a consequence of their 'illegitimate' pregnancies, but it is significant that by the immediate post-war period the purely punitive attitudes of convention were no longer the only dominant approach.

The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to examine this diversification in stance toward the unmarried mother, in order to understand not only how she was being represented but why this alteration in attitude was occurring. In addition, it will also seek to explore the challenge this marginal figure posed to post-war codes of sexual behaviour and femininity, and the challenges she herself faced as a transgressor of those codes. It will argue that although the unmarried mother still attracted much moral and sexual criticism, she was also at times represented with empathy and understanding.

## **Intervention or Ignorance? Opposing state approaches to the emotive issue of unmarried motherhood**

Disparate attitudes toward the figure and treatment of the unmarried mother were not only evident between different institutions, but often existed within the institutions themselves. Nowhere was this more apparent than within post-war state legislation and provision. With regards to rudimentary monetary aid the state had been allocating special grants to charity-run Mother and Baby Homes since the passing of the Maternity and Child Welfare Act in 1918 and continued to do so into the long 1950s. Additionally, following post-war developments in social provision the local authorities could also aid both the homes and the mothers through two new Acts; the National Assistance Act (1948) enabled all persons without means to claim basic financial maintenance, and the National Health Service Act (1946) provided free healthcare. However, despite the state's apparent willingness to provide some financial assistance, it appeared reticent to intervene openly and directly in the practical running of mother and baby homes, which were largely established by voluntary religious bodies and in particular the Church of England Moral Welfare Council (M.W.C). Cate Haste argues that increased state provision in war time had in fact reversed this reliance on charitable homes and that subsequently, notions of illegitimacy had shifted in the post-war period 'from the realm of sin and punishment into an issue of public welfare, care and humane support'.<sup>7</sup> However, this interpretation underestimates not only the continued use of church-run mother and baby homes in the long 1950s, but their impact upon state policy.<sup>8</sup> At a meeting held by the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child (N.C.U.M.C) in 1958, Dr Catherine Morris Jones a former Maternity and Child Welfare

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<sup>7</sup> Haste, C. *Rules of Desire: Sex in Britain, World War I to the Present* (London, 2002), p.131.

<sup>8</sup> According to contemporary researcher Virginia Wimperis, there were in 1956 twenty-seven local authority Mother and Baby homes compared with one hundred and seven voluntary Homes. See: Wimperis, V. *The Unmarried Mother and her Child* (London, 1960), p.180.

Medical Officer confirmed the limited role of local authorities and the development of their atypical relationship with the M.W.C;

There had always been a close liaison between the Maternity and Child Welfare Associations and the voluntary bodies, and it was decided not to appoint a special worker but to make an agreement whereby diocesan associations extended their sphere of work for the authority and received specific payment for it. This arrangement has never been regretted and was continued and expanded under the National Health Service Act.

The Moral Welfare Workers in conjunction with the health visitor, doctor, minister or other interested persons make recommendations concerning the best care required in each particular case.<sup>9</sup>

In a period in which the state was establishing itself as the ‘caretaker’ of its citizens, generating a diversity of health and welfare professionals informed by the latest scientific and psychological methods, it is significant that much of the care and needs of many unmarried mothers remained solely within the remit of charitable, religious organisations. Although the state was now prepared to assume the care and maintenance of children orphaned, neglected or maltreated or even those individuals deemed criminal, mentally or physically ill, it appeared to resist direct involvement in the care of this group of pregnant women. The irregularity of this non-interventionist approach is particularly well highlighted in a scene from the contemporary film *Women of Twilight* (1952), when following conviction and

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<sup>9</sup>Minutes of N.C.U.M.C Extraordinary General Meeting (20<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1958), National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child Collection, The Women’s Library: London Metropolitan University, 5/OPF/01/4/2, Box 003.

imprisonment for murder an inmate declares in conversation to his pregnant girlfriend ‘the state will look after me, but you’ll be alone, helpless’.<sup>10</sup>

A reason for this state distancing can perhaps be found in the significant revival of evangelicalism between the years 1945-1958, as charted by Callum Brown.<sup>11</sup> Brown states ‘that during the late 1940s and first half of the 1950s, organised Christianity experienced the greatest per annum growth in Church membership, Sunday school enrolment, Anglican confirmations and Presbyterian recruitment of its baptised constituency since the eighteenth century’.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, religious authority and the Christian moral framework (with its integral ideas of feminine piety) were still immensely influential in the organisation of early post-war gendered norms. Consequently, unmarried motherhood continued to be framed by notions of ‘sin’; it was thought by most to be a matter for the Church and not the state. Such beliefs were also buttressed by a more general contemporary dispute, between political paternalists and libertarians, regarding ‘how far the state had a legitimate right to control the private realm of sexual morals’.<sup>13</sup> This was a dispute particularly evident during the debates on homosexuality, which followed the infamous convictions of Wildeblood, Pitt-Rivers and Lord Montague of Beaulieu in 1954.<sup>14</sup>

An awareness of the anxiety which surrounded past and potential state intervention in the perceived moral issue of unmarried motherhood can be found in the opening statement of an N.C.U.M.C meeting in 1948. The speaker recalled the reception of the aforementioned

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<sup>10</sup> Parry, G. (dir.) *Women of Twilight* (UK., 1952).

<sup>11</sup> Brown, C. *Death of Christian Britain* (London and New York, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.172.

<sup>13</sup> Haste, C. *Rules of Desire*, pp150-151.

<sup>14</sup> Houlbrook, M. *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago, 2005).



Maternity and Child Welfare Act: 'some people were scandalised, and said that it would be encouraging immorality . . . there are fewer regulations and punishments than in years gone by, but there is still a good deal of prejudice towards the unmarried mother and her child'.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps, as an elected entity the government of the post-war period had heeded the furore generated by this earlier provision and marked the cause as a potentially political 'death trap' – an issue provoking too much public contention. Therefore, the state's decision to continue utilising a third party in the general temporary care of these women could be construed as capitulation to both the continuing prejudices of its electorate and those perhaps still harboured within its own ranks; it was content to remain the almost silent partner in a relationship between itself, the religious associations and the unmarried mothers. The implications of this arrangement however were considerable, as it ensured that the issue of unmarried motherhood continued to be defined as a spiritual and moral problem, a factor which significantly impacted upon post-war ideas about the unmarried mother. The mother and baby homes managed by regionalised Moral Welfare Associations had been established in pre-war years not only to provide the care and accommodation desperately required by some unmarried mothers shortly before and after the birth, but as centres in which spiritual and moral *rehabilitation* could be administered. This notion was still key to the workers of St. Monica's Home, Bradford many years later, as is clearly evidenced in their annual reports of 1956 and 1959:

St. Monica's is much more than an ante-natal and post-natal clinic. For the sake of the girls, in order that good may come out of evil, The Committee, in the year under review, have confirmed their rule that, except in very exceptional circumstances, a period of six weeks' residence in the Home before the birth of the baby is necessary.

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<sup>15</sup>Minutes for N.C.U.M.C Extraordinary General Meeting (8<sup>th</sup> July 1948), National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child Collection, The Women's Library: London Metropolitan University, 5/OPF/01/4/2, Box 003.

The purpose of our work makes the length of stay in the home a crucial factor in the task of rehabilitation.<sup>16</sup>

Women who produced children outside of wedlock were thought to be essentially ‘fallen women’ by many moral welfare workers; they had transgressed not only the naturalised norms of society but the doctrines of the Church and consequently required comprehensive spiritual instruction before they could function as useful and reformed citizens. The continuing notion that this particular group of women were morally deficient and consequently a potential threat to ‘normal’ society was therefore carried through into much of the legislation available to deal with the more complex and problematic cases of illegitimate pregnancy and birth – the instances when state intervention could not be avoided. It is essential, with regard to state policies and the unmarried mother, to appreciate the continued role religious organisations played because as Lieut. Col. Albertine Winner (Hon. Secretary for Highbury Hostels) feared in 1945, the M.W.C’s involvement ensured that these women would remain ‘a thing of charity, apart, outside’.<sup>17</sup>

The main issue necessitating state involvement in the instance of unmarried motherhood during the long 1950s was the problem surrounding financial support. In the event that an unmarried mother had no familial network, could not work, or earn enough to provide for herself and her child, who was responsible for their maintenance? In the case of married mothers the ‘breadwinner’ was naturally and institutionally assumed to be her

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<sup>16</sup>Annual Reports of the Bradford Church Committee for Rescue Work for St. Monica’s Home 1956 and 1959, West Yorkshire Archive Service: Bradford Central Library, 13D80/4.

<sup>17</sup> Booklet: Extracts from N.C.U.M.C Conference Report: ‘Homes and Hostels of the Future’ (29<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1945), National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child Collection, The Women’s Library: London Metropolitan University, 5/OPF/10/4, Box113a.

husband, as the Beveridge Report illustrated so succinctly. However, should the parents of a child be devoid of the marriage certificate then the responsible party was less clear. Janet Fink argues that this awkward ambiguity was an inherent flaw perpetuated by the state itself, a problematic by-product of its consistent sponsorship of traditional gender and familial models. She explains:

The gendered nature of the British marriage contract operated not only to regulate women's sexuality and reproduction but also to confer fatherhood on men and authorise paternal power and control over children. It was marriage and not the act of insemination that legitimated a man's status as father, with the result that children could only have putative fathers in this period.<sup>18</sup>

As an unmarried father remained only an alleged parent until otherwise confirmed; he was not obligated to provide any form of support to the child or its mother. In contrast, as duly noted by the N.C.U.M.C, should an unmarried mother fail 'to maintain her child, leaving it chargeable to the public assistance authority' she could become 'liable to prosecution'.<sup>19</sup>

With regard to financial assistance only two real options were afforded by the state, one could apply through the courts for an Affiliation Order should the father refuse to make private arrangements, or alternatively (from 1948) seek aid from the National Assistance Board. Much can be gleaned through an examination of these financial provisions and the discursive positioning of unmarried mothers within them, as generally not only were the monetary benefits of these options rudimentary and hard won but the application procedures often probing and humiliating.

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<sup>18</sup> Fink, J. 'Natural mothers, putative fathers, and innocent children: The definition and regulation of parental relationships outside marriage, in England, 1945-1959' *Journal of Family History*, 25: 2 (2000), p.181.

<sup>19</sup>N.C.U.M.C. Leaflet: 'A Few Points on the Law of England and Wales Relating to the Unmarried Mothers and Illegitimate Children' (1946), National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child Collection, The Women's Library: London Metropolitan University, 5/OPF/10/4, Box 113a.

The process involved in the seeking of an Affiliation Order - a legal contract which obligated the father to provide regular maintenance payments - was particularly illustrative of the established prejudicial mind-set which commonly informed state intervention in the affairs of unmarried mothers. In order to pursue and obtain maintenance in this way the mother had to be prepared and able to corroborate her sexual relationship with the putative father before a court - 'corroborated in a material particular' - otherwise her appeal would generally be rejected.<sup>20</sup> The limited acceptable forms which this evidence could take were outlined in a leaflet of extracts taken from a conference report (1964) by what was now called the Church of England Council for Social Work, formerly the Moral Welfare Council:

There must be corroboration of the mother's evidence . . . Corroboration can take the form of letters from the man admitting paternity or intercourse or a written agreement to pay, so long as the mother proves his handwriting . If he has made verbal admissions only, a witness must be called who heard him make that admission, the mother's evidence alone will not do here.<sup>21</sup>

Corroboration can also be by a witness who says that within the few weeks before or after the probable time of conception the mother and the defendant were associating as sweethearts and also that she was not associating with any other man.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Giles, F. T. *The Magistrates' Court* (Harmondsworth, 1955), p.205.

<sup>21</sup> N.C.U.M.C. Leaflet: Wilkinson, G.S. 'Legal Aspects of Illegitimacy', extracts from The Church of Eng. Council for Social Work Conference Report: Illegitimacy – Present Attitudes, Social Trends and Case work, (22<sup>nd</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> June 1964) p.12. National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child Collection, The Women's Library: London Metropolitan University 5/OPF/10/4, Box 113a, p. 12

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.13.

On reading the demands of the magistrate court, whose authority it was to decide the outcome of a mother's application, it at times becomes unclear who exactly they classified as the defendant. The mothers had to present in every detail the circumstances of their believed social transgression in order to help secure what was generally a minimal weekly payment, 'the maximum award of £1' being 'rarely enforced by the courts'.<sup>23</sup> With regard to this nominal sum, Fink argues it would appear 'the courts had little sympathy for single mothers and were determined that affiliation orders should provide the means to support, albeit at the poorest levels, only the children.'<sup>24</sup> To compound the indignity of presenting such evidence these cases were also heard in open court before the Legitimacy Act of 1959, the alleged father in his turn was not obligated to corroborate his refusal of paternity and his presence at court was not always essential to the hearing. The actions required (or not required) in this process appear to have been developed not only to establish paternal responsibility, but to publically authenticate the word of a woman whose character could no longer be relied upon.

The notion that this legal process was born of and perpetuated punitive attitudes toward the unmarried mother is further supported by the refusal of post-war parliaments to enforce compulsory blood tests in the cases of contested paternity, despite the existence of such legislation in other European countries.<sup>25</sup> Although blood test results would be accepted by magistrates, it was recognised by organisations such as the N.C.U.M.C that this allowance generally proved meaningless to the petitioning mother, as 'the co-operation of mother, child and alleged father is required'.<sup>26</sup> If a woman had to resort to aid from the court in an effort to

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<sup>23</sup> Fink, J. 'Natural mothers, putative fathers, and innocent children', p.179.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.179.

<sup>25</sup> See: Wimperis, V. *The Unmarried Mother and her Child*.

<sup>26</sup> N.C.U.M.C. Leaflet - G.S. Wilkinson, 'Legal Aspects of Illegitimacy', p.14.

gain financial support from the putative father, then it was unlikely that his consent to a blood test would be freely given.

The difficulty in obtaining and enforcing Affiliation Orders together with the inadequacy of their monetary support was an issue bemoaned by various campaigning bodies, and this disappointment was equally shared by the government established National Assistance Board (N.A.B.). The concerns they held, however, stemmed not from empathy for the mothers' limited agency and social marginality, but from anxiety that the ineffectiveness of legislation left National Assistance as their only and final recourse. Victoria Noble argues that 'the broad mandate of the N.A.B., as set out in the enacting legislation and explained to the public, was to relieve need wherever it existed' yet in practice she claims 'the government's provision of assistance was neither universal nor uniform'.<sup>27</sup> She maintains that 'the very availability of assistance and, if granted, the conditions attached to it depended on the applicant's sex, marital status, and domestic relationships'.<sup>28</sup> Despite the new welfare state's invocation of equality the N.A.B's policies were still based upon conventional gendered notions of the 'deserving needy' and lone mothers of any circumstance were not easily included within this category. The resistance which generally characterised the Board's approach to the mother's applications for assistance was clearly evidenced in a memorandum sent by N.A.B. Headquarters to all its area offices in 1953: 'Assistance ought not to be regarded either by us or by the public, as the normal mode of maintenance of a woman whose marriage has broken up or who has an illegitimate child.'<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Noble, V. A. "Not the normal mode of maintenance" Bureaucratic resistance to the claims of lone women in the post-war British welfare state' *Law and Social Enquiry*, 29:2 (2004), p.347.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.347.

<sup>29</sup> As quoted in: Noble, V. A. "Not the normal mode of maintenance" p.345.

The argument that the N.A.B. assumed a ‘defensive posture’ when faced with the responsibility of aiding unmarried mothers in the post-war period is certainly supported by many of the contemporary testimonies collected by sociologist Dennis Marsden.<sup>30</sup> Marsden’s study, which covered the period 1955-1966, sought to examine the problems faced by ‘fatherless families’ particularly those on a low income, as well as the circumstances behind the lone status of women and the level of support they received from the state.<sup>31</sup> From within the sociologist’s samples taken from both the North and the South East of England there exist a number of cases in which women experienced not only manipulation and coercion at the hands of some N.A.B. officials, but at times blatant, undisguised prejudice. Many of the testimonies describe their association with the N.A.B as an unrelenting pressure; the mothers were often forcibly persuaded to apply for Affiliation Orders and contrary to theories of child psychology regularly urged to work.<sup>32</sup> When asked to summarise her experiences of the N.A.B, one unmarried mother responded: ‘They ask you such a lot of questions the National Assistance and ask you the same questions every time. No they don’t ask what you need. Do they hell ask you what you need. They always ask what you’ve got.’<sup>33</sup> Although it must be noted that not all Marsden’s interviewees perceived their experiences with the N.A.B as entirely negative, the above recollection exemplifies the attitude of many. Additionally, it suggests that gendered prejudices continued to shape national approaches to the support of unmarried mothers.

One interview which particularly illustrates the endemic prejudice of not only this governmental body, but also many of the officials in its employ was that of a 22 year old lone

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<sup>30</sup> Noble, V. A. “Not the normal mode of maintenance”, p. 346.

<sup>31</sup> Marsden, D. *Mothers Alone: Poverty and the Fatherless Family, 1955-1966* [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor]. February 2005. SN: 5072.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, see for example interview’s: Winter\_HU10, Trevor\_CU16, Wigmore\_HU9.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, interview: Wigmore\_HU9.

mother living in the South of England. She recalled that she had initially resisted applying to the N.A.B., preferring instead to live on savings before the birth of her baby. However, as her savings dwindled she had sought the N.A.B.'s aid but almost immediately withdrew her application after her first interview had become abusive:

Yes, they sent a visitor but he was very nasty, I told him, I said alright I won't take it tear up the form and he said no we can't do that its government property it's all got to be filed up. Oh what a sour face that man had, he had the sourest face I've seen in all my life . . . He said the taxpayers didn't want to pay for me to have a baby, so I said I'd do without it.<sup>34</sup>

This interviewee's experience demonstrates that applications for state support from unmarried mothers were not always met with neutrality from the officials in employ. The personal beliefs and attitude of a N.A.B. employee could severely impact upon a mother's access to the support she was entitled to.

Following this incident and the birth of her son, the mother had moved onto a caravan site and was forced through necessity to once again apply for National Assistance. On this occasion she had sent in a form through the post office and received little resistance to her claim, although the aid had come with certain conditions. The mother admitted to Marsden that she was extremely anxious about the consequences of an upcoming court appearance which the N.A.B. had insisted she undertake in order to secure an Affiliation Order against the father. Despite her assertions that such an action would almost certainly damage her

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, interview: Cross\_CU4.



relationship with the father's well known local family, the N.A.B. had continually pressured her into naming him. She recalled that one official had even resorted to scare tactics, falsely informing her that she would be breaking the law if she continued to withhold the father's identity from them. Eventually the mother succumbed to their demands against her wishes and better judgment not because she hoped to gain additional monetary support, but through the sense of guilt and social obligation which they had gradually instilled within her.

But I don't see why I should cause trouble, I don't have to name the father do I, I found that out, the man from Bedford said that I would have to tell them the father that was the law, that was a lie wasn't it, I went to the citizen's advice bureau to see about that but they couldn't tell me anything about it . . . but I went and read it up for myself in the library, I'd been to the office up here and she said to me no I didn't have to tell them but you feel obliged to. They said they had a duty to take the father to court and make as much money as possible for the public funds.<sup>35</sup>

In this instance it is evident that the N.A.B officials did not perceive this mother as one of the 'deserving needy'. They exhibited an obvious discomfort with her maintenance and ignored her concerns about petitioning for an Affiliation Order. Although, it could be argued, it would have been wrong to allow the father to potentially evade his responsibility, the N.A.B.'s inflexible demands may have, as the mother believed, caused irreparable harm in the long-term. Their dismissal of this mother, her opinion and her specific circumstances, suggest a continuing post-war disdain for and homogenisation of unmarried women who were caught transgressing the boundaries of their gender. Significantly, this particular individual had come from a seemingly respectable and affluent family, she had attended Cambridge Art School and worked until her pregnancy, was articulate and appeared hard-

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, interview: Cross\_CU4.

working as a mother; she did not fit the common stereotype of the uneducated, promiscuous delinquent. Yet, in the opinion of these N.A.B. officials, it would seem, she was just another one of ‘those girls’, the other facets of her identity transposed by her status as an unmarried mother, a transgressor of gendered moral norms.<sup>36</sup> During this period the state appeared to prefer a policy of ignorance with regard to unmarried mothers, however, should intervention be unavoidable its approach was generally punitive and judgmental, despite the unique circumstances of each woman who sought help.

### **John Bowlby: Ideas and Influences**

Aspects of the prevalent stereotype, which informed notions of the unmarried mother in this period, were also evident in the notes of Dennis Marsden who recorded the testimonies of this marginalised group. One might assume that, as a sociologist, Marsden attempted to remain a neutral observer, an unbiased recorder of the facts, yet as his work attests no academic study can exist beyond the influences unique to the author’s own temporal positioning. On two occasions he suggests that certain interviewees were engaged in casual prostitution despite his own admission that no evidence existed, and in another instance he irrelevantly asserted that an older mother ‘must have been on the shelf’ before the birth of her child.<sup>37</sup> In both these examples, Marsden’s observations were coloured by dominant contemporary assumptions which fed into the overarching concept of feminine sexuality at the time.

According to these naturalised (although not always unchallenged) beliefs, if a woman had given birth to an illegitimate child and still pursued relationships with men, she must be fundamentally promiscuous and therefore generally a ‘prostitute’. On the contrary, if a

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted from a speech given by Miss E.M Steel, Gen. Sec. of the Church of England Moral Welfare Council, N.C.U.M.C Extraordinary General Meeting Minutes (20<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1958) National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child Collection, The Women’s Library: London Metropolitan University, 5/OPF/01/4/2, Box 003.

<sup>37</sup> See interviews: Trevor\_CU16, Rawson\_CU14 and Rice\_CU15.

woman had not found a husband before she reached her thirties she was past her prime and must be resigned to long-term celibacy and a life alone. However, the most significant assumptions which featured in the sociologist's notes are those regarding his regular assessments of the mothers' mental states, which bore great resemblance to the theories of unmarried mothers espoused by contemporary psychologist John Bowlby. Marsden, as a sociologist with interests in the situations of fatherless families would almost certainly have been acquainted with Bowlby's work. This influence is strongly suggested in his notes and appears to have had a direct impact upon his perception of the women he interviewed.

As established in the previous chapter, Bowlby's text *Childcare and the Growth of Love* (1953) had been particularly popular selling 'on average 1,000 copies every month' in the first six months of publication.<sup>38</sup> Over a decade later in 1964, it was still selling 5,000 copies a year in America alone.<sup>39</sup> In contrast to more traditional images of the unmarried mother which perceived illegitimate pregnancy as the product of a deviant, immoral, fallen nature, Marsden, like Bowlby, looked instead for evidence of mental instability and/or an unstable family background as the root cause. He claimed that many of the women 'suffer with nerves', that they were depressed and suffering from insomnia and in one case bordering 'on the neurotic', yet he posited these symptoms not as a consequence of their difficult position but as the reasons for it.<sup>40</sup> This shift in ideas which looked to a mixture of psychological and social factors rather than moral and spiritual reasons for unmarried motherhood had a significant impact, not only upon scholarly research, but also post-war representations of this figure in general. Although Bowlby's self professed unsentimental attitude to lone mothers did not prove any less judgmental or problematic than that of the

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<sup>38</sup> Penguin Archive, Special Collections: University of Bristol DM1107/A271.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> See for example interview: Rawson\_CU14.

more traditional commentators, it did contribute to an alternative image of, and approach to, the unmarried mother during the period. Consequently, as a text which impacted in both practical and ideological ways, Bowlby's *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (1953) requires greater attention.

As proposed in the previous chapter, Bowlby's widely disseminated notion of 'maternal deprivation' and its negative effects upon young children could have proved a positive development in the emotive issue of unmarried motherhood and the support that individuals received. However, despite strong emphasis of this point, he believed that in the case of the lone mother she was rarely equal to the task and subsequently an adoptive mother - a 'mother-substitute' - was always to be preferred. Although Bowlby was careful not to overtly generalise, he maintained that, 'it is the opinion of many social workers with psychiatric knowledge and experience of this problem that with many girls becoming an unmarried mother is neurotic and not just accidental', and that 'in other cases the girls are chronically maladjusted or defective'.<sup>41</sup> In Bowlby's view the unmarried mother was the antithesis of the celebrated 'natural mother' discussed in the previous chapter. Unlike this revered feminine figure, the unmarried mother required intervention from the state and its welfare services; she could not be trusted to care for her child alone in the necessary way because her illicit pregnancy was considered a clear 'symptom of her psychological ill-health'.<sup>42</sup> However, in spite of Bowlby's certainty that intervention in such cases was vital, he initially appeared ambiguous as to the form that this should take. He criticised the actions of past welfare workers who he believed 'have too often been influenced by punishing or sentimental attitudes towards the erring mother' and called for a more professional and

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<sup>41</sup> Bowlby, J. *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, p.110.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, p.108.

rational approach.<sup>43</sup> Yet, despite his insistence that society must be, ‘more practical in its handling of the problem both by providing economic and psychological assistance to the unmarried mother’, he appeared to believe that generally adoption was the best option for the illegitimate child.<sup>44</sup> He argued that, ‘in some cases, encouraging her to take the responsibility for her baby will help her to become a responsible citizen, but to act on the assumption that this is always the case is not only to be unpractical, but to be socially irresponsible’.<sup>45</sup> In reference to and in support of America’s ‘progressive’ policy regarding illegitimacy, Bowlby stated that ‘social workers now conceive it to be their duty to help the unmarried mother face the real situation before her’ believing that if ‘it is put before her in a sympathetic way by someone who she has learned to trust, many girls recognize that it is in the interest of neither themselves nor the baby to attempt to care for him, and are prepared to release him for adoption’.<sup>46</sup> Contrary to the argument of many N.C.U.M.C supporters that a mother must be given time to decide if adoption is indeed the best route for herself and her child, Bowlby criticised British law for allowing mothers to defer their decision, arguing that, ‘those who frame laws of this kind clearly give first place in their consideration to the parents’ right to the possession of the child and only second place to the child’s welfare’.<sup>47</sup>

Although Bowlby dismissed past emotive responses to the situation of the unmarried mother, his own beliefs refuted the maternal capabilities of these women and thus over-rode his well known vigorous emphasis on the importance of ‘mother-love’ for mental health. In Bowlby’s opinion it was best for the child to be removed from his mother as early as possible and placed with a substitute mother in a ‘normal’ family setting, rather than risk what he saw

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, p.117.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, p.118.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*, pp.117-118.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, p.116.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*, p.117.

as the inevitable maternal failure of an ‘emotionally disturbed’ person.<sup>48</sup> He maintained that this action was essential not only for the child’s mental well-being, but for the health of society as a whole for whom deprived children were a ‘source of social infection as real and as serious as are carriers of diphtheria and typhoid’.<sup>49</sup> Bowlby could not concede that it may possibly have been the stain and strain of illegitimacy – the stigma and its accompanying practical and emotional difficulties which blighted society, the unmarried mother and her child. For him, the mothers were the key problem and in most instances he firmly asserted that they be denied all influence over their children before the cycle of dysfunction could be perpetuated and they grew up ‘to reproduce themselves’.<sup>50</sup>

The influence of John Bowlby’s ideas regarding the social/mental instability and therefore unsuitability of unmarried mothers as parents did not remain within the realms of academia alone, but could be found diffused throughout the varied domains of action which created post-war popular culture. Amongst the various books, films and magazines which evidenced an awareness of Bowlby’s views, there are two texts in particular which exemplify this cultural engagement with the particularities of Bowlby’s approach - Hammer Horror’s *The Nanny* (1965) and Shelagh Delaney’s play *A Taste of Honey* (1956), which was later produced as a film and directed by ‘new wave’ contributor Tony Richardson in 1961.<sup>51</sup> However, to argue that they demonstrate an awareness of his theories does not also mean they supported his notions or even reproduced them knowingly, but that the influence of this particular discourse is present, utilised and perhaps even developed within them, as examples

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<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, p.111.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, p.181.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, p.181.

<sup>51</sup> Holt, S. (Dir.) *The Nanny* (UK, 1965); Delaney, S. *A Taste of Honey* (London, 1988 [1956]).

of the ongoing reciprocating relationship which exists between diverse social spheres and their productions of meaning.

Materially and stylistically it might be argued that little, if any comparisons could be drawn between a film and a play which exhibit such stark contrasts as these, however, on closer examination they share more than one might appreciate. Firstly and essentially, they were both produced within the same time-frame. Delaney's play is popularly presented as a product of its time, a genre of text easily positioned in the historical period of 'angry young men' and 'kitchen sink' realism; a literary response to issues pertinent to the period.<sup>52</sup> Yet it must also be understood that although 'Hammer still sustains a reductive reputation often relegating it to cult status',<sup>53</sup> this studio's films 'do draw upon, represent and are always locatable in relation to much broader shifts and tendencies in British social history'.<sup>54</sup> Although post-war horror or psychological thrillers such as *The Nanny* did not share the claim to realism of the so-called kitchen sink drama, they nonetheless drew upon the same ideological and discursive frameworks dominant in the period and recognised by contemporary audiences. Peter Hutchings argues this point further, claiming that, 'in seeking to make horror attractive to an audience, these filmmakers necessarily had to address what they perceived to be the lived experiences, fears and anxieties of that audience, with the terms of this engagement both aesthetic and ideological'.<sup>55</sup> He would emphasise therefore, that engagement with contemporary themes and issues was as much a conscious act on the part of horror filmmakers, as it was for so-called 'realist' writers.

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<sup>52</sup> See: Brook, S. *Literature and Cultural Criticism in the 1950s: The Feeling Male Body* (Basingstoke and New York, 2007).

<sup>53</sup> Wilson, B. 'Notes on a radical tradition: subversive ideological applications in the Hammer Horror films.' *CineAction*, 72 (2007): Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2010, Expanded Academic: <http://find.galegroup.com>.

<sup>54</sup> Hutchings, P. *Hammer and Beyond: the British Horror Film* (Manchester, 1993), p.1.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p.21.

In addition to the historical proximity of their production, these sources also appear to share an approach which resists the narrative standard of the 'happy ending'. Although according to contemporary models relative normality or convention has been restored by the texts, the audiences are denied the satisfaction of the usual optimistic resolution. In each instance the audience is left unsettled, questioning the validity of a social framework which has precipitated the particular events and outcome of the narrative they have just viewed. This is a theme which will later be explored more fully.

However, one of the main similarities shared by these sources is their appropriation and at times subversion of John Bowlby's popular psychological assessment and representation of the unmarried mother. With regard to Delaney's play, issues of motherhood, illegitimacy and maternal love (or lack of it) dominate the play from start to finish. Likewise, although it is not disclosed to the audience until the final scenes of *The Nanny*, it is an illegitimate birth and issues of respectability and shame which have generated the harrowing events and subsequent breakdown of the Bette Davis character. Both the play and film are driven by themes of unmarried motherhood and both, in their different ways, challenge the gendered presumptions which these perpetuated and which were epitomised in Bowlby's work.

One of the first characters of *A Taste of Honey* to require exploration is not the principal (anti) heroine - Jo, but her unconventional mother - Helen. Helen personifies Bowlby's irresponsible unmarried mother. She is the antithesis of the 'professional



housewife' and the 'natural mother' and therefore the very embodiment of unrespectable post-war femininity. Accordingly, when the audience is first introduced to Helen she is arriving at new lodgings – a dirty and dilapidated flat in the industrial part of town. It is an undesirable and geographically marginal habitation which duly reflects the social position held by Helen and women like her - an unsuitable home for an unsuitable person, an unmarried and further more a seemingly un-maternal mother. However, despite her obvious inadequacies and failure as a mother, the text still affords this character some admirable qualities and the audience is never encouraged to imagine her as the villain of the narrative.

Significantly, Bowlby never refers to the unmarried mothers he classes 'maladjusted or defective' as also being un-maternal, since to do so would have challenged naturalised ideas that all women were maternal if not universally good at parenting. Yet, in contrast the play continually draws attention to Helen's un-maternal nature which is in part established through her own admissions. In one scene, for example, she asks her daughter 'Have I ever laid claim to being a proper mother?'<sup>56</sup> In addition, the fragility of Helen's maternal bond is illustrated through the creation of various situations in which she is forced to choose between her daughter and her present lover, Peter. The most significant instance of such a choice occurs toward the end of the text, during Helen's visit to the pregnant Jo. In this instance, the visit has created an argument between the mother and her new husband, who is incensed and surprised that Helen has invited Jo and the baby to live with them. He defies Helen to have anything to do with her daughter and gives her an ultimatum: 'I dragged you out of the gutter once. If you want to go back there it's all the same to me. I'm not having this shower for any price'.<sup>57</sup> The normally feisty Helen uneasily submits to her drunken and tyrannical husband

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<sup>56</sup> Delaney, S. *A Taste of Honey*, p.35.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*, p.68.

and the audience realises for the first time that it is not Peter who she is choosing over Jo, but the refuge from social and financial instability that comes from her marriage to him. Life with Jo condemns Helen to a disreputable and marginalised existence on the outskirts of ‘normal’ society. Marriage to Peter has given her the security and acceptance that her previous position lacked and this is clearly very important to her, more so even, it would seem, than the welfare of her daughter. This is a theme paralleled in some of the interviews conducted by Marsden in which marriage as means of security is deeply desired above all else. One interviewee for example emphasises: ‘Oh yes, I do want to get married, for security and company more than anything else. I’d live with a man if necessary but I’d much prefer to have a ring on my hand now. I want that security behind me.’<sup>58</sup> For women who experienced the loneliness and strain of living beyond the boundaries of respectable femininity, especially those without the support of friends or family, marriage remained the only route back to social acceptability and if lucky, financial stability. The notion that many unmarried mothers craved the convention of matrimony clearly contravenes Bowlby’s assertion that such women consciously resisted social norms by neurotically pursuing illegitimate pregnancy.

This final implication that all the outrageous, subversive Helen desires is a ‘normal’ and stable home-life completes the sense of ambiguity that the text has woven around the representation of this character from the start. Confusion as to how Helen should be perceived has been continually perpetuated through the stream of mixed messages generated by the text. Alongside the many examples of Helen’s shortcomings as a mother there are a number of instances when she genuinely appears to care for her daughter’s future happiness, and the audience is occasionally surprised by brief allusions to a rather progressive and honest temperament. Despite the fact that Helen sees marriage as the only route to

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<sup>58</sup> Marsden, D. *Mothers Alone*, interview: Osgood\_CU12.

respectability left open to her, she appears to want something different for Jo, an alternative to the conventional feminine life course. For example, when Helen discovers Jo's portfolio of sketches including a portrait of her, she jokes but doesn't dismiss them and seems sincerely enthusiastic. She exclaims, 'I didn't realise I had such a talented daughter', later asking, 'Have you ever thought of going to a proper art school and getting a proper training?'<sup>59</sup> When Jo replies that she's tired of schooling, Helen concludes with, 'You're wasting yourself'.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Helen reacts violently when she discovers Jimmie's ring around Jo's neck. Contrary to custom and her own impending marriage she does not want Jo to marry:

I suppose you think you're in love. Anybody can fall in love, do you know that? But what do you know about the rest of it? . . . Oh Jo, you're only a kid. Why don't you learn from my mistakes? It takes half your life to learn from your own . . . Look, you're only young. Enjoy your life. Don't get trapped. Marriage can be hell for a kid.<sup>61</sup>

Helen's responses to these situations might suggest that despite the post-war hegemony of feminine domesticity, the traditional role of women was in contention. Helen seems almost envious of the possibilities open to Jo, which could imply that Jo's generation were the first women to really experience a choice (if limited) of alternative occupations to the wife and mother. Helen is eager that her daughter should not experience the hardships of her own life as firstly a very young wife, then divorcee and finally an unmarried mother. However, unbeknown to either character at this point Jo's immediate future has already been decided

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<sup>59</sup> Delaney, S. *A Taste of Honey*, pp. 14 and 15.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*, p.15.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid*, p.41.

since she is pregnant, and Bowlby's argument that illegitimate children will always reproduce themselves is, consciously or not, perpetuated by the narrative.

However, returning to the text's portrayal of the clearly un-maternal (if occasionally caring) Helen, a more iniquitous depiction may have been expected, considering the prevalence of beliefs that maternalism was a natural feminine quality inherent to all 'normal' women. However, it could be argued that it is this assumption which the text wishes to critique, through the very ambiguity of Helen's character. Although the text in no way condones Helen's irresponsible behaviour toward Jo, it appears to suggest that her lack of maternal feelings for her daughter are not an indication that she is a bad person or a wholly bad mother – she is simply not suited to the role. The text seems to condemn the convention which judges women abnormal if they fail to have a maternal nature and which pushes them indiscriminately into a role they may not desire. The illogicality of such a tradition is re-emphasised in the final scene when the happy if unusual partnership between Jo and her homosexual friend Geof is disbanded, to make way for the destructive yet more acceptable arrangement of mother and daughter. However, this subversive reading is somewhat overshadowed by Helen's position as an unmarried mother, so perhaps alternatively, the text is indeed supporting Bowlby's assertions that the legacy of most unmarried mothers is unhappiness. However, the circumstances behind Jo's conception (Helen was very young and married but still a virgin when she had a single sexual experience with the father), together with the positive illustrations of Helen's character suggest that her single status is irrelevant to her lack of maternalism – married or not Helen would behave the same.

Although Jo is guilty of making many of the same mistakes as her mother, she is not portrayed in the same jaded light. Like Helen, Jo often displays un-maternal behaviour toward her unborn child, but the text suggests that the reasons for this are quite different from those of her mother. Unlike Helen, the text implies that under the right circumstances, Jo could be a good mother, that she would be capable of displaying the kind of maternal love her own mother does not feel. For example, she is appalled by the filthy appearance of some of the local children and in particular the obvious neglect experienced by one little boy:

Jo: It's their parents fault. There's a little boy over there and his hair, honestly, it's walking away. And his ears. Oh! He's a real mess! He never goes to school. He just sits on the front doorstep all day. I think he's a bit deficient. His mother ought not to be allowed.

Geof: Who?

Jo: His mother. Think of all the harm she does, having children.<sup>62</sup>

Following these observations, which she doesn't appear to relate to her own situation, Jo feels her baby kick for the first time and is clearly delighted by the evidence that her own baby is flourishing, yet almost immediately this joy is replaced with an attitude of detachment: 'it shows it's alive anyway'.<sup>63</sup> Jo does demonstrate unconscious moments of maternal concern and pleasure yet, as soon as such thoughts and feelings are expressed they are deliberately smothered with a fatalistic resignation. Glenda Leeming argues that this inherent pessimism

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<sup>62</sup> *ibid*, p.54.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, p.55.

is a direct product of ‘Helen’s neglect’, a consequence of an inadequate and damaging upbringing, an interpretation which would certainly suggest the text’s affiliation to Bowlby’s thesis.<sup>64</sup> Yet, further material points toward a more nuanced reading, a reading in which not Helen but the gendered social norms of post-war society are to blame for Jo’s unhappiness, the norms which Bowlby’s work perpetuated and reinforced. One significant point in the narrative which supports this argument occurs when Geof gives Jo a doll upon which to practise her mothering skills. The gift generates a violent outburst from Jo and the extent of her anxiety over the pregnancy is finally displayed: ‘The colour’s wrong. I’ll bash its brains out. I’ll kill it. I don’t want this baby, Geof. I don’t want to be a mother. I don’t want to be a woman.’<sup>65</sup> The demoralising tone of the scene derives from the fact that Jo is forced to accept that her status and identity within society are inextricably linked to her gender and notions of respectability. Jo realises that her child’s illegitimate birth and mixed race will always ensure that they exist beyond the limits of respectable society, just as she and Helen had done.

Despite this shocking display of anger toward her pregnancy, the audience is encouraged to criticise not Jo, but society and the rules of gender convention that have placed her in such a desperate position. The notion that it is the unfairness of her situation which is making her react in such a way is also evident in earlier scenes. When Jo first admits to Geof that she is pregnant, she tells him: ‘I’m not planning big plans for this baby, or dreaming big dreams. You know what happens when you do things like that. The baby will be born dead or daft!’<sup>66</sup> Due to the socially unacceptable conditions of her baby’s existence (and her own), Jo doesn’t dare to be happy or optimistic about the future, her statement even insinuates that she fears the baby’s immoral conception may have damaged it in some way. As such, Jo’s

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<sup>64</sup>See commentary by Leeming published within this edition of the play, p.x.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid*, p.75.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*, p.50.

character perpetuates the convention that illegitimate pregnancies, the consequence of illegitimate sexual affairs should not be celebrated but deplored and even feared for the degenerates they could produce. This play highlights the complexities and ambivalence innate to culturally constructed representations and beliefs: it illustrates both rejection and (partial) acceptance of ‘official’ and popular discourses including that of Bowlby. Delaney’s portrayals of unmarried mothers and the themes which surround lone motherhood show that this feminine identity, like any other, was in perpetual contestation.

In contrast to Delaney’s play, audiences of Hammer’s ‘sleeper hit’ *The Nanny* are unaware for the majority of the film that an illegitimate pregnancy lies at the core of the narrative.<sup>67</sup> It is only with hindsight, once this fact is disclosed, that one can then begin to interpret and even understand the strange behaviour that ‘Nanny’ has previously displayed. Significantly, in the opening scenes of the film, images of unmarried motherhood are the last thing to be evoked as we observe a woman who appears to epitomise the dominant stereotype of the middle-aged, asexual, ‘respectable’ English spinster. Nanny is smartly dressed in a dark coat and hat, despite the summer weather and she is seen feeding the ducks amongst the families in the park, before she returns to her employer’s home with a special cake. This figure of single femininity, unlike that of Helen in *A Taste of Honey*, is not overtly sexual and is therefore presented as unthreatening; she can be easily accommodated within this happy public scene. The spritely music which accompanies Nanny’s stroll in the park also adds to the feeling of nostalgic ‘Britishness’ which the images suggest and, therefore, contrasts greatly with the sound of a woman crying on Nanny’s entry to the house. The emotional woman is Nanny’s employer, who was also once her charge. The woman is upset because her young son, Joey, is returning home after undergoing treatment at a residential institution for

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<sup>67</sup> Dixon, W. *A History of Horror* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, 2010), p.100.

mentally disturbed children; she is anxious about the reunion and the potentially unresolved strange behaviour of the boy. According to the psychiatrist, Joey has developed an unusual 'antipathy to middle-aged females' since the 'accidental' drowning of his younger sister, Suzy, and he fears that treatment has been unsuccessful. The psychiatrist's evaluation seems correct when Joey exhibits clear hatred toward Nanny when she arrives to take him home. For the majority of the film the audience remains unsure as to who is the villain of the piece. Is Joey simply a disturbed, trouble-causing child or does he have good reason to fear his harmless 'old nanny'?

Answers regarding Nanny's mental state and agenda are finally illuminated in a significant scene involving Joey's visiting Aunt Pen. During a deadly confrontation between Pen and Nanny, it comes to light that Nanny was indeed instrumental in Suzy's death, however, not through malice but a rare instance of negligence. Through Nanny's recollections of that day, we learn that after receiving a phone call Nanny had been forced to leave the children alone in the apartment in order to visit the squalid flat of her illegitimate daughter. Once there, she had been berated by an attending doctor, who had failed to save the young girl following the fatal consequences of an illegal abortion. He was extremely angry with her, claiming she was 'twenty five years too late' to be of any assistance to her daughter because she had been 'too busy looking after other people's children'. Nanny had returned to her employer's house clearly upset but quickly regained her composure, only to discover that Suzy had drowned in the bath she had drawn before she left.

Once the events that occurred on that fateful day are revealed, the audience is then in a position to reflect upon Nanny's earlier actions in the narrative. Were they a consequence of



inherent psychological flaws, as evidenced by her illegitimate child, as Bowlby would argue? The shocking initial impact of Nanny's cruelty toward Aunt Pen certainly seems to encourage such an interpretation; she watches her former charge die in front of her while she holds life-saving medication in her hands. Additionally, the audience also realises that with a similar callousness she had also poisoned her employer and framed young Joey, in order to cast further doubt on the boy's state of mind and his recollection of events

However, although Nanny's manipulation and escalating crimes are shocking, the apparent motivation behind them disallows a complete demonization of the perpetrator and raises much conjecture. Nanny has been forced to keep her own child a secret in order to secure her employment and probably the finances to maintain her daughter. All her actions have been generated by this need for secrecy, in order that she might continue to appear the woman of respectability her employers and society demand of her. So, who is ultimately to blame for the tragic events which unfold: Nanny or inflexible gendered mores? Contrary to Bowlby's theories, the question which this film seems to pose is - would Nanny have behaved this way if she had been able to openly be with, and care for her daughter?

The ambiguity which surrounds this character stems much from Nanny's obvious long-term success in her position as a carer. The numerous photographs of happy children which stand on her dressing table pay testament to a long career as a nanny, and she is clearly much needed and loved by her present employer, who states: 'Nanny is part of the family'. Contrary to Bowlby's arguments, Nanny has proved herself a successful mothering figure, although she has been restricted in the care she could afford her own daughter. Until the events following the death of her daughter and Suzy, it would seem that Nanny had been

greatly appreciated and depended upon by all, a factor which refutes the notion that she was, and had always been inherently and ‘chronically maladjusted and defective’.<sup>68</sup>

However, the fact that Nanny has remained in a residential position caring for other peoples’ children, while her own daughter has largely been devoid of her mother, raises questions about the real reasons behind Nanny’s need for secrecy. Has she kept her daughter a secret in order to ensure her ability to maintain her, or for her own sake, to preserve the respectability she has earned and the identity she has constructed over many years? There are two key scenes which elucidate this issue. Firstly, following Nanny’s return from her dead daughter’s flat she is seen weeping. This clearly suggests that she is not, or perhaps was not, the cold-hearted monster portrayed in subsequent scenes. She did genuinely care for her child in some way. However, the speed with which she is able to compose herself and resume the role of professional nanny does imply that she is deft at denying this aspect of her life and, therefore, the identity and responsibility of a parent. Secondly, during her candid confession to the dying Aunt Pen, she claims that she must continue to hide the circumstances behind Suzy’s fatal accident because it could impact upon the careers of other nannies. Nanny explains: ‘You see Miss Pen being a nanny is based on trust, it is so important that parents trust us. It’s not myself I’m thinking about; I’ve never been one for self. It’s all those others like me, all those nannies who’ve devoted their lives to taking care of other people’s children’. This statement clearly illustrates Nanny’s identification with this group of ‘childless’ women, she persistently positions herself alongside them. The fact that this character is only ever known as ‘Nanny’ within the film similarly emphasises her complete emersion in the role; she is depicted as having no other valid identity.

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<sup>68</sup> Bowlby, J. *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, p.110.

As with Helen in *A Taste of Honey*, the portrayal of the unmarried mother within this film is ambiguous. Despite the genre of the film and the criminal acts conducted by this character, she is still not presented as a classical villain or monster. After all, she is unable to see through her planned murder of Joey. On the surface it might appear that the narrative is directly reproducing contemporary discourse on the perceived links between unmarried motherhood and mental instability, as espoused by Bowlby. However, the film clearly problematises the simplicity of this view, whilst also raising questions about the potential dangers and effects of traditional gendered prejudices. It conveys Nanny not as simply a neurotic sociopath but a victim of her own fear and the prejudice of others; a woman incapable of facing the shame and loss of respectability that open knowledge of her illegitimate child would bring. Unfortunately, her daughter was also a sad victim of these circumstances.

Both Delaney's play and Hammer's film engage with various elements of discourse which contributed to meanings of unmarried motherhood in the long 1950s. However, of most interest is their negotiation of the ideas promoted by John Bowlby. Far from blindly accommodating this supposed 'authority' on the subject, both play and film examine and often expose the inadequacy and prejudice of his theories. They demonstrate an awareness that Bowlby does not; they suggest that instances of mental ill health in some unmarried mothers are not generally the cause, but a symptom of marginal identity and prejudice.

Through a consideration of some of the discourses which engaged with unmarried motherhood in the long 1950s, it quickly becomes clear that constructions of the unmarried mother were being formed through a dynamic process, in which past ideas and prejudices were being challenged, reformed and reproduced by changes to social provision, the theories of supposed new ‘expert authorities’, and a growing awareness of the negative impact which could result from punitive, moral doctrines. Women who gave birth outside marriage were never fully accepted during this period, but the increasing diversification of their representation had significantly undermined the authority of earlier religious discourse which portrayed them uniformly as sinners in need of rehabilitation. In the following chapter, the effects of this change will be considered and how they, alongside the unintentional advantages of new social provisions, enabled some unmarried mothers to establish happy, alternative family structures in the period.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Unmarried Mothers: Alternative Families, Alternative Femininities

Despite the prevailing image of the post-war model family containing mother and father, content in prescribed roles of carer and breadwinner, there were of course in actuality multiple variations of familial composition. Significantly, regardless of the pressure exerted from many quarters to give up their babies, it was unmarried mothers who were establishing many of these alternative family units. Following the last months of war in 1945 when the number of illegitimate births peaked in England and Wales at 10.3% of all births, still only 25.7% of these illegitimate babies were adopted and the trend appears to have been similar in Scotland.<sup>1</sup> The majority of unmarried mothers were refusing to relinquish their rights as parents even though assistance from the State was minimal, opportunities for child-care were limited and aid from putative fathers could not be enforced. In addition to these practical difficulties they were also generally faced with strong moral opinion which denigrated their actions and dismissed their chances of parental success, yet women continued to leave hospital with their children. Although the day to day existence of ‘fatherless families’ was, and is, often overshadowed by the dramatic psychological discourse of the period and more recently uncovered accounts of traumatic forced adoptions, the long 1950s witnessed not only imagined alternatives to the established family model but real and lived experiences of it.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this chapter, therefore, will be to consider those families recorded and depicted within both popular, autobiographical and official sources who did not meet contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://www.visionofBritain.org.uk>, England and Wales: Births by legitimacy; <http://www.statistics.gov.uk>, Children adopted, 1927 to 1998: Social Trends 30. For Scottish trends see studies such as Thompson, B. ‘Social Study of Illegitimate Maternities’ *British Journal of Preventive and Social Medicine*, 10:2, (1956), pp75-87.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the testimonies of pressurised adoptions in recent television programmes such as: ‘Home Ground: Keeping Mum’, BBC North East (transmitted, 25. 05.1999). See also the reports recorded and investigated by the team from Trackers International: [www.uktrackers.co.uk](http://www.uktrackers.co.uk).

familial or gendered ideals yet existed parallel to them. How did women manage the practical and emotional difficulties of being unmarried mothers and how might their situations have impacted upon their sense of self? How did a woman's class position affect her experience of unmarried motherhood and influence the choices available to her? What part did her own family, friends and larger community play in her decisions and the creation of alternative family units?

### **Class and the Post-war Experience of Unmarried Motherhood**

Despite the thorough dissemination of psychological discourse during this period which sought to pathologise and homogenise the unmarried mother, there were a number of small, localised investigations which challenged the validity of its assertions. Empirical research published in contemporary medical journals such as that of E.K McDonald and Barbara Thompson 'showed the extent to which unmarried motherhood was not the problem of the young neurotic girl of the psychoanalytic literature' but an experience evident in all ranks of society by all kinds of women.<sup>3</sup> Barbara Thompson, a former Almoner at Aberdeen Maternity hospital and a member of the city's University Obstetric Medicine Research Unit, was not only one of the few professionals of the period to question prevailing assumptions, but one of the first to examine the social circumstances of the mothers and the choices they were making. Thompson's findings compiled from birth registrations (1949-1952), almoners' reports and medical registers from the Aberdeen area were published in 1956 and are significant to an understanding of unmarried motherhood in the long 1950s for a number of reasons. Firstly, her research showed that contemporary fears of ever increasing numbers of

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<sup>3</sup> McDonald, E. K. 'Follow-up of illegitimate children' *Medical Officer*, XCVI, (1956); Thompson, B. 'Social study of illegitimate maternities' *British Journal of Preventive and Social Medicine*, 10:2, (1956), pp75-87. Quotation from, Lewis J. and Welshman, J. 'The issue of never married motherhood in Britain' *Social History of Medicine*, (1997), p.411.

‘neurotic’ lone mothers fuelled by misleading national statistics were unsubstantiated; she had discovered that in many instances the parents of illegitimate children were in fact living ‘in steady cohabitation’, their relationships ‘outwardly indistinguishable from that of married couples’.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, her findings confirmed that on being seen antenatally by an almoner a mother’s attitude toward her baby and the future ‘depended partly on her living conditions and partly on her relationship with the father’.<sup>5</sup> However, when Thompson referred to ‘living conditions’, she was not only referring in economic terms to a residence where the child could be accommodated, but to a home in which the child would be accepted and cared for, and in this aspect her study returned interesting results. Thompson found that a woman’s decision to have her baby adopted strongly correlated to her class position which she categorised according to occupation. She recorded that ‘the demand for adoption (in Aberdeen) fell steadily from 50% among professional and clerical workers to only 19% among fish workers’, this industry being one of the biggest employers of unskilled labour in eastern Scotland at that time.<sup>6</sup> Many working class women not only wished to keep their babies in the face of moral criticism but also felt they could adequately provide for them, a factor aided no doubt by the related finding that ‘in general the proportion of fathers accepting responsibility was higher in the unskilled groups, in which eventual marriage to the father seemed to be commoner’.<sup>7</sup> As Thompson rightly recognised in her conclusion, the higher incidence of illegitimacy in the working classes was in part a difference in ‘styles of living and standards of value’, not simply sexual irresponsibility as was frequently assumed.<sup>8</sup> Thompson’s study suggests that not only was it more common practice for working class women to cohabit or marry after the birth than it was for their higher classed peers, but that for those women who were alone a more accepting family support network was readily

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<sup>4</sup> Thompson, B. ‘Social study of illegitimate maternities’, p.85.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p.81.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p.81.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p.80.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p.87.

available. Her investigation indicates that although material concerns impacted upon the decisions of many women to have their babies adopted, for those of the professional classes it was more a matter of protecting social and sexual respectability. Such a notion is supported by Thompson's observation that 'rather than acknowledge violation of the conventions of their social milieu, a few couples in the professions who were engaged and planned to marry later demanded adoption so that they could have "a proper wedding at the right time"'.<sup>9</sup>

The idea that some unmarried mothers from working-class backgrounds were more easily accepted and absorbed into the wider family circle and community is reflected and supported in other sources of the period concerned with different regions of the country. Madeline Kerr, for example, in her observations of a poor working-class community in Liverpool in 1958 recorded that 'the attitude to illegitimacy in this group is very different from the English middle-class one. So far as we can see little shame or guilt is felt. Parents do not turn the girl out and generally accept the baby as another member of the family'.<sup>10</sup> Although Kerr's recollections should certainly not be regarded as typical and in all probability she was not party to any difficulties or negotiations which may have surrounded a family's acceptance, her work is further evidence that some working class mothers of illegitimate babies could expect an increased chance of support. In a rare autobiography of a working class woman caring for an illegitimate son in the post-war period *Mary after the Queen* (1985), Mary Hewins also records the generous aid of her parents and siblings with whom she and her son had continued to live after his birth.<sup>11</sup> Hewins recalls the moment in the family's tiny kitchen when her mother had guessed that she was pregnant: 'our mother was a remarkable person . . . she didn't carry on at me, she didn't fuss. She went on peeling

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p.82.

<sup>10</sup> Kerr, M. *The People of Ship Street* (London and New York, 1958), p.86.

<sup>11</sup> Hewins, M. *Mary After the Queen* (Oxford, 1985).



the apples. All she said was: “You’d better tell im,” in reference to the child’s father.<sup>12</sup> On deciding independently with no pressure from her parents that she would have the baby adopted immediately after the birth, Hewins subsequently refused to look on or care for her son once he arrived, remembering after his arrival that she had just ‘wanted to die’.<sup>13</sup> However, when the baby did not take to bottle feeding and threatened to fall ill, it was her mother who encouraged Mary to take responsibility and try breast feeding him. Once Mary began to care for her son she immediately bonded with him and could not go through with the adoption, perhaps as her mother had already assumed that she would not, once she began to look after him. Similarly, it was her mother who had encouraged her to take the father to court, in an effort to gain an Affiliation Order. She argued that it would secure a level of respectability and provide her daughter with some financial support, telling her “you should ave *something*”.<sup>14</sup> Mary remembers with affection the supportive cocoon her family provided during those early months with her son, a vulnerable time when she was afraid to face the reactions of the larger community. This family network not only materially provided for Mary and her baby, but they ensured that she was given valuable time to make important long-term decisions about her future and that of her baby – decisions that she would not later come to regret.

A more detailed insight into the kinds of family structures unmarried working-class mothers were living in can be found in the testimonies collected by the sociologist discussed in the previous chapter, Dennis Marsden.<sup>15</sup> Marsden was especially interested in the financial practicalities of living in a ‘fatherless family’ and as such his records contain information on

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p.59.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p.68.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p.72.

<sup>15</sup> Marsden, D. *Mothers Alone: Poverty and the Fatherless Family, 1955-1966* [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor]. February 2005. SN: 5072.

contributing and non-contributing family members involved in the day to day existence of the mothers and their children. Alongside this useful information the accounts also (in varying amounts of detail) touch upon the women's decisions to reject the option of adoption, and in some instances the reaction to and involvement of parents and putative fathers in their pregnancies and decisions. As such this contemporary sociological survey is once again a valuable historical source.

The majority of the unmarried mothers that Marsden interviewed can be categorised into two specific groups, those that lived alone with their children and those who lived in shared households with additional family members. Significantly, many of the women who lived alone were still in regular contact with other family members and often in receipt of some kind of aid from them. For example, one interviewee from the north of England who lived alone with her three children, not only spent much of her time with her married sister, but received daily bags of coal from her and regular loans of money when she required it. Her other siblings also visited the family on a weekly basis.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the three sisters of the family including the interviewee would provide childcare for one another should the need arise. The image presented by this account was of a close and caring family in which the unmarried status of one of its members was of little consequence. Whether the knowledge of unconditional assistance from her siblings had any bearing upon the interviewee's decision to keep her children was unclear, but for this mother adoption had never been an option, a decision over which the children's fathers seemingly had little influence: 'it's me what has them and it's me what should bring them up'.<sup>17</sup> This assertion of sole responsibility and independence was once again repeated when the subject of marriage arose in the interview,

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Wigmore\_HU9.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Wigmore\_HU9.

when with regards to her youngest child's father she responded, 'no, I wouldn't get married now, not even if he asked me. . . They're all the same these men. I've brought the kids up so far and I think I can bring them up the rest of the way myself'.<sup>18</sup> Despite her rejection of marriage, however, this mother did not presume that she would also remain celibate; she informed her interviewer that she intended to demand a prescription for the contraceptive pill from her local Family Planning Clinic once her current pregnancy was over.

Unlike this mother who greatly depended on the assistance of her family and reciprocated where she could, another interviewee was hindered from approaching hers for aid by feelings of self-respect. This mother was recorded as knowing 'that her family would send money if she wants' from occasional past experiences, yet she refused to ask anymore because it was like admitting she was incapable of surviving on her own: 'I don't like them to see that I've sunk that low'.<sup>19</sup> She freely admitted to Marsden the level of poverty she and her son lived in (for example, meat and bottled milk were a rare luxury), but she hid this state of affairs from her family from whom she would only accept gifts of children's clothes for the boy. She was only able to proceed in this way because she had moved away from her native county, and thus her family, when her son was still an infant. Perhaps for this mother a life of self-dependence and thus self-respect was only possible if she resisted the well meaning efforts of assistance her family offered. Although she struggled to live on the small amount of National Assistance she received, she did not however appear to be particularly unhappy. This in part is evidenced by the way in which she conducted her interview, described by Marsden as with an 'impish sense of humour'.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, she seemed to gain much satisfaction from her relationship with a married yet separated soldier, who visited the small

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Wigmore\_HU9.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Rawson\_CU14.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Rawson\_CU14.

family on a daily basis and whom the child knew as ‘daddy’.<sup>21</sup> Significantly, although she envisaged that he would soon be divorced and in a position to marry her and she was currently pregnant with his child, she still would not allow him to live with her. Even though the relationship appeared to be committed and long-term, this mother would not risk losing her only income from the N.A.B. until her fiancé was required by marriage and the law to provide for her: ‘Oh no, I couldn’t live with him could I . . . they’d stop your money’.<sup>22</sup> It was not her concern for rules of respectability which informed her decision to live alone, but the fear that should her engagement prove fruitless or the man unreliable she would be unable to maintain her small family, which was her first priority.

Complete dedication to their children and their welfare is a theme which runs consistently through Marsden’s interviews with these unmarried mothers and is dramatically evidenced in one interview. In this instance a mother had battled against repeated homelessness, poverty and severe depression before she had finally attained a home and a sense of stability for her family. From the birth of her second child this mother had lived temporarily at various charitable homes between Colchester and London before the Council had eventually provided her and the family with a house two and a half years later. She told her interviewer that her love for her children was her sole motivation during those extremely hard years, explaining ‘I used to cling to them because without something like that life wasn’t worth living’.<sup>23</sup> Despite the severe material difficulties posed by her situation, this mother had refused to hand over her children to the authorities, firmly believing that through perseverance and hard work she could forge a better life for them than that which they could expect in state care; she did not want her children to repeat the experiences of her own

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Rawson\_CU14.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Rawson\_CU14.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Osgood\_CU12.

childhood. This mother had spent the majority of her youth in an orphanage during the interwar years because her own unmarried mother could not afford to keep her. This fact could be seen by some to support the beliefs of psychologists like Bowlby, that ‘broken homes’ were self-perpetuating, yet her actions and attitude firmly contradicted this theory. Alongside her committed love for her children, this individual also felt that it was her social duty and responsibility to care for them, indicating to her interviewer that she knew she had contravened moral and social codes and had tried to make amends:

As I look at it, I’ve done wrong, but I’ve paid my debts to society by sticking to my children, through thick and thin, and there’s not so many people who’ve had as hard a life as what I’ve had. I’ve paid for my mistakes, but something will turn up as I get older, and I’ll be able to see something for all the hard work I’ve put in.<sup>24</sup>

God pays past debts without money, and I’ve got a clear conscious [sic].<sup>25</sup>

This mother along with others in the group recognised that her illegitimate pregnancies contradicted the norm, yet she resolved that as she had performed her duties as a parent well and produced good, stable children their unconventional births were irrelevant. This notion that success as a parent absolved a mother’s past sexual ‘indiscretions’ threads through many of the testimonies, and although it is often accompanied with a sense of pride it also indicates that these women began their role as mothers with a certain amount of guilt and the need to atone. Such an interpretation would suggest that despite the subversive nature of families headed by unmarried mothers, many were motivated by a need to appease social anxiety and

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Osgood\_CU12.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Osgood\_CU12.

disruption rather than by any sense of empowerment afforded by their single, independent status. Additionally, this evidence of guilt refutes any notion that these women were becoming pregnant intentionally.

One mother in particular appeared to have gained a considerable amount of self-justification from the affirmation she received from others regarding her mothering skills, a point which is duly recognised by her interviewer who recorded that her entire conversation was punctuated by ‘remarks about what the boys had said to her about what a good mother she was, or what her mother had said about how well she looked after the children’.<sup>26</sup> Marsden himself confirmed her success with what appeared more than a little surprise, surprise generated perhaps as a consequence of his initial prejudiced evaluation of her as ‘a little slow-witted’ with ‘a slightly mongol face’.<sup>27</sup> He recorded that ‘the boys did indeed, from her conversation, seem to be very grateful. As they appeared from the little stories she told, they appeared to be a very loving family, and from the photographs on the sideboard they appeared splendid children’.<sup>28</sup> Marsden met the youngest child of the family for himself and observed that she was ‘a fine healthy young girl’.<sup>29</sup> This interviewee seemed to consider her own mother’s positive assessment of her abilities as a parent to be of particular importance, a need generated perhaps from her mother’s initial reaction of horror and shame to the news of her daughter’s first illegitimate pregnancy: ‘she went frantic, she went mad. She said “What will the neighbours say. I’m not taking you to the hospital, you can go by yourself”. What! I haven’t heard the last of it to this day. When we have a row now, she throws it up at me’.<sup>30</sup> However, despite this initial reaction and occasional moments of tension since, widowed

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Brook\_HU3.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Brook\_HU3.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Brook\_HU3.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Brook\_HU3.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, interview no: Brook\_HU3.

mother and daughter overcame their problems enough to be able to live and run a home together; the mother worked part time and the daughter looked after the house and children, they both shared the household expenses. Their relationship was mutually beneficial both on practical and emotional levels; they could pool their minimal resources and achieve a better standard of living whilst providing each other with company – a rare and valuable commodity it would seem when money for social pursuits was largely unavailable as many of the accounts highlight. In Marsden's sample of unmarried mothers, those that did not live alone invariably lived with their widowed mothers, a fact which suggests perhaps that for those on low incomes material issues generally prioritised over those of morality and respectability.

As Barbara Thompson highlighted in her research, post-war unmarried motherhood was certainly not an experience of the lower classes alone – 'women of all civil states and parties are involved' - yet the circumstances behind and the outcome of an illegitimate pregnancy could often be very different depending upon the class position of the mother.<sup>31</sup> This was a fact supported in itself by a significant lack of records reflecting the experiences of women from the middle and upper classes, a result perhaps of greater access to the means of abortion and an increased ability for, and tendency toward secrecy. There were, of course, a number of women from every class whose pregnancies similarly resulted in either abortion or adoption, yet the sources considered here suggest that proportionally working class mothers were more likely to keep their illegitimate children. The sources suggest that although unmarried pregnant working class women were certainly not always exempt from familial or social censure, they did stand a greater chance of support both materially and emotionally. This difference in the experience of unmarried motherhood was not generated

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<sup>31</sup> Thompson, B. 'Social study of illegitimate maternities' *British Journal of Preventive and Social Medicine*, 10:2, (1956), p.87.

from lower class moral laxity, but a divergence in moral and sexual values and practises - a difference which allowed some women greater opportunities to create alternative family units.

### **Placating Performances of the Family Ideal**

While there is evidence of post-war women resigned to or even happy in the overtly subversive position of unmarried mother, there are also instances and representations of women who, whilst not openly challenging gendered norms in this way, purposely circumvented and/or appropriated them nonetheless. These were women who created alternative family units from within the family ideal itself; they placated society's need for convention whilst simultaneously pursuing their own independent and sometimes unconventional desires. Such women disrupted the post-war categories of wife and unmarried mother by blurring and merging the boundaries of both.

The contemporary film *Georgy Girl* (1964), categorised by some as a 'New Wave' production, is particularly interesting for its exploration of the inconsistencies which characterised imaginings of post-war femininities.<sup>32</sup> The film utilises the triangular relationship of three very different friends living in a London flat to tease out and expose not only the futility and fallacy of strict social adherence to gendered assumptions but the potential harm that they can inflict upon the individual. In a similar way to Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1959), this film demonstrates that more conventional family units are not always the most successful, yet in contrast to the earlier play the heroine of the film secures her future happiness and that of her child by ultimately appropriating and performing the very

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<sup>32</sup> Narizzano, S. (dir.) *Georgy Girl* (UK, 1964).



norms which threatened them in the first place.<sup>33</sup> The validity of dominant preconceptions regarding femininity, maternalism, unmarried mothers and marriage are further challenged by the fact that the unmarried Georgy is not the biological mother of the child she has loved and cared for from birth.

The film's narrative conveys the artificiality of the dichotomous feminine stereotypes constructed around the figures of 'wife/mother' and the 'unmarried mother' through the oppositional characters of Georgy and Meredith (Lynn Redgrave and Charlotte Rampling). Meredith is the expectant wife of Joss and should be the figure of convention, yet her dislike, even hatred, of her pregnancy and the restrictions it places upon her social life align her with the stereotype of the morally loose, uncaring and un-maternal unmarried mother: 'I'll tell you what this little episode has taught me, it's taught me what it feels like to look like the back end of a bus and sit around every night with nothing to do'. Georgy, in contrast, is extremely diligent in her preparations for the new arrival; she ensures that all the necessary equipment is bought and she is eager to understand every aspect of the developing pregnancy and the imminent birth. Once the baby is born it is Georgy not Meredith who immediately bonds and falls in love with the child; Meredith wants nothing to do with her daughter and leaves her husband, baby and convention behind as soon as she leaves the hospital: 'It's hideous, I hate it, it gave me hell . . . I want it adopted now.' Her friend and flat mate is more than happy to take on the care of the child and while Jos (Alan Bates) is living with them (he has realised it is Georgy he really loves), the authorities are happy for her to continue. However, when Jos realises that Georgy is fully committed to the baby, a responsibility that he, like his estranged wife, finds too much, he leaves and she is left alone but content in the role of unmarried mother. Despite Georgy's proficiency and dedication to her adopted daughter, the authorities

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<sup>33</sup> Delaney, S. *A Taste of Honey* (London, 1988 [1959]).

are dismissive of their bond and relationship and threaten to take the baby into state care; the fact remains that she is not biologically related to the child nor being unmarried is she a suitable candidate for legal adoption. As previous chapters have highlighted, great emphasis was placed upon infants and children receiving committed, full-time mother love, yet there were stipulations - the mother must be married. This factor, as Georgy herself realises, is more important than her lack of a blood relationship to the child, and in order to ensure their future she seeks to fulfil this demand. Georgy invites her parent's employer and long term admirer the wealthy Mr. James (James Mason), to propose to her and when he does she accepts. This much older man had shown an attraction to Georgy long before but until now she had always resisted his advances. In the final scenes of the film the pair look very content on their wedding day, however, when the bride ensures that her daughter accompany them in the bridal car it becomes apparent that their happiness exists for different reasons. For James, his fight for Georgy is now finally over, despite evidence of a gradual realisation that it is not on the terms he had first imagined, a realisation betrayed by his final facial expressions as the newly-weds leave the church. For Georgy the marriage is 'a means to an end', a way in which convention might be appeased and her unconventional family allowed to continue. Georgy obviously considers a marriage of convenience a small price to pay for the familial security she receives in return. The portrayal of this character's negotiation of the gendered norms that governed post-war family models may not initially be construed as subversive, as Georgy does eventually fulfil all social requirements and in doing so it could be argued the film does too. Maroula Joannou, for instance, has argued (with regard to the original novel) that it ultimately 'ends with reluctant concessions to respectability'.<sup>34</sup> Yet, Georgy's conscious appropriation of the cultural values and norms which would govern and structure her future demonstrates a clear willingness to challenge those edicts with which she was

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<sup>34</sup> Joannou, M. *Contemporary Women's Writing: From 'The Golden Notebook' to 'The Colour Purple'* (Manchester, 2000) p.52.

dissatisfied. The film illustrates the potential for women to negotiate a position which satisfied both themselves and society; they need not always outrage convention to attain what they wished or for their actions to be considered subversive. Conveniently for Georgy, her desire for motherhood even with a child not her own, was a wish feminine norms could easily accommodate and this was something she certainly used to her own advantage in the creation of an alternative family unit.

One of the most innovative texts to explore the inconsistencies in and tension between simplified categories of single feminine identity and lived experience in the post-war era as well as dichotomised notions of subversion and acquiescence is Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986).<sup>35</sup> This study, as Steedman highlights, 'is about lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretive devices of the culture don't quite work'.<sup>36</sup> Utilising her own recollections of being a child in the 1950s and particularly her memories of her mother, Steedman effectively challenges the myths surrounding post-war femininity and images of unmarried motherhood by illustrating the ways in which her mother, unmarried to Steedman's father and eventually estranged from him, was able to re-articulate and negotiate certain discourses to suit her own purpose. She shows how her mother, unable to identify with the images of working-class femininity on offer, aspired to exploit the new opportunities presented by consumption and the established idealism of motherhood in order that she might create for herself an alternative identity. The woman depicted within this text bears little resemblance to the domesticated, maternal, unambitious post-war woman of popular myth or to the disrespectable, overtly sexual image of the unmarried mother. This is a woman who shrewdly comprehends (consciously or not)

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<sup>35</sup> Steedman, C. *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London, 1996 [1986]).

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, p.5.

the basic mechanisms of post-war ideology and is willing to exploit what she has in order to attain a secure future for herself.

Rather than becoming pregnant as a consequence of neurosis, ignorance, accident or loose morals, as contemporary critics may have speculated, Steedman considers her conception an intentional and calculated act on her mother's part. When Steedman's parents met, her father was already married and had a daughter and therefore her mother was in effect the 'other woman'. Steedman's father eventually left his wife and the two set up home together in a different town. To the critical gaze of the unknowing outside world, Steedman's mother appeared to be fulfilling all post-war gender norms, *especially* once her two children were born, despite the fact that she actually remained unmarried.

Steedman considers her mother's actions alongside Gayle Rubin's argument in *The Traffic of Women* (1975) in which patriarchal notions of women's historical exchange and disposal by men are critiqued.<sup>37</sup> Steedman argues, in line with Rubin's stance, that her mother was not a disempowered object but an active agent able to draw upon social norms and exchange herself, her labour and her potential ability to bear children, in order to secure a future for herself. The notion that Steedman's mother became pregnant for reasons other than maternal desire are further evidenced by her seemingly 'un-maternal' feelings toward her children; her daughters are viewed as a commodity - something like the desired 'new look' coat she covets - items which she believed could guarantee her a certain identity and position in the world:

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<sup>37</sup> Rubin, G. 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex' in Reiter, R. (ed.) *Towards an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp.157-210.

What we learned now, in the early 1960s, through the magazines and anecdotes she brought home, was how the goods of that world of privilege might be appropriated, with the cut and fall of a skirt, a good winter coat, with leather shoes, a certain voice, but above all with clothes.<sup>38</sup>

Nancy Miller has argued that Steedman's account of her affectionless mother 'emphasizes the kind of revolt that occurs within motherhood in a culture where "either socially or physiologically" women could not bodily refuse to bear children, and that 'this is how she [Steedman] understands her mother's performance'.<sup>39</sup> Yet, this interpretation is too simplistic; it overlooks the motives behind Steedman's conception. Steedman's account clearly demonstrates that her mother chose to have children because she thought it would give her a social and cultural advantage; she believed at the time it would improve her status.

Steedman's work highlights that there are certain forms of femininity which have been overlooked by feminism. Her mother's identity as a white, northern, working-class, unmarried mother is neither radical nor particularly deferential, and it does not conform to any previously identified critical or contemporary model/category. As a consequence, her work urges feminist scholars to re-evaluate approaches which divide femininities into the radical or the conservative and to consider the contradictions and ambiguities surrounding the formation of feminine identity. Such an approach challenges notions like Judith Butler's concept of the 'exclusionary matrix', the idea that we are always defined by that which we are not, and it questions the notion that there is a definitive boundary between what Butler

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.38.

<sup>39</sup> Miller, N. 'Mothers, daughters, and autobiography: Maternal legacies and cultural criticism' in Fineman, M. A. And Karpin, I. (eds.) *Mothers in Law: Feminist Theory and the Regulation of Motherhood* (New York and Chichester, 1995), p.8.

terms ‘legitimized subjects’ and ‘abject beings’, that is, those who do not enjoy the status of a subject, yet are necessary to circumscribe the domain of the subject.<sup>40</sup> As Steedman’s recollections of her mother illustrate, there existed a contemporary awareness (conscious or unconscious) of the fluidity of feminine identity; women could at times occupy the position of both ‘legitimized subject’ and ‘abject being’ simultaneously. So, it would seem that if we are to fully comprehend the complexities of feminine identity construction and experience of the unmarried mother, and indeed single woman in general, we must not approach our sources with oppositional notions of conformity and subversion, empowerment and disempowerment, but explore the great many grey areas and permutations that they are likely to present.

**Unmarried motherhood, an alternative route to feminine independence and self-awareness? Literary representations of unmarried motherhood in Lynne Reid-Banks’ *The L-shaped Room* (1960) and Margaret Drabble’s *The Millstone* (1965)**

The previous section considered how preconceived notions of unmarried motherhood in the long 1950s could limit and impede our understanding of the subject and the women involved. This is a concern not limited to those researching this area from the present, it would seem, but also an issue recognised and explored by certain writers of fiction and film at the time. For example, in Sylvia Rayman’s play and later film adaptation *Women of Twilight* (1952) and the play *A Taste of Honey* (1959), as already discussed, many of the prejudices surrounding unmarried motherhood are critiqued and sympathy for the plight of these women displayed.<sup>41</sup> The novels by Drabble and Reid-Banks selected here, share many of these traits;

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<sup>40</sup> Butler, J. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York, 1999).

<sup>41</sup> Rayman, S. *Women of Twilight* (London, 1952); Parry, G. (dir.) *Women of Twilight* (UK, 1952); Delaney, S. *A Taste of Honey* (London, 1988 [1959]).

their representations successfully challenging the uncompromising, stereotypical images of unmarried motherhood popular at the time. However, unlike the other examples, they develop their critiques by also challenging the uniformity of portrayals which depict the experience of unmarried motherhood as consistently negative and life-destroying. An interesting theme shared and explored by these two post-war novels is the idea of a comprehensive *feminine* independence, an independence engendered through the positive experience of unmarried motherhood.

Unlike masculine understandings of independence, that emphasise only notions of autonomy, ambition and reason, the portrayals of feminine independence in *The Millstone* and *The L-shaped Room* also integrate ideas of fulfilment found in sexuality, love and self-awareness. The texts are not suggesting that unmarried motherhood is the only way to attain true feminine independence, since this would contradict the very essence of the idea being presented, but they use the event of unplanned pregnancy as an experience which generates journeys of self-evaluation that the two heroines may not otherwise have had. As the subject of illegitimate birth was such an emotive, controversial topic during the post-war period and its effects on lives so dramatic, it challenged both the characters and the reader to consider implications of gender and class which were (and are) often unquestioningly accepted as truth. The novels explore the ways in which unmarried pregnancy enabled their heroines to envision an alternative way of being and seeing – an alternative femininity – and for this reason they play an important part in understanding the complex and diverse contemporary perceptions and imaginings of unmarried motherhood. They prove that reproduction outside the boundaries of marriage was not always depicted as a negative event in the post-war years.

In addition, as Maroula Joannou has pointed out, these novels also carried out a further important function. She emphasises that ‘for much of literary history the story of the unmarried mother has been conjoined with the romance plot . . . a love child in literature has very often been quite literally that.’<sup>42</sup> However, these novels resist that format and, therefore, not only defy post-war constructions of unmarried motherhood but ‘the conventions of the novel as well’.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the concluding chapters of these novels do not present a reunion of the child’s parents or any promise of marriage, thus, rejecting the traditional happy ending. Instead, reader satisfaction is gained from the depiction of two unmarried women content in their role as mothers, individuals greatly strengthened by their journeys of self-development and self-awareness.

Before the texts’ representations of unmarried motherhood and the changes it engendered in the characters are explored, it is first significant to consider the lives and positions of the heroines, Rosamund and Jane, before they discover they are pregnant and their attitudes and circumstances begin to change. This is interesting because both women are living what might be considered in the conventional sense quite independent lives, especially by the standard of the times in which a woman’s working life and single status were generally considered temporary before the real ‘dependent’ occupation of wife and mother began. Yet within these texts the women are committed to and enjoy the challenges of their chosen careers, neither appears to have any intention of settling down to a family life or a husband. Drabble’s heroine Rosamund, who had quite an unconventional if privileged childhood, is planning to pursue a career in academia following the completion of her thesis on sixteenth-century poets. She lives alone in her parents’ well-located London flat while they work

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<sup>42</sup> Joannou, M. *Contemporary Women’s Writing: From ‘The Golden Notebook’ to ‘The Colour Purple’* (Manchester, 2000), p.57.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, p.57.



abroad and socialises regularly with a rather bohemian set of friends. She appears the epitome of independence and admits 'I believed dependence to be a fatal sin'.<sup>44</sup> Jane, of *The L-Shaped Room* similarly presents herself as self-reliant and ambitious during the years leading up to her pregnancy.<sup>45</sup> She had spent the first years of her adult life working with a travelling theatre group and pursuing an acting career, when this had been unsuccessful she had begrudgingly attended secretarial school. To her surprise this had led to a well-paid and much enjoyed job at a top London hotel as assistant to the public relations officer. Although Jane lives in the family home with her widowed father, she appears largely unconstrained and unbothered by the limitations placed upon feminine behaviour at the time, evidenced for example by her self-funded trip alone to southern France in the pursuit of a love affair.

However, despite this comparative autonomy both women are seemingly uneducated in, or at least naive about the details of reproduction, becoming pregnant after their first sexual experiences. This ignorance, together with the relative freedom they have so far enjoyed, helps to explain their initial reactions to the knowledge of their pregnancies. Jane's attitude is the more conventional of the two. She is initially frightened and worried about the reactions of other people to the news and also anxious about the practicalities of having a baby on her own.<sup>46</sup> She also feels (not consciously at first) ashamed and guilty at the situation her actions have precipitated and begins to identify herself as a member of a sub-class group – a group of individuals deemed socially deviant who help to circumscribe the boundaries of respectable society with their exile from it. This is evidenced by the literal removal of herself from the middle-class home, people and area where she had lived to the shabby L-shaped room in a derelict and insalubrious area of the city. The other residents of the house she

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<sup>44</sup> Drabble, M. *The Millstone* (Harmondsworth, 1969 [1965]), p.9.

<sup>45</sup> Reid-Banks, L. *The L-Shaped Room* (London, 1960).

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, p.96.

shares also occupy marginalised positions within society whether through race, religion or sexuality and similarly emphasise Jane's perceived fall from grace. Joannou argues that this 'house has been specifically chosen to safeguard her anonymity', but I would argue that there was an additional reason.<sup>47</sup> Jane vaguely recognises that notions of economy were not the only reasons behind her choice of destination, yet initially anger and bitterness at her father and the pregnancy obscure the knowledge that she is punishing herself.<sup>48</sup> Joannou emphasises that 'the division of women into madonnas and magdalens' is one that Jane has internalised.<sup>49</sup> Despite her obvious middle-class notions of respectability she still accepts the room after learning that prostitutes occupy the basement flat, because as a consequence of those same sensibilities she now believes herself a 'fallen woman':

I was curious, in a remote sort of way, about the prostitutes. I'd never met one; I'd never wanted to. They'd seemed like strange animals from another part of the forest with whom I had nothing in common. Now since my own father evidently considered me one, I had to think again. After all, they were people. It might be rather interesting to talk to one.<sup>50</sup>

A factor which contributes to this image of herself is the nature of the affair which resulted in her pregnancy. In the first weeks she was unwilling to recall the memory of her only sexual experience, as she felt the thoughts 'could only make me more unhappy and ashamed'.<sup>51</sup> She feels guilty that a child has occurred from an act with a man that she had neither enjoyed nor really wanted, although she had gone to great lengths to precipitate the occasion. She finally admits to herself with some difficulty that her decision to have an affair

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<sup>47</sup> Joannou, M. *Contemporary Women's Writing*, p.58.

<sup>48</sup> Reid-Banks, L. *The L-Shaped Room*, p.25.

<sup>49</sup> Joannou, M. *Contemporary Women's Writing*, p.58.

<sup>50</sup> Reid-Banks, L. *The L-Shaped Room*, p.8.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, p.155.

with Terry was a mistake because it was not based on love or desire but self-illusion (that she was in love) and selfishness. She appears to believe that if her illegitimate pregnancy had been the consequence of a real love affair it would have been more acceptable: 'there were quite definitely no mitigating circumstances. I was not in love with Terry, never had been; I went after him, deliberately, because I was ripe for an affair'.<sup>52</sup> Yet, parallel to Jane's shame there is also some resentment and she feels that the price for her mistake is disproportionate: 'One little mistake! What horrible injustice, to impose a life sentence for that'.<sup>53</sup> She also feels that it is wrong she should have to pay alone, initially bitter that 'he'd got away scot-free'.<sup>54</sup>

However, despite this negative reaction to the pregnancy and her early description of impending motherhood as a 'huge frightening vista' generating unadulterated 'misery', she does not initially consider abortion a viable solution, even when the respectable doctor she visits offers her the opportunity.<sup>55</sup> She is alarmed by his assumption that this is what she wants and he in turn is surprised by her decision to go through with the pregnancy. She tells him, 'I wouldn't have chosen to have one this way. But if it's happened, yes, I want it. Anything's better than your cheating way out'.<sup>56</sup> Significantly, the theme of parental and social responsibility is repeated often within the interviews conducted by Dennis Marsden and was it would seem an important factor in a mother's decision to keep her illegitimate child at this time. Jane similarly appeared to believe that having the baby despite the stigma and probable hardship was the correct and dutiful action to take, although there is a brief instance when she does reconsider abortion after questioning the morality of both options

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, p.155.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid*, p.156.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid*, p.155.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, p.36.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*, p.35.

open to her. However, following the threat of an early miscarriage she realised how important the baby was to her and from that point there was no question in her mind that she would keep it.

In *The Millstone* Rosamund's feelings toward her situation, it could be argued, are much more complex than Jane's. The pregnancy not only poses a challenge to her way of life but to her very identity and the way she sees herself. Perhaps initiated by the feminist left-wing teachings of her parents, Rosamund has come to quietly despise any form of dependence which, alongside ideas of physicality and the body, she associates with inferiority, women and the feminine. The effects of this way of thinking have kept Rosamund from forming any kind of intimate or sexual relationship; she could neither take from nor give to another person as this would have contravened the strict rationality and independence of the persona she wished to embody. Susan Spitzer rightly emphasises that 'Rosamund fears intimacy because she fears needing'.<sup>57</sup> To develop intense feelings for someone Rosamund risked becoming dependent upon them, a state which she could neither accept nor accommodate. Only on one occasion with George, the father of her baby, was she able to justify and accept the intimacy of intercourse and this, it would seem, was largely because she believed him to be homosexual: 'Knowing that he was queer, I was not frightened of him at all, because I thought that he would expect no more of me'.<sup>58</sup> Marion Vlastos has argued that 'fear of sex is an ancient – and a modern – female problem' but in this case she maintains that Rosamund is 'not so much afraid of sexual intimacy as indifferent to it, above the need

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<sup>57</sup> Spitzer, S. 'Fantasy and Femaleness in Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone*' *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 11:3 (Spring, 1978), p.231.

<sup>58</sup> Drabble, M. *The Millstone*, p.29.

for intense physical contact with an adult'.<sup>59</sup> However, such a reading ignores Rosamund's own sadness at the situation: 'my virtuous reluctance made me very miserable . . . I enjoyed being in love and being kissed on the doorstep . . . I hated being alone'.<sup>60</sup> Rosamund is certainly fearful of the sexual act both physically and emotionally because it symbolises submission for her in every respect, she accepts the sacrifice of being alone but is clearly not indifferent to it. She is comfortable with a brief sexual affair with George for the very reason that his effeminacy and sexuality do not challenge her fiercely protected autonomy or remind her of her own womanhood. He is not overtly masculine like the characters of Joe and Roger and neither (she assumes) will he desire a long-term relationship. George provides the perfect solution to the conundrum created by her limiting perception of independence.

Considering Rosamund's attitude toward intimacy, independence and femininity, it is therefore predictable that her reaction to the pregnancy would be one of fear and shock. Initially, her only thought is that the pregnancy must be terminated, yet when her first attempt is unsuccessful her commitment to the decision immediately diffuses and she pursues this option no longer. The reasons behind her change in attitude are ambiguous. It is certainly not motivated by any sudden desire to keep the baby, yet neither does it appear to be a simple inability to decide, as Vlastos implies.<sup>61</sup> A more convincing interpretation is that Rosamund gradually accepts (not without some difficulty) the results of her actions and decides to take responsibility for the pregnancy which has occurred, a reading supported by her eventual forced pragmatic attitude to the pregnancy and the imminent birth. This reading is further validated by her reaction to her sister Beatrice's emotive letter of pessimism and concern, a

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<sup>59</sup> Vlastos, M. L. 'Fate and Feminism in the Novels of Margaret Drabble' *Contemporary Literature*, 16:2 (Spring 1975), pp.180-181.

<sup>60</sup> Drabble, M. *The Millstone*, p.18.

<sup>61</sup> Vlastos, M. L. 'Fate and Feminism' p.181.

significant moment when Rosamund fully realises the depth of her determination to keep the baby:

The determination at this stage cannot have been based, as it later was, on love, for I felt no love and little hope of feeling it: It was based on an extraordinary confidence in myself, in a conviction, quite irrational, that no adoptive parents could ever be as excellent as I myself would be . . . Whatever Beatrice said, I would have felt it a cowardly betrayal to abandon it to the unknown, well meaning ignorance of anyone else in Britain.<sup>62</sup>

Similarly to Jane in the earlier novel and the mothers of Marsden's research, Rosamund feels that it is her duty to care for the child that she has helped to create. However, despite her decision to reject abortion or adoption, her acceptance of impending motherhood was at no time complete or straightforward. She oscillated between feelings of anger, disgust and often extreme anxiety, generated through her fear of losing control and her independence.

Following a conversation with her friend Joe about the pregnancy, she states: 'I suddenly felt quite overcome with weakness and misery. At that moment I could not envisage any kind of future at all, and the complete lack of any sense of control or direction scared and alarmed me'.<sup>63</sup> These are the principle reasons behind her anxiety, yet notably at no time is the illegitimate nature of her pregnancy presented as the cause - social condemnation seemingly had little impact upon the decisions she has to make.

However, there is another issue which subdues any tendency Rosamund might have toward celebration and this centres round her image of herself; to be in a pregnant state forces

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<sup>62</sup> Drabble, M. *The Millstone*, p.79.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, p.43.

Rosamund to recognise herself as a woman and therefore as feminine. This is an identity and category she has always fought, associating it as she does with weakness, dependence and corporeality. In a rare instance after heavy drinking Rosamund articulates her bitterness toward this aspect of her maternity, whilst trying to convince herself that having a baby will be a positive experience:

My sister had babies, nice babies, and seemed to like them. My friends had babies. There was no reason why I shouldn't have one either, it would serve me right, I thought, for having been born a woman in the first place. I couldn't pretend that I wasn't a woman, could I, however much I might try from day to day to avoid the issue? I might as well pay, mightn't I, if other people had to pay?<sup>64</sup>

Rosamund's estrangement from post-war femininity and therefore the ideal of motherhood is clearly represented in her portrayal of mothers or other pregnant women. These figures are depicted, as Spitzer emphasises, as 'bodies only, inferior mindless beings', and they represent the antithesis to intellect, reason and self-control and the identity Rosamund herself champions.<sup>65</sup> Contrary to contemporary celebratory images of the maternal state, Rosamund conceives the women she meets in the clinics and hospital as physically repellent, worn out and damaged by the processes of reproduction: 'Anaemia and exhaustion were written on most countenances: the clothes were dreadful, the legs swollen, the bodies heavy and unbalanced. There were a few cases of striking wear: a huge middle-aged woman, who could walk only with a stick, a pale thin creature with varicose veins and a two year-old boy in tow.'<sup>66</sup> This negative image of maternal femininity is not simply a product of bitterness generated by Rosamund's own illegitimate pregnancy (as she herself suggests in one

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, p.16.

<sup>65</sup> Spitzer, S. 'Fantasy and Femaleness', p.241.

<sup>66</sup> Drabble, M. *The Millstone*, p.57.

instance) but a fundamental view which persists even after her experience of extreme pleasure and love at the birth of her own child.<sup>67</sup> It could be argued that this negative view exists as a critique of the post-war patriarchal romanticisation of maternity and motherhood. Yet, it seems more likely a result of Rosamund's inherent disgust at this 'unmistakable mark of biological and social difference'.<sup>68</sup> Significantly, in contrast to the multiple, detailed and evocative images of her peers' maternity, the account of her own short labour and the birth of her daughter is vague and given little space. It is not used to further highlight the physical and generally painful reality of motherhood, which is often obscured by contemporary idealisation. Her subsequent quick recovery and her body's instant return to a pre-pregnancy state further distance her from other women in the same position. Despite her joy at the arrival of her daughter she still feels detached from and superior to those who have also shared the experience of child-birth. Unlike herself who has triumphed over the demanding physical act of giving birth unscathed, she sees the other women on the maternity ward as being physically marked by it: 'After the birth, the muscles of my belly snapped back into place without a mark, but some of the women looked as big as they had looked before. I am haunted even now by a memory of the way they walked, large and tied into shapeless dressing gowns, padding softly and stiffly, careful not to disturb the pain between their legs.'<sup>69</sup> Rosamund is proud of the fact that she has maintained her pre-pregnancy state both physically and mentally. She does not see herself as defined by maternity, unlike the other women in the hospital who she describes as 'so entirely and tediously submerged' within it.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *ibid*, p.57.

<sup>68</sup> Brannigan, J. *Orwell to the Present: Literature in England, 1945-2000* (Basingstoke and New York, 2003), p.109.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid*, p.109.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid*, p.109.



Unlike Rosamund, whose significant changes in attitude toward motherhood and herself began after the birth of her baby, Jane's process of change starts suddenly once she begins to experience the tangible movements of the child that she carries. Until this moment as she admits: 'I had accepted the idea of the baby, but only, it seemed in terms of fantasy, not reality'.<sup>71</sup> This physical knowledge of her baby's existence is a key moment in Jane's journey of self-development. It mentally shakes her from the daze that she has slipped into following the separation with her boyfriend, giving her the will and desire to begin making plans for her future alone with the baby: 'this tangible life-force drove me, literally, from within . . . the kicks and blows from my inner mentor were probably the deciding factor in my abrupt emergence from lethargy'.<sup>72</sup> Jane had initially needed a great deal of emotional support and distraction to help her cope with the enormity of her situation, which had firstly been provided by Toby and then her Aunt Addy. However, from this point she realises her own self-sufficiency both practically and emotionally. This change in attitude is not limited to her feelings toward the baby, but appears to pervade every aspect of her life and affords her an inner contentment that she has never before experienced. This is particularly evident during her surprise meeting in the final stage of her pregnancy with Terry, the father of the baby. Until this moment she had resisted thoughts of him because of his obvious association with the shame she felt at their night together. In addition to this she also had strong feelings of resentment for the way he, like any man, could escape the physical repercussions of an unplanned pregnancy. However, when she is finally confronted with Terry and the feelings that he represents, any negativity toward him quickly dissipates and she feels sorry for the anguish and guilt he is obviously suffering at her expense. The way she behaves at this meeting illustrates considerable self-growth from earlier portrayals in which she was largely presented as arrogant, petulant and immature. Jane has dealt with the shame she felt at her

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<sup>71</sup> Reid-Banks, L. *The L-Shaped Room*, p.259.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid*, p.265.

pregnancy and, therefore, is no longer inhibited by the sexual and social mores which curbed her independence and emotions.<sup>73</sup> The transformation she has undergone is clearly recognised by her old acquaintance as well as herself:

‘Terry, don’t do this to yourself. What on earth good will it do? It hasn’t been so bad. I haven’t been alone all the time. I met a boy – in this house – in fact, I made quite a lot of new friends. It’s been interesting and good for me in lots of ways.’

He was staring at me. ‘God, how you’ve changed!’

‘How?’ I asked, interested.

‘Don’t you want to – to hurt me in some way – punish me for all you’ve gone through?’

‘No. Well, only a little. If you’d come back a few months ago – but I feel different now. More peaceful about it.’<sup>74</sup>

Similarly, her view of the relationship she has with her father alters considerably once she gains the perspective and maturity that her experiences engender within her. She no longer experiences the bitterness she had felt at his perceived disappointment in her because she is no longer disappointed in herself. The insecurities and prejudices which had restricted her emotionally and socially in the past have been confronted. Jane’s illegitimate pregnancy challenged the notions of her own capabilities together with her views of the wider world and her place in it. The result of this grounding experience for Jane is a contentment and sense of independence born of a confidence in herself and an appreciation for different people based on standards of mutual respect, kindness and love, not those of fear and ‘otherness’ as before.

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<sup>73</sup> See: Brook, S. *Literature and Cultural Criticism in the 1950s: The Feeling Male Body* (Basingstoke and New York, 2007), p.119.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid*, p.275.

The rejection of her former prejudiced view – informed by middle-class notions of respectability - is exemplified in the moment when she finally realises John's homosexuality: 'I waited for a change in my affection for him, the faint revulsion I had felt for Malcolm and others like him in the past. But there was no change. I knew what I owed to John, and that he couldn't have helped me in the way he had if he had been any different.'<sup>75</sup>

Evidence of Jane's emotional and ideological epiphany can ultimately be read in her final approach to the relationship with Toby. In the beginning when they first acted upon their feelings she had clung to him and the comfort he provided, his presence shielding and distracting her from the reality of the situation. After his departure she fell into an emotional lethargy certain that she would not be able to cope without his support. She described the loss at the time as 'life without Toby became like life minus an arm'.<sup>76</sup> Yet, following the birth of her son and her new sense of self and inner strength, the urgency and perception of her need for Toby is altered. She still loves him and desires a long-term relationship, but she also realises that to embark on such a relationship without first establishing themselves as individuals would ultimately doom it to failure as it had before. The nature of her love for Toby is no longer based on need and dependence and she is happy to wait until the moment when they are both capable of a relationship based only on equality and companionship:

As our hungry need for each other diminished, and we grew stronger as individuals, we'd have more to give.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *ibid*, p.311.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid*, p.257.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid*, p.313.

I longed for the time when we could safely and unpossessively lay claim to each other. But I felt happy about him, it didn't matter too terribly that he wasn't mine yet, and might never be.<sup>78</sup>

Although Rosamund's fear and rejection of emotion and intimacy are initially challenged by the instant and all consuming love she feels for her new born daughter, it is not until her baby has to undergo a life threatening operation that she truly realises and embraces an alternative way of being. Until this moment her masculine concept of independence had trivialised and crippled her ability to articulate and therefore impress her emotions upon others. Paradoxically this had not only limited her ability to form relationships but led to an inability to seek what she wanted or demand what was rightfully hers – and so she denied herself. However, when she is told to deny her convalescing child the comfort of seeing her mother as a consequence of the hospital rules, she understands that she cannot behave as before. She will not deprive her daughter as she has herself, and so she harnesses her emotions and exerts her will in a controlled bout of crying and assertiveness to gain entry to Octavia. This is an unprecedented and significant moment in Rosamund's journey toward an alternative sense of self, an alternative femininity, and importantly it is a moment she herself recognises:

All the time I was thinking I must go on doing this until they let me see her. Inside my head it was red and black and very hot, I remember, and I remember also the clearness of my consciousness and the ferocity of my emotion, and myself enduring them, myself neither one nor the other, but enduring them and not breaking in two.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid*, p.314.

<sup>79</sup> Drabble, M. *The Millstone*, p.134.

In a less dramatic yet no less momentous occasion, Rosamund again rejects the edicts of her past behaviour when she seeks the aid of neighbours on behalf of her daughter's wellbeing. Initially once again only motivated by the need to assure Octavia's safety, Rosamund gradually realises through this engagement that her ideas regarding need and dependency are questionable. She reflects that in seeking help she was not admitting weakness or generating dependency but instead creating opportunities for kindness and friendship, a notion borne out by her neighbours' continued and indeed welcomed and reciprocated consideration thereafter. Yet, the most significant example of Rosamund's continuing personal transformation occurs during her final conversation with George. After inviting him back to her flat following a chance meeting, Rosamund momentarily reverts to her old habits of feeling and behaviour. She still has strong and confused feelings for George, yet she cannot bring herself to tell him or even discuss the possibility of a relationship, despite the fact that it may be her last chance to do so. However, ironically, in this instance her silence proves to be the correct action because when she takes the unknowing George to see his daughter she is suddenly aware that a relationship with him would be out of the question. Compared with the love she has for her child she realises her feelings for George are weak and this is now simply not enough for her. On this occasion she allows George to leave her life not through fear or indecision, but because her recent experiences have altered her perception of what she wants and what she feels is important, a journey she feels that George has yet to undertake. She is happy and fulfilled in her role as a mother and a working woman, and does not feel that a relationship with him or any man could ever provide the same satisfaction. Significantly, she herself recognised that it was as a consequence of the part of herself she had so long rejected - her womanhood - that she was able to begin the journey of self-awareness and find the contentment she had so long lacked:

Love had isolated me more securely than fear, habit, or indifference. There was one thing in the world that I knew about, and that one thing was Octavia. I had lost the taste for half-knowledge. George, I could see, knew nothing with such certainty. I neither envied nor pitied his indifference, for he was myself, the self that but for accident, but for fate, but for chance, but for womanhood, I would still have been.<sup>80</sup>

Yoshiko Enomato argues that Rosamund's experience of unmarried motherhood 'awakens her to the reality of life and leads her to maturity and true independence'.<sup>81</sup> Such a statement not only implies problematically that there exists a single generic reality for everyone, but it also concludes that her journey toward an integrated and healthy selfhood is complete. Rosamund's insistent division and categorisation between the feminine (inferior) and the masculine (superior) clearly did not cease upon the birth of her child, but the examples discussed here show that she was *gradually* becoming aware of the artifice of these constructs and the impact her perception of them was having on her life. The title of this novel could refer to Rosamund's illegitimate pregnancy, yet in this case it seems more likely that it refers to Rosamund's restricting notions of gender and related ideas of independence which continue to blight her image of other women and especially the female body.

Rosamund's millstone was self-created by her strict adherence to a masculine version of independence which trivialised and scorned the necessity of emotion and relationships in the formation of a successful identity. In a similar way, Jane in *The L-Shaped Room* was also hindered from attaining true contentment because of her own preconceived and prejudicial notions of what constituted a good and successful human being. However, the texts in which

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid*, p.172.

<sup>81</sup> Enomato, Yoshiko. 'The reality of pregnancy and motherhood for women: Tsushima Yuko's *Choji* and Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone*. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 35:2, (1998), p.117.

these protagonists appear use their respective experiences of unmarried motherhood as a grounding influence, which forces them and the reader to re-evaluate the value of the gendered and class biased ideologies they had previously internalised. The suggestion of the texts is not that success in the workplace should be replaced by success as a mother, but that contemporary notions of feminine independence and success should extend to include contentment with oneself - generated through self-awareness and rewarding, supportive, non-prejudicial relationships with others. With regard to *The L-shaped Room*, Susan Brook argues that, 'the importance of emotional honesty and authenticity' is heavily emphasised, and this could also be said of Drabble's novel. However, the narratives suggest that without the contentious event of illegitimate pregnancy destabilising their middle-class beliefs, this would never have been a possibility.<sup>82</sup> John Brannigan has argued that, the privileged social and financial status of both characters enables them 'to control and negotiate the degree to which their biological identities interfere with their aspirations towards independence'.<sup>83</sup> Yet, as this analysis demonstrates, it could be argued that it was the prejudices born of their privileged middle-class backgrounds in the first instance, which inhibited their potential for true emotional self-sufficiency and contentedness.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the representations and experiences of unmarried motherhood during the long 1950s were richly diverse and complex. Although it was an issue which impacted upon the lives of women from all racial, cultural and social backgrounds, the various potential outcomes for each individual illegitimate pregnancy depended on a multitude of different factors – not least class. The dominance of discourses which constructed the unmarried mother as mentally unstable or spiritually deviant have falsely

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<sup>82</sup> Brook, S. *Literature and Cultural Criticism in the 1950s*, p.106.

<sup>83</sup> Brannigan, J. *Orwell to the Present*, p.111.

homogenised this group of women, and hidden the existence of many successful and happy families. Although there were many women (and men) of the period who suffered intolerably for their perceived crime against respectability, as highlighted in the introduction, there were also those able to establish alternative family units for which they were immensely proud. With limited state aid and contrary to convention, some unmarried mothers headed families in which a different conception of feminine identity was possible; an identity which was defined outside the boundaries of marriage and a dependency on men. Within such families the concept of independence could form significant alternative meanings from those which it had traditionally held, an issue which was clearly recognised and explored through certain novels at the time.

In addition, this chapter has also emphasised the necessity for scholars to carefully consider the connotations of their categorisations. If one approaches the sources with the intention of locating only moments of resistance or acquiescence, then not only are the intricacies and nuances of experience and identity formation misunderstood, but those groups and individuals who cannot be so easily characterised are overlooked and left from historical record. With regard to the experiences of lone mothers in the long 1950s further analysis is vital in order that those voices submerged might be heard. Also, with further research it might be possible to ascertain the extent to which alternative femininities, possible within alternative families, impacted upon the later feminist movement at the end of the decade.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### A Single Problem: (De)Constructing the ‘Spinster’

Spinsters have always had a raw deal, whether in literature or in life. Even on the stage and in novels they are reckoned fair game. They are either shown as lovable fools like Miss Matty in *Cranford* or as sour tyrants like Miss Murdstone in *David Copperfield* or, like poor old Miss Bates, as simple bores.<sup>1</sup>

As Margery Fry recognised in the 1950s, the ‘spinster’ had always been a diverse, contested category and figure. The ambiguous and therefore potentially threatening social position occupied by the unmarried woman has troubled accepted gender norms for centuries. From the image of the ‘witch’ to the ‘old maid’ and the ‘prying town gossip’, cultural frameworks have attempted to suppress and circumvent the latent disruptive power of the ‘spinster’s’ social marginality. The cultural label ‘old maid’ has never had the dangerous life-threatening implications of the seventeenth-century’s ‘witch’, but the results of such representations are the same. By constructing cultural caricatures of unmarried women as inherently mad, bad and/or sad, society disseminates a warning to young girls and women that the independent lifestyle is undesirable and, consequently, reinforces the accepted and naturalised feminine identity of the wife and mother. Katherine Holden argues that, ‘in this way, both the difficulties and ambiguities within marriage for women, such as dependence and confinement, and the possibilities of freedom and independence a single life could represent for them are suppressed’.<sup>2</sup> The role of single women in the maintenance of the feminine ideal

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<sup>1</sup> Fry, M. *The Single Woman* (London, 1953) p.5.

<sup>2</sup> Holden, K. *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914-1960* (Manchester and New York, 2007) p.6.

is often ignored, but their negative stereotypes have historically defined the limits of normative feminine behaviour.

The spinster's social status during the long 1950s was no less provocative than it had been in previous eras. Following the disruption of total war and consequent resurgence of idealism around the family unit, her position was once again thrown into relief. The spinster's relative autonomy challenged the perceived route to national success which was heavily linked to the stability of the nuclear family and the children it produced. Unlike the 'surplus women' of the previous generation, these women could not construct their identities as victims of war - the widows of potential husbands killed on the battlefield - as the male populace in the Second World War had not suffered the same levels of decimation.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the post 1945 spinster was unable to legitimise her single status as an unfortunate consequence of events outside her control. She occupied a precarious position, her independent lifestyle and childlessness potentially leaving her open to accusations of selfishness, unnaturalness, and even deviancy. As Susan Cotts-Watkins emphasises, in an era 'when most women marry, remaining single must be justified in terms accepted as legitimate by the community'.<sup>4</sup> This was particularly pertinent when it is considered that during the post-war years 'rapidly rising marriage rates diminished the proportion of never-married men and women in the population to around one quarter, with a low point for women in 1961 showing only one in five never having married'.<sup>5</sup> However, despite perpetual contemporary emphasis upon the nuclear family and its inherent gendered roles, post-war society

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<sup>3</sup> Current statistics estimate that 703,000 were killed serving in the First World War compared with 264, 443 (inc. those missing in action) in the Second World War. Statistics were taken from; Nicholson, C. *The Longman Companion to the First World War* (Essex, 2001) p.248 and Encyclopaedia Britannica 'World War II', Encyclopaedia Britannica online: <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648813/World-War>>, accessed 28 Aug 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Cotts-Watkins, S. 'Spinsters', *Journal of Family History*, 9:4, 1984, pp. 310-325, p.313.

<sup>5</sup> Holden, K. *The Shadow of Marriage*, p.27.

increasingly generated opportunities which arguably proved advantageous to the independent woman. Ironically, the founding of the welfare state (primarily organised to support families) alongside a national production drive helped to provide the channels through which the single woman could forge a career and an arguably respectable identity.

In an effort to better understand the volatility of the single woman's position during the long 1950s and the identities available to her, therefore, this chapter will analyse the types of cultural representation being produced at that time. The chapter will explore how the ambiguity of this social position was negotiated through certain cultural texts and question how their representations might differ from those of an earlier era. In addition, it will also examine how such women might receive and negotiate these cultural preconceptions and the kinds of social space they were able to carve out for themselves within post-war society. It will argue that traditional constructions of the spinster as worthless, bitter and superfluous were being challenged, not only through cultural productions of the period, but also by the women themselves.

### **Mad, Bad and Sad or just Misunderstood? The Mid-Twentieth-Century 'Old Maid'**

One of the most enduring models of the spinster is that of the eccentric, often embittered 'old maid', a figure epitomised in the nineteenth-century by Dickens in his characterisation of the tragic Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* (1860-1861).<sup>6</sup> It was an older version of the spinster which continued to be drawn upon in the post-war period and for that reason its historical specificities require some examination. This usually harmless, if slightly mad, figure might well be considered the more benign sister of the earlier much feared 'witch'

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<sup>6</sup> Dickens, C. *Great Expectations* (Harmondsworth, 2004 [First serialised between 1860-1861]).

whose potentially subversive power had been gradually tempered over time by science, scornful pity and humour. Whilst, a single middle/upper-class woman of the nineteenth-century may have posed a challenge to the 'angel in the house' ideal, unfettered as she was by marriage, bourgeois notions of respectability had ensured that any such power would be neatly defused. Nina Auerbach has argued that this act of social subjugation was pursued primarily through the enforcement of 'inflexible prohibitions' around the spheres of work and love.<sup>7</sup> She argues that for the *respectable* Victorian 'old maid,' 'allowable work was limited to ill-paid dithering around the fringes of the service professions, while love meant meeting uncomplainingly the demands of aging parents or sibling's children', the active pursuit of non-familial relationships being strictly forbidden.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the narrowing of acceptable employment and the points of social contact rendered single Victorian women not only dependent, but also inferior within a society defined by family relationships. Auerbach concludes her argument by claiming that the label itself was the final tool wielded in revenge against the 'old maid's' potentially subversive power because the appellation 'forced on her the most horrible attributes of youth and age: 'maid' turns her into a perpetual virgin and humble servant, while 'old' mocks the grotesquerie of her preadult status'.<sup>9</sup> Cultural representations have often presumed the 'old maid' to be resentful and embittered of this position, and so, like Dicken's Miss Havisham they have often portrayed her as manipulative and cold. Additionally, as the influence of inter-war Sexology burgeoned it was commonly held that the thwarting of a woman's natural maternal desires only served to compound this bitterness, potentially leading to a plethora of complexes and neuroses.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Auerbach, N. Foreword to Doan, L. (ed.) *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Urban and Chicago, 1991), p.ix.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p.ix.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p.x.

<sup>10</sup> See for example: Jeffreys, S. 'Antifeminism and Sex Reform before the First World War' in Jeffreys, S. *The Spinster and her Enemies: Femininity and Sexuality 1880-1930* (Melbourne, 1997 [1985]).

This bourgeois categorisation and its limitations, of course, generally discounted the working-class single woman, who through necessity had always worked. Yet, due to a scarcity of autobiographical sources it is difficult to assess the impact such a representation may have had upon her. (Perhaps, unlike others more able and willing, she had thought her life was not ‘worth the labour to record it’.<sup>11</sup>) However, with the premium placed upon marriage and motherhood, one might assume that many of the negative assumptions regarding ‘old maids’ were also applied to the single working-class woman. Although her working status would have been accepted by her peers, her spinsterhood would always have positioned her contrary to the norm. The figure of the ‘old maid’ may have been a middle/upper-class construction, but it cannot be assumed that its impact was not felt, if in different ways, by the working-class spinster.

Throughout the long 1950s, the figure of the ‘old maid’ and many of the inherent connotations of this category continued to be evoked in films and fiction. However, as with any cultural category, concept or institution, time and circumstance perpetuate a constant revision of meaning. As political, economic and social changes occur, a reciprocal re-negotiation of definitional boundaries must take place. As the introductory chapter emphasised, all categories/labels denoting the single woman are time specific and so, to understand how these women were thought about in the immediate post-war period it is essential to consider not only the kinds of representations being produced, but also how they related to the wider historical context. It is important to examine the extent to which the older model of the ‘old maid’ was drawn upon in mid-twentieth century discussion of the single

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<sup>11</sup> Kanner, B. *Women in context: Two Hundred Years of British Women Autobiographers* (New York, 1997), p.xxvi.

woman, but it is also vital to explore how cultural understanding of this category was being negotiated and re-constructed.

Arguably, one of the most thought provoking portrayals of a post-war 'old maid' appears in Olivia Manning's *School for Love* (1951).<sup>12</sup> This novel has largely been ignored by the literary critic, dismissed alongside Manning's earlier *Artist Amongst the Missing* (1949) as 'trial runs for her two trilogies'.<sup>13</sup> However, such a dismissal underestimates the power of the critique which the text presents, not only of British imperialism but also the debilitating realities of spinsterhood. The novel is set in Jerusalem in the final years of the war and follows the experiences of the young, newly arrived Felix Latimer, who is also the text's narrator. Orphaned and homeless, Felix has been invited to lodge in the home of a Miss Bohun, the unmarried and unknown step-sister of his late father. She is the pastor of a religious group, but makes her income through the rental of rooms in her house. Initially influenced by his immense gratefulness to Miss Bohun for giving him a home when he had none, it is not long before he begins to question the motives behind her 'selfless' actions. The text is as much an examination of Miss Bohun and the possible reasons for her behaviour as it is an exploration of Felix's growing self awareness and entry into manhood.

One of the first instances to trigger suspicion in the reader, if not necessarily in Felix, is when Miss Bohun raises the subject of the boy's keep.<sup>14</sup> Her assertion that Felix (a young boy of minimal means) should pay half of the household expenses is no less surprising than her seemingly gross miscalculation of the amount. Although Felix is not directly shown the

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<sup>12</sup> Manning, O. *School for Love* (London, 2001 [1951]).

<sup>13</sup> Treglown, J. 'Olivia Manning and her masculine outfit' in Mackay, M. (ed.) *British Fiction after Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century* (Basingstoke, 2007), p.149.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, see pages 13-14.

list of expenses she has compiled, he notices her duplication of certain bills and cannot understand how their total could equal the final sum. To add to the young boy's confusion, Miss Bohun then tells him he should pay an amount which he knows is actually *more* than half of this final total. However, whether through shock, naïvete or manners Felix never challenges Miss Bohun on the matter, despite his anxiety about the impact it will have upon his limited funds. Being forced to see this exchange through the boy's inexperienced eyes serves to compound the reader's own feelings of uncertainty towards Miss Bohun. Has this unfeeling woman consciously manipulated Felix, taking advantage of his youth and circumstances or were these the honest mistakes of an elderly, well-meaning lady just trying to make ends meet in wartime austerity?

Phyllis Lassner would argue that Miss Bohun is decisively mercenary and calculating, a personification and symbol of the British colonial project in the Middle East at the time.<sup>15</sup> Lassner maintains that, 'unsullied by a feminised sentimentality, Miss Bohun's pragmatic rationalism resembles the rationale of British imperialism'.<sup>16</sup> She claims that the spinster's behaviour toward her lodgers, especially her perceived moral and political authority over the exiled Jewish Leznos, show that she is clearly an agent of the British Empire and an advocate of its particular set of beliefs. However, such an interpretation ignores the point that Miss Bohun is herself a type of refugee, with no real position or space of her own. Miss Bohun left Britain and its institutions behind long before the war because they offered no prospects for a single woman. The house in which she lives is rented from a local Imam and much of the furniture belongs to the Leznos, she has no formal income. Bohun has more in common with this victimised Polish family, than any British orchestrator of colonial rule.

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<sup>15</sup> Lassner, P. *Colonial Strangers: Women Writing the End of British Empire* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, 2004), p.21.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p.23.

However, the physical description of Felix's foster aunt and his initial reaction to her appearance certainly does not induce the reader to imagine her as simply a harmless old lady. Miss Bohun's unfeminine physical exterior is presented as both a reason for, and a sign of, her single status. In addition, it is also suggestive of a duplicitous character. Her portrayal draws upon established notions that all mature unmarried women must be unattractive or plain at best, the assumption being that a handsome woman would never fail to secure a husband.<sup>17</sup> This is an idea which is further supported by the fact that the two women in the narrative who are deemed attractive – or 'a hundred percent feminine and fully fashioned' in the words of Miss Bohun – were both married, if subsequently widowed:<sup>18</sup>

He had felt sorry for her as she sat there, a little, worried old lady with her hand to her brow . . . but now he could see her face he was disturbed again. Her face was so narrow there scarcely seemed room between the cheeks for the long, bone thin nose and the compressed mouth. It looked to Felix like the face of some large insect. Her hair, fairish and greyish, was bound in thin plaits round her head. Her eyelids, thick and pale, hid her eyes.<sup>19</sup>

This and further physical descriptions of Miss Bohun intimate that her appearance is significantly connected to the type of woman that she is – it is an outward clue to her character. For example, the boy's early reference to the 'spinster' as insect-like is built upon in later reflections when he realises 'she reminded him of a praying mantis . . . silent, shut up

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<sup>17</sup> See for example: Kerslake, E. and J. Lilihadar. 'Angry sentinels and businesslike women: Identity and marital status in 1950s English library career novels' *Library History*, 17:2 (2001), pp.83-90.

<sup>18</sup> Manning, O. *School for Love*, p.102.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p.10.



in itself”.<sup>20</sup> Such a comparison suggests not only that this woman is cold and unfeeling, driven only by an instinct to survive, but also that her skills lie in camouflage and illusion. This is a notion upon which Felix later contemplates when he recalls his mother’s observation about the older woman’s choice of hairstyle: ‘women who do their hair like that want to seem more simple than they really are’.<sup>21</sup> The idea that Miss Bohun intentionally arranges her appearance to generate a look of harmlessness is never directly endorsed in the text, yet it becomes clear as the narrative progresses that her limited, shabby and ill-fitting clothes are certainly not the result of poverty. However, any effort to divert attention from herself could as easily stem from her position as an aging single woman in a foreign city, as it could from ill intention. Throughout the text the reader can never be sure if Miss Bohun is being portrayed as the embodiment of the ‘old maid’ or if this is an acceptable, innocuous persona she *utilises* to deflect suspicion from her continuous accumulation of wealth.

At times, however, the question is not necessarily can Miss Bohun be described as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” *but* as “a sheep in wolf’s clothing”. There are several instances within the narrative in which the efficient, brusque demeanour of the ‘spinster’ appears to slip and is replaced momentarily by an almost painful vulnerability. Such behaviour occurs most frequently when the young, widowed Mrs Ellis rents a room in the house and it is generally a direct product of their interactions. On the young, widow’s arrival it is not only Felix who is unsettled by the complete change in Miss Bohun’s demeanour and attitude, but the reader’s evaluation of her character over the previous chapters: ‘She crossed the grass with a movement that was almost a waltz; her face lit by an eager and happy expression that made it

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p.25.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p.170.

seem – what? Felix could only think of the word ‘generous’. She called out: “Feel-ix. Come and meet Mrs. Ellis.”<sup>22</sup>

From Mrs Ellis’s first appearance in the narrative it becomes clear that Miss Bohun has invested a great deal of hope in the prospect of friendship with her and, consequently, the reader is introduced to a facet of Miss Bohun’s character which stands in complete contrast to everything which has gone before. The constructed image of the cold, manipulative, self-sufficient ‘old maid’ is now challenged by an encroaching suspicion that Miss Bohun is nothing more monstrous than a desperately lonely woman. Her initial eagerness to please Mrs Ellis is not only typified in totally uncharacteristic gestures of generosity, but also in the anguish she feels at their rejection. When the ‘spinster’ presents an expensive pair of fur lined gloves to Mrs Ellis as a solution to the cold and is clearly rebuffed, the pain and bewilderment she experiences is a palpable force felt by all present:

Miss Bohun still stood holding them towards Mrs Ellis. Felix, seeing Miss Bohun’s hurt and confusion, wished that Mrs. Ellis would anyway reach out, take the gloves into her hands, and perhaps admire them or make some alleviating comment before returning them. But Mrs. Ellis did nothing.

Miss Bohun at last put them down on the corner of the table, where they lay throughout the meal with a forlorn, repudiated look. She ate in silence: the others had nothing to say.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p.95.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, p.122.

Once Miss Bohun realises that the younger woman will never be a companion to her and that she does not consider the three of them ‘a happy family’, she promptly resumes her previous distant manner and whether through genuine disapproval or revenge she attempts to evict Mrs. Ellis from the house indefinitely.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, it is Mr. Jewel, a past victim of Miss Bohun’s ruthlessness, who offers the only excuse for her behaviour arguing; ‘You young ones are a bit hard on us old ones – you don’t know what it’s like to be old . . . she’s a lonely old woman. All she’s ever wanted is for life to give her something, just to show she’s not out of it all, not neglected.’<sup>25</sup>

The ambiguity of feeling for this ‘old maid’ figure experienced by both Felix and the reader continues to occur throughout the text and frequently oscillates between pity, dislike and even affection. The result of this ambivalence is significant because it encourages the reader to contemplate the character much more deeply as the luxury of a fixed representation is constantly denied. In answer to the earlier question, therefore, both assumptions regarding Miss Bohun could be argued as simultaneously valid: she is both a monster and a victim. It would be fair to maintain that Miss Bohun is both self-serving and miserly as her treatment of her tenants illustrates. However, the text appears to suggest that these traits should not be considered the natural attributes of an ‘old maid’, but the effect of a precarious social existence forced upon her by prejudicial gendered mores. It is a situation which Miss Bohun herself clearly understands: ‘I have never had a husband to keep me, or even to die and leave me a comfortable pension. No, I’ve had to rely on myself all along. I have had to build up for

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, p.145.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p.232.

my own old age. Having no wish to be dependent on others, I must work while I can and work hard.<sup>26</sup>

In the multi-Oscar nominated film *Hush . . . Hush Sweet Charlotte* (1964) produced over a decade after Manning's novel, many of the same themes and assumptions regarding the single woman as 'old maid' are still being communicated.<sup>27</sup> However, this discourse is not constructed around a single representation but, through the portrayal of two seemingly very different unmarried women played by Bette Davis and Olivia de Havilland. The film is set in 'Hollisport' in America's deep South, the narrative begins over thirty years earlier in 1927 with the landed and wealthy Hollis family holding an extravagant ball. It is this fateful night which sets in motion the dramatic events which are to occur many years later, for it is the night a young Charlotte Hollis is to elope with her married lover. However, after her lover ends their affair under threat from Charlotte's patriarchal, widowed father, he is later found decapitated in the family's summer house. Suspicion for the murder instantly falls on Charlotte who has re-entered the party confused and blood-stained, yet she in her turn suspects her father of the crime. Nobody is ever convicted of the murder and Charlotte remains a recluse in the house for many years even after the death of her father, until the town's council decides to build a road on her land. Modernity is forcing itself upon Charlotte and the house and the 'time bubble' in which they have existed threatens to burst. Desperate to remain in her state of stasis she calls upon her cousin Miriam for help.

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, p.151.

<sup>27</sup> Aldrich, R. (dir.) *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte* ( USA, 1964).

The film's opening scenes initially suggest that Charlotte (Bette Davis) has become the archetypal 'old maid' in the years which have past, if only in the eyes of the Hollisport children. The past events surrounding the house and its inhabitant have developed into an urban legend and we are shown a gang of local boys anxiously approaching the house on a dark night. The boys are both fearful and fascinated by Charlotte, in their eyes she is not simply a woman living alone, but a strange, gothic ghoul who exists separately - physically and metaphorically - from the rest of the town. However, when with encouragement from his friends one of the boys enters the house and disturbs Charlotte asleep in her chair, his fear does not detract from the viewer's awareness that she is not the crazed harpy of the boys' imaginations, but simply a sad and lonely woman. The image of the monster evoked by the young boys is entirely contradicted by the woman we are presented with.

During the events of the following day, the effect of past experiences and a reclusive lifestyle upon Charlotte's mental state become clearer. Her fiery and petulant outburst at the arrival of building contractors conveys an immature, childlike personality which is greatly emphasised by her long plaits, the pink girlish dress she wears to greet the sheriff and her coquettish manner toward him. Such a representation implies that Charlotte's development into a woman has been stunted by the death of her lover and the denial of her natural womanly instincts, an image which perfectly embodies the 'old maid' conjured by Auerbach.<sup>28</sup> Charlotte, the film suggests, has remained the girl of her youth while her body has aged around her, a notion which is supported by her long-term housekeeper who excuses her tantrums with a motherly pride: 'she ain't nothing but a child'.

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<sup>28</sup> Auerbach, N. Foreword to Doan, L. (ed.) *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters*, pp. i-x.

The immaturity of Charlotte's demeanour is further accentuated by the arrival of her similarly unmarried, but career-minded and sophisticated cousin. Miriam (Olivia de Havilland) carries with her an air of calm, confidence and control into her old family home, which contrasts significantly with the anxiety and volatility exuded by Charlotte. She is initially represented as the perceived rationalising forces of modernity, whilst Charlotte embodies the immaturity and superstition of the past. In physical appearance the two women are also very different, unlike her cousin, Miriam has short, fashionable hair and she dresses in smart, modern clothes appropriate to a woman of her age. The audience is drawn to Miriam and the sense of civilised modernity she brings to the backward and unhealthy Hollis household, a feeling which appears justified when she is later forced to defend herself against an unprovoked attack from Charlotte:

Miriam: I have a career and I've given up valuable time to come here.

Charlotte: What is it you call your job . . . oh yes, Public Relations, sounds like something pretty dirty to me.

Miriam: The dirt Charlotte is entirely in your own mind.

The audience is further encouraged to empathise with Miriam when it is revealed that she has also been a victim of the family's tragic past. On the arrival of Drew (the family doctor) to the house, the audience learns that a relationship had once existed between the two. However, he had abruptly ended the affair when the scandal of the murder had erupted, fearing the threat to his family's name. Miriam has clearly not forgotten the experience, but

the power dynamics between the former lovers has significantly shifted and it is she who now rejects his advances: 'You've been content to let me get along on my own all these years, so don't think another night is going to kill me.'

It is entirely due to the narrative's positive representation of Miriam that the audience feels so betrayed when the truth of the situation is conveyed. Miriam is not the sensible and considerate woman she has projected to Charlotte and the audience, but a devious and resentful individual who has manipulated the already tormented Charlotte for her own gain and pleasure. For many years before her return to the house, Miriam had already begun to undermine her cousin's mental state by regularly sending her abusive, hate-letters. On her arrival with the aid of Drew, she had proceeded with her aim to fully destroy Charlotte's sanity and rational mind through the staging of various hauntings involving her murdered lover. Miriam's monomania with Charlotte's destruction and ownership of the family wealth is so intense that she even resorts to murder when the housekeeper confronts her with her suspicions.

The audience at this stage in the film is required to not only exchange its loyalties, but to reassess its evaluation of Charlotte as well as her cousin. Charlotte's 'old-maidish' character, the narrative suggests, has been a direct product of her traumatic experiences and the design of other people's ill-intention. Charlotte is a harmless woman-child whereas Miriam is a strong, knowledgeable and dangerously manipulative femme fatale. With regard to the traditional figure of the 'old maid' the film encourages a compassionate and understanding attitude, yet with regard to women like Miriam, it appears to be issuing a warning. Arguably, it was unnecessary for Miriam's character to be represented as a new

‘career woman’. She might have easily been living on the bribe money she received from the real murderer or even have been provided for by a husband all these years. However, by portraying Miriam in this way, the film implies that much of her will and ability to deceive was directly related to her identity as a ‘career woman’; the businesslike manner with which she carries out her heartless crime is a product of the skills she has acquired in her professional life. Although Miriam, like Charlotte, has been embittered by past events, she has been *further* de-feminised by her participation in the market economy and has been allowed to accumulate the power and knowledge needed to act upon her bitterness. The film influenced by the increasing numbers of contemporary women in employment, has envisioned a new, empowered breed of ‘old maid’ and as a consequence appears to look with nostalgic affection to her more benign predecessor. Such an interpretation is supported by Charlotte’s eventual victory over her scheming cousin, who ironically falls prey to the mental volatility she has been nurturing in her victim. Significantly, it is not until Charlotte murders this malignant force within her life, that she eventually finds the peace of mind and maturity she needs in order to leave the past and her old home behind. Unlike Dickens’ gothic monster Miss Havisham, Charlotte is not punished for being an embittered Old Maid, but is depicted with empathy and eventually given a second chance at a happy life.

### **‘Excellent Women’: The Indispensable and Respectable spinsters?**

‘ . . . a stout high-busted party with woollen stockings and golf shoes, hair in a bun, clothes too tight, a jolly laugh, ever so hearty, and on every committee in the village or town in which she lives. And, of course a spinster. Possibly a retired schoolmistress.’<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Du Maurier, A. *Old Maids Remember* (UK, 1966).



It is significant that Angela Du Maurier in her autobiography *Old Maids Remember* (1966) should evoke this image to describe those women in a position similar to herself.<sup>30</sup> It illustrates not only a continuing stereotyping of the spinster, but also an engagement between cultural representation and self-awareness. Since the inter-war period a variation on the 'old maid' model had begun to emerge and was largely related to the single woman's increasing freedom both within areas of employment and society at large. As Du Maurier's description suggests, this image of the spinster stood in opposition to that of the 'old maid', she was defined not by a solitary, limited lifestyle but an active involvement within the local community and the wider world. These 'Excellent Women' in Barbara Pym's words were often considered the backbone of Church and Charity organisation, a factor which should have ensured their position as respectable and indispensable citizens.<sup>31</sup> However, despite the positive elements of this representation and its use by many single women as an anchor for self-identity it was inherently flawed. The image of the 'spinster citizen' was often misappropriated and her involvement in the lives of others construed as officious interference rather than true selflessness. In addition, the message it conveyed was generally more one of commiseration than celebration, the spinster's pro-active lifestyle constructed as a poor substitute for her lack of maternal and matrimonial responsibility.

Margery Fry, herself an older single professional woman of the period, recognised the ambiguities and prejudices which surrounded single women at this time and, following a radio interview which briefly addressed the subject was motivated to publish a short tract titled simply *The Single Woman* (1953).<sup>32</sup> Fry is now mostly remembered as a campaigner for reform with regard to the post World War One criminal justice system. However, she was

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<sup>30</sup> Angela was the elder sister of the better known novelist Daphne Du Maurier.

<sup>31</sup> Pym, B. *Excellent Women* (London, 1978 [1952]).

<sup>32</sup> Fry, M. *The Single Woman* (London, 1953).

also as Anne Logan stresses ‘an educationalist, university administrator, governor of the BBC, and broadcaster’.<sup>33</sup> This text along with the autobiographies to come is extremely useful because it shows how, as Holden emphasises ‘different cultural beliefs and ideas both from the past and in the present are drawn upon and reworked by individuals to explain their marital status and to present a particular version of their lives’.<sup>34</sup> The tract responded candidly to prevalent assumptions regarding unmarried women and while it generally condoned their detrimental nature it also, as will be discussed, revealed a significant level of acceptance. Initially, Fry heavily criticises the contemporary trend to prioritise the figure of wife and mother over all other feminine identities and particularly berates the commercially led complicity of the women’s magazines in this effort: ‘judging from them the whole duty of woman might be summed up in a parody of ‘First catch your hare’ as ‘First catch your husband then cook for him out of our tins.’<sup>35</sup> Yet, despite her support of spinsters and their right to equality and respect, she consistently undermines the power of her polemic by privileging marriage and motherhood as *the natural* feminine route. As a consequence, Fry does not portray spinsterhood as an alternative lifestyle, but an unavoidable reality for those unable to marry: ‘Books and papers and broadcasts very rarely seem to concern themselves with the special troubles of the lonely woman or even of the woman who, though not lonely, has to make out her life without the natural ties of a human being.’<sup>36</sup>

The author does momentarily disrupt this image of the ‘spinster’ as victim, however, when she addresses the vital and growing role of unmarried women in the ‘life of the

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<sup>33</sup> Logan, A. ‘Women’s History Month: S. Margery Fry (1874-1958) Women [sic] Champion of the Underdog’, Women’s History Network Blog. <http://womenshistorynetwork.org/blog/?p=732>

<sup>34</sup> Holden, K. *The Shadow of Marriage*, p.19.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, p.7.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, p.7.

country'.<sup>37</sup> Fry draws upon the notion of 'excellent women' and positions her unmarried peers at the forefront of national success and development. She relates this model of 'spinster' to the maiden aunts of the pre-war years whose indispensable aid within the family circle has been enlarged to encompass the health of society as a whole. She recalls the achievements of unmarried women past and present and demands that society recognise their limitless value:

Conceive that some demon's influence could suddenly obliterate all the single women with careers today. The City would fall into an awful disorder – better far eliminate the Directors than remove 'our Miss Smith' who knows all about everything, and where the Uruguayan order of last month will be found. The children in their tumult will wreck the school, the machines turn idly in the factories – No! Those who undervalue the unmarried woman must think again how much they depend upon her.<sup>38</sup>

However, once again it is Fry herself who devalues the identity and social contribution of the 'spinster' because she perpetuates the common assumption that their proactive lifestyle is a direct result of unfulfilled biological instincts. Instead of wholly rejecting this notion the author capitulates to it by celebrating a 'spinster's' ability to redirect her 'natural' tendencies, claiming 'that women have known how to achieve this sublimation is a cause for wholesome pride'.<sup>39</sup> Subsequently, the identity and accomplishments of the 'spinsters' are overshadowed by a sense of sacrifice and loss; their lives presented as an embodiment of the war-time slogan 'make do and mend'. Fry's representation, consequently, resists any notion that these women might have consciously chosen their single lifestyle:

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p.32.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, pp.33-34.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, p.33.

Have you the least idea how many of these women regret that they have never found the man they would gladly have shared their “natural duties” with . . . is it a crime if in our complicated civilisation, some women give to mankind what was meant for the family, if instead of making one man happy they try to make a larger circle less miserable?

A further assumption conveyed within Fry’s text and related to her concept of sublimation, is the idea that spinsterhood signifies celibacy. Understandably, an author of the period might refrain from open advocacy of sexual relations outside of the ‘marital bed’, but Fry’s notion of celibacy appears central to her representation of the single woman, the connotations of which are twofold. Firstly, by associating sexlessness with the ‘spinster’, the author distances herself and those like her, from any socially threatening notions of unbridled sexuality. Secondly, by emphasising the unmarried woman’s detachment from affairs of the heart and of the body, the author evokes the respected image of the nun and implies a freedom to pursue a higher calling. This association of the modern working ‘spinster’ with a woman of the Church is evoked in the language she utilises in the final summary of her text:

I have watched the successful way in which so many of my friends have coped with their single lives. They crowd in upon me as splendid examples. Please do not think I am preaching a sermon if I say that the qualities they seem to have had in common – all these wise virgins – have been a mind open to the outside world and the possession of a heart at leisure from itself.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid*, p.44.

Margery Fry's short text was a brave attempt to redress the 'unconscious cruelty' of society's usual approach to the unmarried woman.<sup>41</sup> It is an historically significant text because it reveals one woman's attitude toward the privileging of domestic femininity and her endeavour to create and promote an accepted identity for herself and others who lived outside this ideal. Despite Fry's adherence to certain limiting assumptions, her representation of the hard-working 'spinster citizen' did offer unmarried women a way to think about themselves and their position within the social order. However, although Fry maintained that she desired 'to talk as a spinster to spinsters', it must not be assumed that her understanding of spinsterhood was universally accepted by every contemporary unmarried woman.<sup>42</sup> Her representation of the 'spinster' was built around notions of sublimation and sexual purity and it was certainly not advocated by all.

Evidence of contrasting ideas concerning a 'spinster's' sexuality and an alternative approach to the identity as a whole, can be found in the autobiography of the aforementioned Angela Du Maurier. Du Maurier's text, significantly titled *Old Maids Remember* (1966), was not written like Fry's piece to solely justify or champion the 'spinster's' position, but in many ways was considerably more empowering. The author, as in the title, consistently used society's loaded 'nicknames' to refer to herself, yet juxtaposed against the open, rational and dynamic woman represented within the text their artifice was exposed; the reader finds it difficult to associate this woman's life and attitude with the figure evoked by the label. Whether Du Maurier's comfort with her marginalised gendered position was a product of a theatrical and wealthy background or the later period in which she wrote it is hard to

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, p.8.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, p.8.

ascertain, but nonetheless, her text offered an alternative, unapologetic and positive image of spinsterhood at a time when there were few.<sup>43</sup>

The author's contentment with her independent lifestyle at the time of writing is particularly emphasised in the recollections of her youth. Unlike Fry, who surrounded failure to marry with feelings of disappointment (perhaps to deflect accusations of a conscious challenge to the norm), Du Maurier considers her younger days with affection and humour which refutes any possibility of regret. Recalling her past attitude at the beginning of her adult life, she considers the limited aspirations she had held as a privileged debutante:

What an exciting life lies ahead of me . . . First nights with Mummie, meeting thrilling people with Daddy. Dances with Tom, and Dick, and Harry, and of course before very long I shall get married and I mean to have six children . . . Six because I like the names I've chosen for them . . . And so thought Auntie Jessie, who would not be eighteen again if offered a million.<sup>44</sup>

Du Maurier never denies that there were times in her life when she wished for a family of her own, but in contrast to Fry she does not consider her childlessness a loss or a sacrifice. She is satisfied in hindsight with the *alternative* route her life has taken. She recognises that her cherished life experiences and career were borne of the freedom which came from a single

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<sup>43</sup> Although this text was published a year later than the period of interest, it was of course developed before this and reflects upon Du Maurier's earlier life and experiences.

<sup>44</sup> Du Maurier, A. *Old Maids Remember*, p.43.

lifestyle and she punctuates this in her contentious use of the quotation ‘Blessed are the Barren’,<sup>45</sup>

The attitudes of Fry and Du Maurier are further contrasted on the issue of the single woman and sexuality, the careful and morally accommodating representations of Fry standing in stark opposition to the candid sensuality exhibited by her peer. Perhaps as an upper-class, successful, middle-aged woman Du Maurier’s fear of social censure had lessened, for her frank comments on non-marital sex directly challenged the traditional mores of the period:

I also think it foolish to live in ignorance of one of life’s pleasures. One can sip one’s wine and quaff champagne without becoming a drunkard, and an occasional invitation to the bed does not make a tart or a nymphomaniac. To be shop-soiled at sixteen is a tragedy, to be white as the driven snow at thirty is just damn silly.<sup>46</sup>

Although Du Maurier’s bold, ‘no-nonsense’ approach to non-marital sexual relations may have been rare amongst others of her generation, her belief in an unmarried woman’s right to physical friendships certainly was not singular. The publisher and writer Diana Athill, in an autobiography published in 1963, recalls that while still in her youth she knew that ‘whether married or not’ she would not forgo the experience of a sexual relationship.<sup>47</sup> Athill strongly disagreed with the limiting norms governing female sexuality and it was an opinion which would ultimately challenge her religious convictions: ‘I knew that I was made for love, and love meant love-making, and I was going to bring this two-things-in-one to a blazing

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid*, p.138.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, p.110.

<sup>47</sup> Athill, D. *Instead of a Letter* (London, 1963), p.85.

consummation . . . as soon as possible. God forbade me to do so and I did not – I could not – feel that he was right.’<sup>48</sup> Throughout her life, Athill adhered to this attitude, even during the years of her depression which followed her failed engagement to her childhood sweetheart, and despite the knowledge that others condemned her open sensuality. On reading an entry in her younger sister’s diary, Diana Athill was faced with the knowledge early in her youth that her liberal views and behaviour were likely to induce prejudicial assumptions. Her sister’s entry read: ‘He told me that he was not going to kiss me although he wanted to. He said that I was going to be a fascinating woman but that I mustn’t begin that sort of thing too soon or it would spoil me. Look at Di, he said, you don’t want to be like her. And of course I don’t.’<sup>49</sup> Knowledge of her sister’s attitude toward her had a dramatic effect: ‘The shrivelling sensation of reading those words is something I flinch from recalling. I could not even summon up indignation at their smugness and unfairness, or question the misconception that “being like Di” resulted from being loved too soon instead of from misery at being loved no longer.’<sup>50</sup>

However, despite the pleasure she gained from a number of transient sexual relationships following the separation with her fiancé, Athill admits to a lingering and crippling sense of failure with regards to her status as a spinster. The feelings of shame and inferiority, which stemmed from what she believed to be *her* inability to marry, deeply affected her self-esteem and the way she conducted her life for many years later. Recalling this period with hindsight Athill recognises, with regards to her own experience, the potentially devastating emotional impact of not achieving the naturalised feminine ideal:

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<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, p.86.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, p.132.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, p.132.



It is the exact truth to say that if at many minute during those years I had been asked to think about it, made to stop doing whatever was distracting me and pass judgment on my own life, I should have said without hesitation that failure was its essence. I had never really wanted anything but the most commonplace satisfactions of a woman's life, and those, which I had wanted passionately, I had failed to achieve. That I would have answered in such a way is not speculation. I did answer that, to myself, over and over again . . . The knowledge was my familiar companion.<sup>51</sup>

For many years Athill remained in what she termed a self-induced social 'hibernation', until by chance she discovered a passion and talent for writing.<sup>52</sup> Upon the finding of this skill, she underwent a personal epiphany because she was now able to visualise herself not as a failed 'woman' but, as a successful 'writer'. This transition of *self* from 'spinster' to 'writer' altered every aspect of Athill's life and outlook and was summarised in her statement ' . . . the future is no longer an immutable threat. Nothing is immutable, that is the thing. My condition has changed – even, to a small extent, my nature has changed – so possibilities exist again'.<sup>53</sup> The opportunity to construct an alternative and positive feminine identity through her positioning within the 'public' sphere as opposed to the 'private' was vital to Athill's sense of self and happiness, and as a wider cultural phenomena will be afforded greater attention in the subsequent chapter. However, it would be wrong to suppose that all unmarried women of the period could shed the emotional insecurities of a 'spinster's' identity as easily, or as completely, as Diana Athill.

One of Athill's peers who appeared to battle constantly with the relationship between society's expectations of the 'spinster' and her own self-image was the novelist Barbara Pym.

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, pp. 209-210.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, p.151.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid*, p.212.

Within her letters and personal diaries there is evidence that Pym, like many of her fictional heroines, constantly struggled with her given identity, although she never fully revolted against the prejudicial ‘otherness’ of its position. The author instead exhibited an uneasy acceptance of the title, often referring to herself as a dreary or lonely ‘spinster’ but without the ‘tongue in cheek’ humour of Du Maurier.<sup>54</sup> Her acquiescence appeared to stem from a belief that she had been key in the orchestration of her own spinsterhood, when she voluntarily ended the relationship with the man she had passionately loved. In her diary she wrote ‘I lay awake thinking of Gordon, wondering where he was and if he was awake and longing hopelessly for him and panic came over me at what I had done and the life that was before me.’<sup>55</sup>

However, in time and with the continuing success of her writing, Pym seems to have increasingly enjoyed the independence and experiences proffered by the single lifestyle and, consequently, the insecurities of old were recorded less frequently. Significantly, when feelings of inferiority were related, they were generally instigated by an outside force, not by Pym herself: ‘It is the only occasion when one really wants a husband – in a pub with uncongenial company and the feeling of not belonging’.<sup>56</sup> Yet, as the tastes of the publishing world changed toward the latter years of the long 1950s, Pym found her work less and less popular and without the confidence borne of a successful professional identity, she was once again open to feelings of inadequacy.

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<sup>54</sup> Pym, B. *A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Letters and Diaries* (London, 1985), see pages 151, 178 & 219.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, pp.189-190.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*, p.261.

Yet, in an ironic twist of fate the author herself might have appreciated, Pym's literary work has, since the relative obscurity of the 1960s and 70s, become the object of considerable feminist attention.<sup>57</sup> Historians and literary critics alike have argued that underneath the seemingly trivial surface of Pym's plots, characters and settings, there exists an important, subtly subversive examination of the dominant cultural assumptions that governed notions of gender in the immediate post-war years. Barbara Bowman represents the opinion of many of these scholars when she emphasizes that 'it may sound odd to speak of her [Pym's] heroine's as subversive, since they are hardly radicals who protest loudly against the dominant culture's expectations' but 'on the miniaturized scale of manners, which examines the intricacies of how men and women think and act, such a protest is taking place'.<sup>58</sup>

Amongst all her works, Pym's *Excellent Women* (1952) is of particular interest because it can be viewed as a direct contemporary response to the precariousness of the 'spinster's' single status. Amidst the often farcical events in which the heroine of this text finds herself embroiled is a subtle and insightful examination of the problems and prejudices faced by the post-war spinster, a sensitive portrayal of a single woman negotiating the social and cultural conventions which would seek to constrain and define her. The text's focus is Mildred Lathbury, a single woman in her early thirties who has moved from her father's rectory in a country parish to the suburbs of London after the death of both her parents. She receives a small private income, which she supplements with a part-time job at a charitable organization and she lives alone in a rented flat. On a superficial level, the narrative revolves around Mildred's involvement with the community in which she lives. However, what the

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<sup>57</sup> See bibliography for some examples of this work.

<sup>58</sup> Bowman, B. 'Barbara Pym's subversive subtext: Private irony and shared detachment.' In Rossen, J. (ed.) *Independent Women: The Function of Gender in the Novels of Barbara Pym* (Sussex, 1988), p.84.

text is really interested in is her experience of spinsterhood. Although the text never explicitly explores Mildred's understanding and feelings for her socially constructed identity, it is peppered with moments when she must negotiate consciously and unconsciously what it means to be a single woman.

The first instance in which Mildred is confronted with one of the many assumptions regarding her perceived spinsterhood occurs in the opening scene. An acquaintance of Mildred has remarked on the fact that new neighbours are in the process of moving into the flat next to hers, but the observation is quickly dismissed by the man who says 'I expect *you* know about it.'<sup>59</sup> The assumption is that as a spinster she must be knowledgeable in the 'comings and goings' of the local community, having nothing of interest in her own life.<sup>60</sup> This notion of the unfulfilled spinster fully informed about the activities of others, does of course relate to the popular stereotype of the 'prying town gossip', highlighted by Laura Doan.<sup>61</sup> However, what is of interest here is not so much the assumption itself, but Mildred's reaction to it. Her initial emotional reflex to the man's presumption is, as she admits, one of annoyance, a reaction which is reflected in the bluntness of her reply: 'Well, yes, one usually does . . . It is rather difficult not to know such things.'<sup>62</sup> However, in the next instance Mildred is found contemplating the justification of this belief, accepting it (with some self-deprecating humour), as a social truth when she had initially conceived it an insult: 'I suppose an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties, must expect to

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<sup>59</sup> Pym, B. *Excellent Women*. p.5.

<sup>60</sup> Mildred acknowledges the existence of this assumption in the following quotation: 'I don't know whether spinsters are really more inquisitive than married women, though I believe they are thought to be because of the emptiness of their lives'. Pym, B. *Excellent Women*. p.8.

<sup>61</sup> Doan, L. 'Introduction' to Doan, L. (ed.) *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Urban and Chicago, 1991).

<sup>62</sup> Pym, B. *Excellent Women*. p.5.

find herself involved or interested in other people's business, and if she is also a clergyman's daughter then one might really say there is no hope for her.'<sup>63</sup>

It could be argued that the contradictory feelings displayed by Mildred at this moment highlight a realization that spinsterhood as a role and identity (perhaps newly acquired once she reached the age of thirty) must be performed and accepted according to the conventions which govern it at that time. Mildred at this moment is negotiating the popular representation of the spinster as a 'prying gossip', yet despite her initial resentment toward this negative and generalizing image of the single woman, she accepts it as a natural inevitability. In this instance and others to come, Mildred against her own inclinations, can be seen to be actively and consciously embodying the qualities expected of the spinster as prescribed by society at that time. In effect, the text at this moment appears to be suggesting that women are socially conditioned to accept dominant constructions of femininity, despite the fact that they may oppose them.

However, the notion that Mildred should submit so easily to a prescribed identity she finds offensive, purely because she has been socially 'brainwashed' to accept it, is not totally satisfactory. As the narrative progresses the reader eventually comes to realize that there are further, more complex factors at play here. It would seem in Mildred's case, and in the case of many other fictional and actual single women of the period, that this demonstration of acquiescence was a means of ensuring a degree of social tolerance.<sup>64</sup> As discussed

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, p.5.

<sup>64</sup> Evidence of this, it could be argued, can be found in the prim, androgynous figures of Jarvie, Collie and Gregg in Muriel Spark's, *The Girls of Slender Means* (London, 1963), or in the grey figure of Miss Fuller in

previously, post-war society felt more comfortable with the image of the asexual perhaps eccentric, interfering yet harmless spinster, than the dangerous figure of the single independent woman unconstrained by the morally policing frameworks of family or marriage. Living in direct contradiction to the post-war ideal of *respectable* femininity (the professional housewife) placed single women in a socially precarious position. In their seeming inability or refusal to fulfil their biological function as wife and mother such individuals were already considered failures, and historically there has always been a thin line for women between perceived failure and deviancy.<sup>65</sup> By courting or even embodying the popular innocuous image of the spinster, Mildred is safeguarding her position as an acceptable and respectable member of the community. This notion is evidenced in her subtle rejection of Winifred Malory's invitation to live in the top rooms of the rectory where Winifred lives with her brother:

‘But I suppose you wouldn’t think of coming here yourself, Mildred? . . . I know Julian would like to have you here as much as I should.’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ I said, speaking slowly to gain time, for fond as I was of Winifred I valued my independence very dearly, ‘but I think I’d better stay where I am. I should be only one person and you’d really have room for two, wouldn’t you?’<sup>66</sup>

Rather than disclose to Winifred that she enjoys the relative autonomy her single status allows her, Mildred seemingly sacrifices her own wishes for the good of the Malorys. This

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Alison Hennegan’s ‘. . . And Battles Long Ago’ in Heron, L. (ed.) *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties* (London: Virago, 1985).

<sup>65</sup> One only has to think for example of the ‘Fallen Woman’ so popular in Victorian literature.

<sup>66</sup> Pym, B. *Excellent Women*. p.17.

action benefits her peers' perception of her in two ways. Firstly, the action *appears* self-sacrificial and therefore Mildred's identity as a person who is non-threatening and docile (if a little downtrodden) is reiterated. Secondly, and possibly more importantly, her desire for the independence that spinsterhood allows her is concealed. To have openly admitted to Winifred the real reasons behind her decline of the offer would have been to directly challenge prevalent constructions of post-war femininity. Such a move would have invited suspicion and possibly accusations of social deviancy. It would appear in this instance, at least, that Mildred prefers to negotiate a space for herself within dominant ideology, rather than defy its doctrines openly.

Although on this occasion Mildred has quietly undermined the stereotype by paradoxically utilising the image of the 'spinster' as self-sacrificing to her own ends, there do exist within the text a number of small yet openly defiant acts. One such example occurs after her meeting with the ironically named Mrs. Gray, the attractive and predatory clergyman's widow. Mildred, flustered and upset after their conversation regarding Gray's intention to evict Winifred, finds herself following the crowds into a department store, where she decides to buy a new lipstick. A conversation between Mildred and an assistant at the make-up counter then proceeds as follows:

'Oh Hawaiian Fire. It's rather an orange red, dear' she said doubtfully, scrutinizing my face. 'I shouldn't have thought it was quite your colour. . .'

'Oh it doesn't matter really,' I said quickly. Perhaps another colour would be better. What would you recommend?'

‘Well dear, I don’t know, really.’ She looked at me blankly, as if no shade could really do anything for me. ‘Jungle Red is very popular – or Sea Coral, that’s a pretty shade, quite pale, you know.’

‘Thank you, but I think I will have Hawaiian Fire,’ I said obstinately, savouring the ludicrous words and the full depths of my shame.<sup>67</sup>

The text utilises the term ‘girl’ as opposed to woman to describe the counter-assistant and in this case such terminology is significant because it establishes an age difference between the two women. Consequently, the girl’s use of the term ‘dear’ in her address to the elder Mildred suggests a patronising attitude and emphasises the point that even a young girl can pass judgment on the older single woman. Although we cannot assume that the counter girl serving Mildred is aware of her marital status during this scene, she nonetheless appears to have typecast Mildred as the sort of woman who should not be wearing this particular shade of lipstick. The girl’s final recommendation of the pale shade ‘Sea Coral’ implies that Mildred should be wearing a shade of lipstick which does not draw attention. Perhaps the girl believes that by wearing a strong colour such as ‘Hawaiian Fire’, the owner is attempting to emphasize her femininity or her sexuality, behaviour not deemed to be suitable for a spinster. However, as before, it is not the assumption but Mildred’s reaction to it which is of interest here. Initially capitulating to the opinion of the assistant that her selection of lipstick has been misguided as is her manner, she seeks the girl’s advice. Mildred is betraying a lack of self-esteem, accepting the opinion of those she regards as more qualified, those people who know more about being a woman than she does. However, as the girl continues with what Mildred perceives as a nonchalant and slightly derisive appraisal of her appearance, her attitude changes. Instead of retreating from the situation, Mildred stands her ground and calmly yet

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<sup>67</sup> Pym, B. *Excellent Women*, pp.130-131.



firmly rejects the girl's opinion and repeats her initial request. Mildred's feelings of embarrassment generated by this scene have been overpowered by a need to assert herself, her femininity and her right to make her own choices. Despite the brevity of the moment, it is a moment nonetheless when Mildred displays an ability to reject and transcend the dominant ideas about a spinster's identity that she is trying to accommodate, and the social conventions which confine her. Although this scene may at first be considered insignificant, it is actually a seminal moment within the text and a personal victory acknowledged by Mildred:

I hurried away and found myself on the escalator. Hawaiian Fire, indeed! Nothing more unsuitable could possibly be imagined. I began to smile and only just stopped myself from laughing out loud by suddenly remembering Mrs. Gray and the engagement and the worry about poor Winifred.<sup>68</sup>

Offsetting these moments of empowering defiance within the text, however, are many reminders of the toll that the inflexible feminine ideal can have upon the single woman's psyche and self esteem. The ambiguity surrounding Mildred's social position as a single middle-class woman and the internal confusion this creates within her, are consistently evident throughout the text. For example, in the following quotation the reader is reminded how powerful the feminine ideal is at this time and the deference it demands from even those, like Mildred, who value the independence of their marginal existence:

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<sup>68</sup> Pym, B. *Excellent Women*, p.13.1

I turned on the wireless to distract me. But it was a women's programme and they all sounded so married and splendid, their lives so full and yet so well organized, that I felt more than usually spinsterish and useless. Mrs Napier must be hard up for friends if she could find nobody better than me to confide in, I thought.<sup>69</sup>

At this moment Mildred has succumbed to the pressure of the prevalent contemporary belief that only women occupying the role of housewife can be considered 'real' women, that life as a spinster is a life unfulfilled, unsuccessful and unfeminine. At this point Mildred does not consider herself the equal of her neighbour, the married Helena Napier, despite the fact that Helena has proved herself to be a selfish, flawed individual on numerous occasions. For example Helena does not think twice about asking Mildred for difficult favours with regards to her stormy marriage or her secret infatuation for Everard Bone, despite the fact that she knows Mildred is good friends with her husband, Rocky Napier.

The novel engenders empathy for Mildred not only in moments such as this, but also through the mode of its narration which is in the first person. As a consequence, the reader is situated alongside Mildred, experiencing with her the difficulties of her ambiguous social position and the moments of her submission and rebellion. As Bowman explains in relation to all the heroines of Pym's work, 'though they maybe subordinates in relation to a dominant culture's assumptions the reader and the narrator join them in that isolation' and 'that redefinition by the fictional universe, in turn, empowers their sensibility'.<sup>70</sup> Although various examples of subversion have been considered here, Laura Doan is correct in her analysis of *Excellent Women* when she states that this is more 'a text of persuasion' than a text of

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<sup>69</sup> Pym, B. *Excellent Women*, p.28.

<sup>70</sup> Bowman, B. 'Barbara Pym's subversive subtext', p.91.

rebellion.<sup>71</sup> The text initially embraces the stereotype of the spinster in order to gradually undermine it, highlighting to the reader the illogical nature of the assumptions it harbours, whilst quietly supporting a woman's right to an autonomous lifestyle without the fear of derision. This notion concurs with Bowman who states that Pym's 'heroines and narrators are not overtly feminist in the sense that they set out to overthrow male domination, but they do dramatize the heroine's perception of the discrepancy between her own and the dominant culture's assumptions'.<sup>72</sup> It could be argued that the purpose of the text is not one of simple inversion, an effort to promote spinsterhood over marriage, but a logical and persuasive argument against the unrealistic and prejudicial standards of the socially constructed post-war feminine ideal. Katherine Ackley has stated that Pym's 'female characters belong firmly to preliberation days'.<sup>73</sup> However, it could be argued that in fact post-war literary heroines such as Mildred Lathbury were evidence that the contemporary women's movement was under way, the quiet, subtle beginnings of second wave Feminism.

The analysis of these contemporary texts has shown that the cultural identity and social position of the post-war single woman were far from fixed. The texts indicate that exactly what it meant to be an unmarried woman or 'spinster' in this period was often ambiguous and open to interpretation, but that nonetheless it remained a marginal and problematic category for those it sought to identify. The outside factors affecting the position of single women were both positive and negative; on the one hand the unmarried woman had to legitimise her status at a time of near universal marriage, but on the other, a fully autonomous life and, to some, a professional identity were increasingly possible through

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<sup>71</sup> Doan, L. 'Pym's singular interest: The self as spinster' in Doan, L. (ed.) *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters*, p. 153.

<sup>72</sup> Bowman, B. 'Barbara Pym's subversive subtext', p.85.

<sup>73</sup> Ackley, K. A. 'Proving one's worth: The importance of marriage in the world of Barbara Pym.' In Mink, J. and Doubler Ward, J. (ed.) *Joinings and Disjoinings: The Significance of Marital Status in Literature* (Ohio, 1991). p.131.

growing employment opportunities. Therefore, many single women in this period were able to fulfil their potential and forge their identities in the public sphere, but the lingering sense of failure which accompanied their 'otherness' was rarely exorcised completely. However, the number of women who were willing to celebrate their achievements and/or challenge the prejudices surrounding their single status suggests that change was being welcomed. With regard to notions of femininity, this period was certainly not one of unanimous consensus: 'the orthodoxies of the time were not universally supported'.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Barker, N. *Happily Ever After? Women's Fictions in Post-War Britain 1945-1960* (London and Basingstoke, 1989), p.ix.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Career, Independence and Respectability? The Single Working Woman**

As the previous chapter examined, the ‘spinster’ was not a static category in the long 1950s, but a diversifying, fluid label employed and understood in varied ways by different people. The complexities of its meaning were derived not only from past decades of usage, but by contemporary cultural and social factors which necessitated a re-negotiation of its terms. The spinster of the post-war period, who half a century earlier would generally have been dependent upon obliging family members for her keep, was now able to support herself without reproof for disrespectable behaviour and the connotations of this shift in attitude were extensive. According to a report in 1956 by the National Insurance Advisory Committee, 80% of single women between the ages of 15-59 were in full-time employment compared with 19% of married women.<sup>1</sup> Past representations of the spinster were often recognisable by the parasitic or rootless existence of the individual; she belonged nowhere and commanded no sphere of her own. However, with increasing approval and opportunities for participation in the public sphere, unmarried women could now potentially stake their claim in the wider world through their function and identity as workers. Significantly, therefore, it might be argued that this period characterised by its traditional gender ideology actually instigated the birth of the ‘career woman’ figure and thus perhaps the slow death of the traditional ‘spinster’ model.

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<sup>1</sup> Cmd. 9684 (1956): appendix vi (Between the ages of 45 and 54, 71.3% of all single women were still in full-time employment.)

In order to examine the impact of increasing employment opportunities upon post-war representations of unmarried women, this chapter will explore a number of questions. Initially, it will examine how perceptions and representations of the working (single) woman/career woman differed from those of the spinster and whether this particular model of feminine identity was considered more or less respectable? Secondly, it will consider if a career/employment did potentially offer unmarried women the prospect of constructing an alternative feminine identity and if so, whether the opportunity was limited to women of a certain class?

The chapter will argue that unmarried women of the period were able to create a space for themselves within the social hierarchy and navigate restrictive gendered norms through their identities as professionals or workers. The expansion of the employment market was a vastly significant event for single women because it afforded many individuals (to varying extents) the ability to challenge social accusations of 'feminine failure' by finding personal fulfilment through their activities in the public sphere as opposed to the private.

### **Acceptance and Respectability? The Spinster and Employment**

Before this section contemplates the development of differences between representations and imaginings of these figures, it must first be emphasised that the two categories were not mutually exclusive. The figure of the committed career or working woman had arguably evolved from the earlier 'spinster' who was herself often characterised by a commitment to unpaid church and charity work, so that, perceptions and portrayals of these feminine models were inherently linked. Although generations of so-called spinsters would have worked through economic necessity before the emergence of the post-war career/working woman,

popular, classed representations had generally associated this figure with genteel unemployment, voluntary activities or limited quasi-respectable roles such as that of the governess.<sup>2</sup> However, as a result of the large scale utilisation of female labour in the two world wars, expanding employment options and growing social approval, the single working woman (spinster) was increasingly in the post-war public eye and arguably the proliferating representations of career and working women were a cultural response to this. Contemporary perceptions of this emerging feminine model of independence were varied and frequently derogatory, and through a consideration of the differences they bore to more conventional portrayals of the spinster one can further investigate the positioning of unmarried women within the post-war era.

One of the earliest examples within this period of unmarried women promoting the image of themselves as workers occurs within the political campaigning of the National Spinsters' Pensions Association (N.S.P.A.). Although this was a movement championing the pension rights of unmarried women in full time employment, the campaign always referred to its members as 'spinsters' never career or working women, and the significance of this terminology will later be considered. The group was actually established some years earlier in 1935 and had already successfully lobbied the Government with a petition of one million signatures to achieve a lower retirement age for insured women in 1940. The main aim of the N.S.P.A was to promote the implementation of a voluntary retirement age of fifty-five for working women, in order that they might have financial security should they have to cease work due to poor health. However, for Florence White the original founder of the N.S.P.A,

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<sup>2</sup> Various novels by the Bronte sisters published in the nineteenth-century portray the difficulties and limitations which surrounded the single, middle and upper-class woman and opportunities for employment. See for example Charlotte Bronte's *Villette* (1853) or better known *Jane Eyre* (1847), as well as Anne Bronte's *Agnes Grey* (1847).

the age reduction from sixty-five to sixty for insured women was a partial victory only and the subsequent Beveridge Report had raised further issues for her cause. The campaigners argued that the lifetime of contributions to the national insurance schemes paid by unmarried women were proving advantageous to married peers, but were of little benefit to the single working woman when she needed them most. William Leach M.P a long-term campaigner for the N.S.P.A. concisely voiced the opinion of the group when he stated that 'to Sir Wm. Beveridge the spinster does not exist'.<sup>3</sup>

What is of particular interest is the way in which the N.S.P.A's views were publicized. White and her supporters primarily pursued an alteration to legislation through appeals to logic and democratic fairness; they did not sentimentalise the harrowing tales of poverty which had motivated the campaign in the first instance. This approach was important because it denied the perpetuation of an image which construed the spinster as pathetic, marginal and desirous of charity by instead positioning her as a member of a large and essential working section of society. The confident, businesslike manner with which the N.S.P.A executed their campaign conveyed their strong belief in the vital part unmarried women played in the success of the nation, and the following statement from an edition of their quarterly organ 'The Spinster' is illustrative of this inherent attitude:

The Spinsters being the only section of women compelled to pay constant weekly contributions to the scheme over a long period, should have the utmost value for their

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<sup>3</sup> N.S.P.A Leaflet: 'Criticisms of the Beveridge Report' as given by Mr. Wm. Leach M.P at a Bradford Spinsters' Social, (No Date), Florence White and National Spinsters' Pensions Association Collection: West Yorkshire Archive Services: Bradford Central Library, 78D86 2/1.



contributions afforded them, together with an equitable share of the State subsidy which they as taxpayers help to provide.<sup>4</sup>

The Association's methodical and rational presentation of their cause and of the working spinster won them support from diverse sections of society, not just the working and lower middle-classes from which their members belonged. Amidst the supporters listed in their magazine for example, there are members of parliament, city councillors and even married women's groups such as the 'Inner wheel', the wives of local Rotarians.<sup>5</sup> This cross-section of support from the community was only possible, it could be argued, because of the subtle approach they employed in their campaigning. The N.S.P.A did not pursue their claims through damning critiques of the prejudicial treatment afforded to their married counterparts, but modelled their argument around notions of parity and a recognition of difference. Had the group openly denigrated the social mores which privileged matrimony and domestic femininity it is unlikely they would have received such widespread support. In addition, such an approach may have been construed as confirmation that prevalent ideas about the spinster were correct, that she was essentially a jealous and bitter creature, twisted by her unfulfilled maternal longings. As a consequence, instead of constructing themselves as an opposing category to the established norm, the N.S.P.A positioned the spinster-worker as an essential contributor to the benefits accorded to the wife and mother by the State; the spinster was as such a vital part of the financial framework which supported the feminine ideal. In his speech which critiqued the Beveridge Report, the aforementioned William Leach repeatedly emphasised the movement's backing of increased financial aid for the housewife:

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<sup>4</sup> 'The Spinster', journal of the N.S.P.A, vol.13, no.2 (1950), Florence White and National Spinsters' Pensions Association Collection, 78D86 1/20.

<sup>5</sup> See for example the acknowledgments in the above edition of 'The Spinster'.

We do not grudge the married woman these benefits. Far from it. But they provide a special reason for giving some compensating treatment to the spinster . . . I think we must make clear we do not object to any of the benefits proposed for married women. I think we should signify our approval of children's allowances. I do not even cavil at making the spinster's contribution the same as the married woman's.<sup>6</sup>

As workers and taxpayers the N.S.P.A clearly represent the spinster as an equal and, therefore, an important participant in the continuing economic survival of the nation. However, this empowered identity afforded the unmarried woman was occasionally overshadowed by the supporters themselves. The campaign literature intermittently undermined its message of agency by associating the spinsters' position with war time loss, in a similar way to Margery Fry's text in the previous chapter. This suggestion, that their first choice of a husband and domesticity had been effectively denied them forcing them to survive alone, contrasted with the mood of the campaign because it implied that the women were hapless victims. In a leaflet summarising the main argument of the N.S.P.A, this notion was promoted under the evocative subtitle 'Spinsterhood Caused by War':

It should not be forgotten that many spinsters now struggling on in their 50's would, but for world war No. 1 have been in the more secure and privileged class of married women or widows. Many of them not yet 60 having worked since 11 or 12 years of age, have already given more than forty years industrial service, under the old conditions of long hours and low wages, and like the more preferentially treated widows are feeling the strain, but **they** must keep on working whilst widows are given consideration under the National Insurance Scheme.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> N.S.P.A Leaflet : 'Criticisms of the Beveridge Report' as given by Mr. Wm. Leach M.P at a Bradford Spinsters' Social, (No Date) Florence White and National Spinsters' Pensions Association Collection, 78D86 2/1.

<sup>7</sup> N.S.P.A Leaflet: 'Do You Believe in a Square Deal and Fair Share for all' (1943), Florence White and National Spinsters' Pensions Association Collection, 78D86 1/2.

This element of the campaign's discourse explains the circumstances behind the N.S.P.A's continued use of the term 'spinster' as opposed to career woman or other variation on this title – it was both a product of time and class. The group had initially been established in the inter-war period, a period when social mobility through employment was limited. It was unlikely that any woman below the upper-middle class could ever pursue a career or profession and thus, the title professional or independent woman was also limited to an advantaged few. As Adrian Bingham explains,

the Restoration of the Pre-war Practises Act (1919) and the widespread adoption of the marriage bar in both the public and private sectors ensured that wartime hopes of a transformation of female job opportunities were not realized, and although the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 opened up several professions and public positions to women, it by no means ended discrimination at the workplace.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, as the majority of unmarried women at this time were distinguished first and foremost by their spinsterhood (their failure to marry), despite their employment status, no terminology existed to otherwise define or unite them. Unfortunately for the long-term prospects of the campaign, the N.S.P.A was complicit in the perpetuation of this identification process. Despite its avid promotion of the spinster's validity and identity as a worker, they too prioritised a woman's marital status over any other identification marker. Although it was true that wartime fatalities had reduced many women's chances of marriage, the reference to this in their campaign diminished the power of the spinster-worker image, by clearly advocating the role of the wife and mother as a woman's primary vocation. As a

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<sup>8</sup> Bingham, A. Review Essay 'An era of domesticity?' *Histories of women and gender in interwar Britain* *Cultural and Social History*, 1:2, 2004, pp.226.

consequence, the perception of the independent worker is one of conciliation, the spinster's position in the market economy an unfortunate reality of her loss.

Throughout the active years of the N.S.P.A (1935-1958), the campaign continued to present its arguments in the same terms and ultimately it proved to be the movement's downfall. Unlike other lobbying groups, such as the Six Point Group and the Equal Pay Campaign Committee who called for universal equality in employment, the N.S.P.A were demanding special dispensations for unmarried women workers, especially those of the working-class in long-term manual occupations. The N.S.P.A recognised its difference and consciously separated itself from these other groups and their campaigns, stating that 'if equal pay advocated by many women, mostly of the professional classes, was granted – it would not benefit the older working women . . . whose needs are our chief concern'.<sup>9</sup> Diane Prickett suggests that it was this unwavering belief which would eventually lead to the N.S.P.A's formal dissolution in 1958 because 'the movement had lost its impetus; it was not attracting new members, and Florence was fighting for a pre-war cause in a post-war age. Twelve years had changed the way many women thought. Many younger spinsters didn't want special treatment any more, they wanted equality.'<sup>10</sup>

Although the N.S.P.A had struggled to survive in the latter half of the 1950s, its legacy for single women of the period must not be underestimated. Despite the campaign's adherence to certain limiting assumptions regarding a woman's natural function, the Association significantly contributed to changing perceptions of the unmarried woman and

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, back page of leaflet.

<sup>10</sup> Prickett, D. J. *Florence White: a Biography* (Chapter 7, p.10), Unpublished transcript in Florence White and National Spinsters' Pensions Association Collection, 78D86 6/2.

her role as a worker. Although prejudice toward unmarried women, and women in employment still existed, the N.S. P.A had convincingly challenged the validity of these discriminations and gained support in the process. The N.S.P.A had vitally produced and promoted a positive representation of the unmarried working woman when there were few. This action aided the facilitation of increased acceptance for the working woman and encouraged the production of further representations. However, Prickett was correct in her assessment of White's greatest achievement when she said that most importantly, 'she had given a voice and an identity to thousands of single working-class women. They had been a submerged group in pre-war society and she had shown them how to surface.'<sup>11</sup>

Although by the last years of the N.S.P.A, the figure of the working woman was not only more visible, but more widely accepted (if only as a necessary evil and a temporary measure) she was still generating a significant amount of anxiety. From magazines to novels and film, the challenge that this alternative feminine identity posed to the traditional model was under scrutiny and often attack. Unlike the established figure of the generally benign spinster, who it seemed was increasingly looked upon with nostalgia in the face of this new femininity, the independent work-oriented woman was perceived to be independent of family ties, completely self-sufficient and therefore more dangerous. In order to appreciate the supposed threat this type of woman presented to conventional gender dynamics, it is helpful to consider Simone de Beauvoir's contemporary evaluation of this development:

It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice.

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<sup>11</sup>ibid, (Chapter 8, p.3).

Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles;  
between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator . . .  
she concretely affirms her status as subject.<sup>12</sup>

The independent woman's self-governing lifestyle contrasted significantly with the domestically invested and bound activities of the wife and mother, and so it was assumed the self-sacrificing, compassionate traits of a housewife would not be shared by her counterpart. Consequently, the working woman was often portrayed as a hard and ambitious character, her naturally caring and maternal nature lost to the demands of her working life. Denise Riley argues that 'by 1945 the dominant rhetoric described the figure of woman as mother and woman worker as diametrically opposed'; the independent woman was the antithesis of the feminine ideal.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore no surprise, that many representations of the committed worker were constructed as a warning, considering the implications this figure had for the prevalent pro-natalist ideology of the day.

One such example of a cautionary tale featuring an independent woman as the (anti-)heroine can be found in one of the main women's magazines of the period, *Woman*.<sup>14</sup> This short story is sardonically entitled 'The Girl who had Everything' and follows the experiences of Vera, a journalist for the *London Weekly* who has exchanged jobs temporarily with her New York counterpart to work as assistant-editor on an American magazine chain. The story begins toward the end of Vera's six months in America and examines the dilemma

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<sup>12</sup> De Beauvoir, S. *The Second Sex* (trans. H. M. Parshley) (New York, 1974[1949]), p.755.

<sup>13</sup> Riley, D. 'Some peculiarities of social policy concerning women in wartime and postwar Britain' in Higsonnet, M.R. et al. *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven and London, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Smaridge, N. 'The Girl Who Had Everything', *Woman*, May 17<sup>th</sup> 1947, (London), pp. 11,19&21.

she is faced with when she is offered a permanent post – should she stay and pursue a successful career or return to marry her long-term boyfriend Neil and embrace domesticity?

Initially, before Vera learns of this long-term job opportunity she contemplates the positive experience her exchange has been and the changes it has induced within her. She measures these changes by her altered appearance and celebrates the career-woman identity her exterior form now represents:

She stared into the mirrored back of the display window. An arresting little figure looked back at her- chic, sophisticated, in a black suit with a veiled hat, and brief red gloves.

She breathed more quickly, thinking, I've got it now. I've really got it crystallized. The New-York look – the young executive look!

Seeing her today, no one would have recognized her as the girl who walked down the gangplank, six months ago, pretty but inconspicuous, in a blue utility suit.

She was smiling when she turned from the window.<sup>15</sup>

This change to her appearance and demeanour are not only recognised by Vera but also a colleague, who jokingly asks her, 'is that Vera Mallory, or a brand new graduate from the Success School?' an affirmation in which she further delights.<sup>16</sup> Vera feels at this moment that she has achieved her goal; she is not only living the life of an independent career women but she has successfully embodied that identity. This aspect of the narrative would suggest, therefore, that there was some potential during the period for certain women to carve out an

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p.11.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p.11.

alternative feminine identity to that which was generally represented. Vera seemingly understood this to be a possibility when she left for the job in New York because she had consciously evaded an engagement to Neil; she recalls after the permanent position is offered that ‘something had warned her not to accept a ring before she left’, an act which would have severely limited her choices.<sup>17</sup>

However, despite this initial positive view of the young career woman, the narrative then begins to increasingly cast shadows over Vera’s chosen identity - a model which it comprehends is neither natural nor British. Within this article the career woman is a strictly American femininity, the ‘young executive look’ is equated with the ‘New York look’ and Vera must work hard ‘trying to catch on to American methods, American ideas’ if she is to succeed.<sup>18</sup> This American career woman is embodied by three characters within the story. They are not portrayed in the same way (stereotyped) but each represent what are perceived to be the potential dangers of this alternative femininity. The first of these figures to which the reader is introduced is Hilda Marrachek, Vera’s colleague and professional competition. Before knowing the root cause of Hilda’s frosty attitude towards her, Vera instinctively dislikes this woman because she makes her ‘curiously nervous’ and ‘strangely on the defensive’.<sup>19</sup> Later she learns Hilda’s behaviour is due not to personal dislike, but professional jealousy as she is consumed by ambition to succeed in her chosen career. A telephone operator at the company describes Hilda as a “sour puss” and feels it is necessary to warn Vera of the danger she poses explaining: “You’re on the same ladder - and climbing faster than she likes”.<sup>20</sup> The operator correlates this aggressive, unfriendly, and therefore,

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p.19.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p.11 and p.19.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p.11.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p.11.



unfeminine manner with Hilda's single-minded desire to succeed in the company, an ambition motivated by a wish to transcend her poor mid-Western roots. The operator concludes: "Put herself through college. Now she's pulling herself up by the boot straps – and she doesn't feel secure yet".<sup>21</sup> This portrayal of Hilda suggests that readers should be wary of harbouring any professional ambitions because they are a corrupting influence which will inevitably leave them anxious, lonely, bitter, and disliked.

Vera's supervisor and editor of the magazines, Eugenie Whittamore, is in the younger woman's eyes, the ultimate business woman. Unlike other characters she doesn't appear to have sacrificed her 'feminine ways' for success in the public sphere. She is described as: 'delicate, gracious – with nothing in her appearance to suggest that she was a shrewd business woman, an ultra-capable editor'.<sup>22</sup> Vera is continually struck by the innocuous appearance of both Miss Whittamore and her office which seems to her 'more like a drawing-room than a business place', its occupant 'looking as if she should be presiding behind a silver teapot'.<sup>23</sup> It might be argued that this portrayal was simply an attempt to ingratiate a new model of femininity with that of convention, in order to encourage social acceptance. However, further points within the narrative would indicate a more negative interpretation. Unlike Hilda Marrachek - outwardly vindictive and obsessively ambitious - Eugenie is not depicted as an explicit threat. She has already realised her goals and is secure in her position as editor. Instead the danger she poses is considered more subtle and therefore more alarming. Eugenie Whittamore, the text suggests, is a cloaked, subversive force, a figure akin to the Siren of legend who lured seamen to their death with a beautiful song, only in this cautionary tale it is the young modern woman and the 'true' feminine role which is at risk. The editor's homely

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p.11.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p.19.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, p.19.

appearance is a façade, it is implied, a ruse which aids her both professionally and in the accumulation of young recruits to the industry by concealing her hard and ruthless character. She doesn't appear to understand or appreciate why any woman would choose to pursue a more conventional domestic femininity and is surprised and disappointed, for example, by her sub-editor's decision to resign her position in order to marry: 'She sighed. "She's getting married and staying in London. I certainly didn't expect this of her - I chose Barbara because I thought she'd be proof against the charm of the Englishman!"'”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, when she offers Vera a permanent position, she assumes that the young woman will ultimately accept because she can conceive no reason why she would reject such an opportunity: ““It's almost settled, I can see. You're too clever a girl to pass up a chance like this. I recognise the authentic career-woman.” She laughed, friendly. “The - shall we say, the single-minded look?””<sup>25</sup>

The final independent woman of this narrative is Irma, Vera's friend and flat-mate. Irma's character represents not the emotional dangers of a professional identity but the supposed physical connotations of such a lifestyle. Although Vera's friend is described as 'smart and versatile' it is said that her 'energy is not always equal to the demands of her job'.<sup>26</sup> On discovering Irma has fallen asleep after returning from work, Vera feels a 'stab of sympathy' when she observes that her friend looks 'tired – and older than her twenty seven years'.<sup>27</sup> Irma appears to have resisted the single-minded callousness of Hilda, yet her physical appearance has suffered at the hands of her career and her independent lifestyle. Such a portrayal could be interpreted as a response to glamorised images of the career-

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, p.19.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p.19.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, p.19.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p.19.

woman, a warning to readers that the dangers posed to the self by this identity are both internal and external.

Luckily for Vera, the narrative suggests, she realises before it is too late that she is pursuing the wrong role and identity, unlike the other unfortunate women of the piece. She is nearly seduced by the outward glamour of the career woman figure, but is fatefully saved by a reminder of her past (British) identity, an identity which was shaped by her relationship to Neil and their shared dreams of domestic stability. The message conveyed by this short story is clear and is emphasised in the text's summary: 'She was the luckiest girl ever, she'd a wonderful job, smart clothes, good looks. She had so much it really wasn't surprising that she'd overlooked a little thing like happiness'. It is a warning to readers that despite the material advantages of a career, a woman can never be truly happy or fulfilled by any alternative to traditional domestic femininity.<sup>28</sup> Significantly positioned at the conclusion of this story, the magazine has placed an advertisement for wedding dress patterns.

This type of short story which utilises the formula of the successful working woman giving up her career for the sake of love and domesticity is often featured within the main magazines of the period, similar material also being found in *Woman's Weekly*, for example.<sup>29</sup> The appearance of these stories and the messages they disseminate support Marjorie Ferguson's assertion that for the producers of post-war women's magazines 'the woman who loved and was loved, either en route to, or within marriage, was the proto-

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, p.11.

<sup>29</sup> See for Example: Bauman, M. 'Rendezvous', *Woman's Weekly*, January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1948, ( London) pp.3-6, 8, 26-27.

female' and that 'the woman who was alone or unloved was not a candidate for the cult'.<sup>30</sup>

This assessment is further supported by the contemporary comments of *Woman's* editor Mary Grieve, ironically one of the most successful single career women of the period. At a meeting with fellow editors regarding the present and future role of women's periodicals, she reproduced the assumption that a woman's primary sphere and interest lay mainly with the affairs of home and family, which would explain the absence of happy, fulfilled career women from the magazines of the day:

Our magazines are closely integrated with the lives of their readers. We serve their health, home, child care, clothes, food, budgets and many other interests which make the pattern of their lives. They read our columns with their minds turned towards their own affairs.<sup>31</sup>

However, resistance to emerging models of independent femininity was not unilaterally reciprocated by all, especially within the fiction of certain post-war novelists. As considered in the previous chapter, both Pym and Manning had produced texts which challenged the validity and authority of prevalent spinster stereotypes and in subsequent material this would also extend to images of independent 'career women'.<sup>32</sup> Susan Ertz was another contemporary writer who contributed to this ongoing discourse, particularly with her novel *The Prodigal Heart*.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the rather sentimental title promotes the assumption that this text is primarily a 'Romance', but its principal concern lies indisputably with the activities, desires and relationships of its single female characters. The narrative contains a

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<sup>30</sup> Ferguson, M. *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity* (London and Exeter, 1983) p.47.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>32</sup> See for example: Manning, O. *The Doves of Venus* (London, 2001 [1955]) and Pym, B. *Jane and Prudence* (London, 1979 [1953]).

<sup>33</sup> Ertz, S. *The Prodigal Heart* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951 [1950]).

variety of differently situated independent women and although certain portrayals appear to resonate at times with established stereotypes, the narrative ultimately supports the diversification of post-war feminine identity.

The central character of this text is Medwin a young widow who is desperate to establish a fulfilling, independent life and household for herself and her daughter, Sarah. However, Medwin has been unable to pursue her ambition since an accident temporarily disabled her mother and she was required to care for her at home. Yet, as her mother's health begins to improve Medwin is suddenly offered an ideal employment opportunity in the city. Her sister agrees to care for Sarah, but she must persuade her fiercely independent aunt Louise to move in temporarily with her mother, thus relieving her for the work.

Although Medwin doesn't initially understand her aunt's avid pursuit of 'complete anonymity' and strict outward projection of the stereotypical spinster, she does appreciate and share her intense desire for independence. She reflects: 'Why should Louise have, and uninterruptedly enjoy, what she so longed for – a life of her own? She did not know what it was to think of others. True she had little, but that little was of her own choosing.'<sup>34</sup> Rather than criticise her aunt's decision to eschew social gendered expectations, Medwin respects and almost envies her position, supporting her belief that every woman has 'the uninhibited right to her own life, her own career' as well as the expression of one's sexuality without reproof or the permanency of marriage.<sup>35</sup> Considering the confidence with which Louise conveys these rather unconventional, yet forward thinking opinions, it is significant as Medwin notes, that she so wholly embodies the quiet, unassuming identity of the traditional

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, p.15.

spinster and not that of the contemporary career woman. However, in a similar way to Pym's Mildred Lathbury, it would appear that Louise purposefully projects this image in order to resist social scrutiny.<sup>36</sup> Yet, in contrast to Mildred this is not done to ensure social acceptance or respectability, but as a facade to cloak what would have been considered a much more deviant identity: Louise is an ardent advocate of Communism. When Medwin discovers her aunt's political beliefs she understands immediately why Louise has chosen to publically represent herself as the more innocuous feminine figure; 'Louise's life, her character, her oddnesses, were lit up for her. Before there had been no way of explaining her. Now she understood a little . . . At least Medwin knew what nourished Louise'. She was 'fascinated by the two women who lived together in her aunt's skin – the prim, dry spinster and the wild revolutionary'.<sup>37</sup> Unlike the professional career women of the text, who are presented as living very much in the public eye, Louise has embraced a slightly less contentious and more culturally overlooked feminine identity, in order to pursue her controversial choice of politics. Louise's actions would suggest that at this moment the established figure of the spinster was for the majority of unmarried women the more acceptable and therefore more respectable identity to assume, *unless* like Miss Lyddon (Medwin's new employer) you were born into aristocracy, wealth and privilege.

With regard to Miss Lyddon, it would appear that there existed much more freedom in the choice of lifestyle and expression of self. Although she lives with her friend - the wealthy, widowed Mrs Gresham - as much for economy as company, her decision to participate in various professional and public roles is through choice and not necessity. Miss Lyddon already carries the social respect bestowed by her familial status and consequently has

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<sup>36</sup> Pym, B. *Excellent Women* (London, 1978 [1952]).

<sup>37</sup> Ertz, S. *The Prodigal Heart*, pp.17, 20&21.

increased liberty to pursue not only a professional feminine identity, but also her employment of preference. As well as sitting on various committees and boards, we are told that Miss Lyddon is the founder of a Home for Crippled Boys, a product of her special interest in the research of infantile paralysis. However, the narrative suggests that for Miss Lyddon this was less an act of charity or maternal empathy than a public show of personal power and influence:

Everyone likes a bit of limelight. And the socially important have to keep on the go or they'd soon cease to be socially important . . . Drop out and you're forgotten in a surprisingly short space of time, whoever you are. Speaking for myself, I like to be busy. It's fun having influence and getting one's own way. It's fun pushing people about and getting things done.<sup>38</sup>

For Miss Lyddon, her role within the public sphere is not significant as a medium for identity formation and self-respect, but as a channel through which she can obtain and demonstrate power. Lyddon recognises this need for power within herself and the consequences it can have for others, but she remains largely unapologetic: 'Desire for power corrupts . . . Anyone who desires power over other lives or even another life is potentially criminal, and I've always wanted power over every life I've come close to'.<sup>39</sup> Significantly, the most recent victim of Lyddon's manipulative influence was Medwin's predecessor Gwen Jones and although the former secretary was like her employer an unmarried working woman, the narrative presents her in an entirely contrasting light. Gwen is portrayed as a nervous, forgettable, colourless spinster compared with the elegant, charismatic and passionate professional, Miss Lyddon, a judgment which was clearly reciprocated by the secretary

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, pp. 206-207.

herself. Robert Lyddon the estranged nephew of Medwin's employer, and a good friend and distant relative of Miss Jones explains to Medwin that the unequal relationship between the two women was not only the cause of his friend's resignation but also her stay in the sanatorium:

You see Gwen is a humble soul; proud, but humble in the face of what she conceives to be real superiority. And my aunt seemed to her one of the really superior people . . . in most ways. Brains, ability, charm, skill, birth. If Gwen didn't at times hate her, I'd say she worshipped her. It was that admiration for my aunt that wore her down. No outlet, you see; it was all locked up in that small spinster body, and I've no doubt nipped pretty cruelly if ever it showed itself. Admiration from the wrong quarter can be an insult to some.<sup>40</sup>

Robert's explanation would suggest that although Miss Lyddon was culpable, Gwen was the primary cause of her own subjugation and low self value. She was unable to envision herself positively as a professional woman like her employer. Instead she assumed the traditional identity of the spinster with its inherent notions of inferiority, failure and loss. Surprisingly, Miss Lyddon recognised and disliked this subservient behaviour so different from her own and, consequently, denied Miss Wood the attention and friendship she sought, knowing that she craved for it:

She was so utterly worthy and so tiresome. She was all that is quite unbearable for a spinster to be, if you know what I mean. She made one feel so dreadfully that she had missed everything, which was most unfair as there was really nothing one could do

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid*, p.129.



about it . . . She was a nice good creature, but she depressed me. No one need be quite so colourless.<sup>41</sup>

There are two possible reasons behind Miss Lyddon's indifferent, yet callous treatment of her former secretary. Firstly, by not allowing Gwen to express her affection or encouraging her to think more of herself, she ensured that her unhealthy admiration continued and she remained in control; she maintained the cosseted power over another life. Alternatively, the narrative suggests, Miss Lyddon avoided the secretary not through intentional malice or an effort to control, but because she related to her feelings of inadequacy. Towards the end of the narrative it becomes increasingly clear that Miss Lyddon is not the supremely confident professional woman that she projects and that much of her controlling behaviour is actually symptomatic of her low self esteem. She admits 'I am an extremely arrogant woman, but at the same time I can never be assured often enough that I am not insignificant and futile'.<sup>42</sup> Despite the opportunities and privileges bequeathed by her birth and the importance of her professional status, Miss Lyddon essentially suffers the same self doubts as Gwen Wood but she reacts in a different way.

The representations of these women, who are obviously in varied states of internal anguish, could be regarded as contemporary commentary on the difficulties faced by the independent woman. However, the assessment of gender which runs through this text is more nuanced. The text implies that this crisis of identity is not only endemic to those of single status, but a problem which affects post-war femininity more broadly. Although the difficulties of the narrative's single women are treated in more depth and detail, the married

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, p.83.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, p.206.

and widowed women of the piece are not without their issues. The text's Mrs Gresham is haunted by her father's working-class origins, Charlotte - Medwin's sister - is struggling to raise her children in the face of her husband's open affair and Medwin herself suffered a mental breakdown, when she was widowed after only a few months of marriage and found herself pregnant. The narrative suggests that the pressures of contemporary gender expectations are certainly felt more keenly by those who remain unmarried whether defined as spinsters or career women, but that all women, married, widowed or single, suffer as a consequence of traditional gender norms. The text presents a critique more generally of the legitimacy of a culture which continually seeks to define a woman's identity through her relationship to men, and which ultimately, therefore, maintains her status as a secondary and inferior being. Although Miss Lyddon finds a level of fulfilment and purpose in her various occupations and professional identity, it is not enough to resolve her self-doubt or her regret that she had never married.<sup>43</sup> As Simone De Beauvoir recognised at the time, although the advantage of financial autonomy accompanied a working life, the independent woman was still constrained and de-valued by the gendered moral, social and cultural frameworks of the period, Beauvoir argued:

The social structure has not been much modified by the changes in woman's condition; this world, always belonging to men still retains the form they have given it . . . she has to please men if she is to succeed in her life as woman. The fact of being a woman today poses peculiar problems for an independent human individual . . . The woman who does not conform devaluates herself sexually and hence socially, since sexual values are an integral feature of society.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, p. 87.

<sup>44</sup> De Beauvoir, S. *The Second Sex*, pp. 689, 691 and 692.

With regard to the representations of working women produced through the cultural texts considered here, it would appear that although this figure was becoming more common and perhaps, slightly less controversial, it was still derided and de-valued as an alternative femininity. Although single working women had increasing opportunity to openly pursue work or even a career, which afforded them some social and economic value (unlike their predecessor the 'spinster'), they were still de-feminised, marginalised and thought unsuccessful as women. Considering how single working women themselves perceived this shift in cultural perception and the effects it had upon their sense of self is essential, in order to fully appreciate its significance and the two-way relationship of gendered identity construction.

### **Before the Feminists? The Independent Working Woman and the Search for an Alternative Femininity**

She realised now that her mother and sister resented not so much her escape as her wish to escape what seemed to them the common lot. They had accepted it; why should not she?<sup>45</sup>

Throughout Manning's *The Doves of Venus* (1955) from which this quotation derives, the reader is presented with a variety of women who are striving to assert themselves as something other than the wife and mother ideal posited by post-war convention. In contrast to the figure of the spinster with its roots in an earlier period, these aspiring independent women were not defined by unfortunate loss and consequence, but possibility and ambition. As with Susan Ertz's novel, Manning's narrative highlights the prejudices, difficulties and self-doubts which accompanied such an identity, but it also confirms, as hers does, that post-war notions

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<sup>45</sup> Manning, O. *The Doves of Venus* (London, 1955) p.35.

governing the definitional limits of femininity were expanding, not contracting. However, as some contemporary memoirs would suggest, a single woman's recognition of and engagement with this development were generally more problematic than that of her fictional counterparts. It would appear that depending upon an individual's social and cultural background the dominance of traditional gender norms could have a varying impact on their ability to embrace, identify or even envision an alternative femininity.

Diana Athill's autobiography *Instead of a Letter* (1963), as discussed in the previous chapter, recalls the sense of sadness which pervaded the author's life as a young professional woman. Athill was haunted for many years by a debilitating sense of failure as a young single woman because she continued to measure herself and her activities against the dominant ideal of the period. Unlike Ellie the protagonist of *The Doves of Venus*, for example, Athill did not intentionally seek to embody or associate herself with the figure of an independent working woman, despite the fact that this was exactly what she was. Perceiving marriage and maternity as the only legitimate route to a successful femininity, Athill was unable to envision her professional activities as anything other than a financial necessity and signifier of her failure. Although the author's long held views on female sexuality ran contrary to the mores of the period, they were rooted in a much more conventional belief that love, sex and ultimately marriage were integral and primary to the feminine state. Athill considered with hindsight that this was an outlook established and evident from an early age, as a point of unanimous unspoken consensus throughout her whole family. She recalled that she and her younger sister were never encouraged to pursue, and rarely even exposed to, alternative models of femininity. The dutiful return of Athill's only unmarried working aunt to the family home following the death of her grandfather, served only to reinforce the notion that a

woman's professional activities were unimportant, frivolous compared with that of her family commitments:

It is astonishing to remember how few working women we knew – none at all well . . . Sometimes a report would come in that so-and-so's daughter – 'such a clever girl' – had got 'a wonderful job in the Foreign Office' or 'was doing so well at the Manchester Guardian'. We would admire this, but the mere fact that the girl was in such a job removed her from our sphere and made her seem a different kind of person from oneself.<sup>46</sup>

Athill's disengagement with the notion of professional femininity was such, that when someone referred to her as a 'career woman' (by which time she was well established in her long term occupation in publishing) she experienced genuine surprise: 'Good God! I thought and was about to protest. But what is a woman with a job and no husband, once past thirty, if not a career woman?'<sup>47</sup> Although she resisted the idea that her employment in publishing had completely overturned her deep-rooted feelings of failure, she did conclude that it was fundamental to an increasing sense of personal peace and acceptance which had been lacking since her failed engagement years earlier:

That I was lucky I knew. My basic sense of failure was always present like a river bed, but the water running over the bed had become deeper than I supposed it would ever be. My work brought enough incident and movement into my life for me to be content to exist with very little beyond that.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Athill, D. *Instead of a Letter* (London, 1963 ) p.139.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*, p.139.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, p.186.

I had become, if not a career woman, at least a woman who had found a career.<sup>49</sup>

However, when Athill discovered a love of, and talent for writing, she realised that she had found not only an alternative vocation to that of the prescribed wife and mother, but also an alternative identity. She recalled that the impact this discovery made to her sense of self and her outlook for the future was so profound, that the change in her was even perceptible to other people. Following her success in a national writing competition which affirmed her identity as a writer, she remembered overhearing various and numerous comments about how well and how young she now looked.<sup>50</sup> She surmised that this dramatic change to her exterior appearance was achieved by nothing else than the ‘power of mood’ – her new found feelings of happiness and contentment, which were, it might be argued, derived from the security she experienced from her new purpose and position within the social framework.<sup>51</sup> In contrast to the sense of isolation and estrangement which defined her first years of adulthood, Athill began to present herself as part of the social collective; in her eyes her identity as a writer both validated and legitimised her existence within the world.

If I die with my wits about me, not shuffled out under drugs or reduced to incoherence by pain, I want my last thoughts to be of plants growing, children being born, people who never knew me digging their gardens or telephoning their friends. It is in the existence of other things and other people that I can feel the pulse of my own: the pulse something which hums and throbs in everything, and thus in me.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, p.179.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, p.211.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, p.209.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, pp.222-223.

Another life history requiring consideration is that of Alison Hennegan. Hennegan's memories are interesting because they highlight the significance of past feminine experience and representation of employment upon her own developing identity and career aspirations in the post-war period. Her account also highlights the complexities and diversity of individual engagement with the identity of the working woman, an engagement intersected by experiences of class, race and sexuality. These recollections appear in a compilation purposefully produced by a number of female academics who were all children and adolescents in the long 1950s.<sup>53</sup> As a narrative written in retrospect, this text differs from the previous in that it was not produced during the period of historical interest, it was published in 1985. Unlike the material of the previous texts, the childhood memories recollected here have been influenced and shaped not by the cultural, social and political climate of the post-war years, but that of the mid 1980s and contemporary feminist theories. Although this is an issue to be kept in mind when analysing the text, it does not invalidate the representations offered by it. In actuality, the adult's hindsight which informed Hennegan's memories might actually prove useful, in giving a child's past abstract thoughts and perceptions a form and relevance otherwise unattainable.

This particular text affords two possible avenues of analysis; the first being Hennegan's own early realisation and development into a career-oriented single lesbian woman in the 1950s and 1960s, and the second, her impressions of those older single working women influential upon her post-war childhood. The first part of this analysis will be to consider the latter, taking in to account those single women who although unknown to

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<sup>53</sup> Hennegan, A. '... And battles long ago' in Heron, L. (ed.) *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing up in the Fifties* (London: Virago, 1985).

her personally, significantly impacted upon her formative years and perception of the single working woman through their influence upon her parents.

The information provided by the text on the single working women so influential yet unseen by Hennegan, might initially be construed as minimal, considering the effect she claims they have had upon her life.<sup>54</sup> The reader is told that the first of these family icons was Miss Lacey the supportive former headmistress of Mrs. Hennegan. She was a New Woman and a good friend of George Bernard Shaw the controversial playwright, and of Stewart Headlam the radical Christian Socialist. The second, Miss Dorothy Tarrant, a friend and neighbour of her parents courting days ‘went as an undergraduate to Girton in 1904 and became eventually Regius Professor of Greek in the University of London’.<sup>55</sup> However this lack of personal information on the two women is simply a reflection of the way these figures have been (and indeed still are) constructed by Hennegan and her parents. In the eyes of the Hennegan family, we the readers have been told all the important information. What these women were like as individuals, the intricacies of their lives and how they conducted themselves is irrelevant to their representation as heroines.

According to the Hennegans, these independent women (through their impressive professional achievements and intellect), have risen above the banalities of everyday life and transcended the social conventions which would seek to define and confine them. These were the kind of women whom Hennegan’s father ‘deeply and sincerely admired’ and indeed he ‘was self-deprecating in their presence’, but for Alison Hennegan their influence was even

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<sup>54</sup> She regards them as her ‘spiritual godmothers’ (Hennegan, A. ‘. . . And Battles Long Ago’, p.147).

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, p.148.



more profound.<sup>56</sup> In the following passage we learn the extent to which the legend of these women shaped not only her view of single working/career women (in stark contrast to the prevalent image of the period), but also her own life choices:

Both ‘Girton’ and ‘Greek’ became words endowed for me with semi-magical meaning: each seemed in some way to be a key to mysterious, barely attainable riches. Somehow I meant to get those keys and turn them.

Quite early on I deduced that those tantalising riches came most often to those women who didn’t marry. Those women I most admired or who influenced me – Miss Fuller, my piano teacher, Miss Lacey, Miss Tarrant – were all spinsters. Moreover, they were all women of such dignity, such presence, that they all became for me the definition of Spinsterhood. Very early on a word which was for others so often the cue for sniggering contempt signified for me female strength, independence and freedom.<sup>57</sup>

Although the achievements of these women must not be ignored and the respect they have gained underrated, there are it could be argued as many problems with this celebratory representation of the single woman as with the more popular derogatory images. Lost in her admiration for these women, Hennegan has become unconsciously guilty of harbouring the very thing of which she accused her father: ‘the assumption that there are two kinds of women’.<sup>58</sup> By constructing unmarried femininity in this way as the only possible route to feminine enlightenment, Hennegan is undermining the experience and achievements of differently situated women, for example, that of her own mother who brought up two children and ran a home whilst also teaching full time at the local school. In effect she has simply

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<sup>56</sup> *ibid*, p.147.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*, p.148.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*, p.148.

*inverted* the post-war notion that only marriage and family life could equip women with the key to ‘tantalising riches’, replacing it instead with spinsterhood and a career.<sup>59</sup>

Despite, however, Hennegan’s early desire to emulate the lifestyles of her single heroines and parental approval of this identity, she still struggled under the pressure to conform to post-war ideals of femininity. This is evidenced by an early childhood obsession with the period before the Great War (as represented by the old family albums), which as Hennegan herself realises was a reaction toward her feelings of confusion for the present and its gendered ideals, together with a growing awareness of her homosexuality:

. . . I resisted the present so vehemently because I was already uncomfortably aware that I wasn’t going to fit in. I didn’t consciously define myself as a lesbian until I was thirteen, when I met the word for the first time and recognised that it and I belonged together. But long before that I felt chafed, excluded, cramped by the assumptions about boys and girls, men and women, which I sensed crowding in from the world outside.<sup>60</sup>

The familial acceptance of single working women, it would seem, was not enough to counteract the dominance of sexual and gendered conventions promoted by the cultural frameworks of the period, and as Hennegan rightly recognised the internal battle it created within her would shape her identity and behaviour for the future. As a homosexual single working woman/girl, Hennegan was doubly affected by the inflexible demands of the feminine ideal; she would not only offend the norm with her independent lifestyle, but also

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid*, p.148.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*, p.134.

with her sexuality. To be an independent heterosexual woman might court accusations of failure, but to be a single, lesbian woman would ensure accusations of deviancy.

Whether Hennegan did suffer more than the heterosexual girls her age, who also found that they could not embody the role prescribed to them, is open to conjecture. However, the effects of her confusion over the gendered position she was required to negotiate were dramatic and arguably largely negative. As she highlights in the following statement: 'I retreated by becoming a Watcher. Watching comes naturally to the powerless. To observe, note, record, compare, is a necessary tool for survival: every beleaguered group knows that'.<sup>61</sup> During her childhood and in her recollection of it, Hennegan recognized that her position was socially precarious and, as she perceived it, powerless; her personal inclinations meant that she was incapable of achieving the gendered ideal that was expected of her. As a consequence she withdrew from the society which she knew would eventually reject her, communicating only what she knew others would want to hear, particularities and behaviour which she had gained from her observations.

During this difficult time of personal confusion Hennegan also retreated into fantasy, a psychological environment where, perhaps, she could readdress the balance of power. She retreated into a world of diverse day dreams which all had one symbolic theme in common: 'a masochistic vision of the world whereby the self is proved, redeemed – ultimately victorious – only through suffering and humiliation.'<sup>62</sup> As a young child Hennegan appears to have been accepting of and at ease with the person she was, she did not attempt to reject or deny her inner self, but even at this young age Hennegan realised that others would not

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid*, p.136.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid*, p.137.

tolerate her differences and controversial choices. In her child's mind she knew that she would be socially marginalised, if not ostracised. However, for her the social humiliation was a natural inevitability, a rite of passage which must be suffered in order that others might then recognize her worth.

One of the most interesting fantasies indulged by Hennegan was her invention of a German-Jewish persona, 'complete with changed name, parentage and family history'.<sup>63</sup> Despite the fact that Hennegan wasn't yet born when the atrocities of the Holocaust took place, the event was still raw within public consciousness. Possibly, as Hennegan had no other marginal group or individual with whom she could identify, she was drawn to the only images of marginality and persecution available. It is possible that as a child Hennegan equated her own socially hazardous situation with that of the Jewish people or, perhaps, she felt that a German-Jewish girl was a more publicly acceptable or recognised outsider than a homosexual English girl with ambitions of a career and independence. Additionally, the suffering of the Jewish people yet their ultimate survival as a cultural group confirmed Hennegan's belief; personal redemption must always be preceded by pain. In her child fantasies the females to emulate were not the contemporary sugary-sweet girls of Blyton's creation, for example, but those of Jewish extraction who had undergone the baptism of fire and survived.

The material offered by this text, provides not only a contrasting perception of single working women during the immediate post-war years, but also insight into how such perceptions could impact upon the younger generation of the day. Hennegan knew from an

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, p.137.

early age that she wished to pursue a career and professional identity like Miss Lacey and Miss Tarrant before her. However, she also realised simultaneously that this decision, along with her homosexuality, would invite controversy and emotional hardship. Her childhood behaviours and fantasies appear to have been her way of preparing for that potential eventuality. Hennegan's recollection re-emphasises the point that 'single women' and their experiences of work must not be homogenised. Although, single women may have shared employment status, their social, emotional or psychological experiences leading up to and beyond that employment were likely to have been radically different. Some women, like Hennegan, always knew that they would pursue a professional feminine identity and prepared for it from an early age. Whereas, those like Diana Athill had a much more ambiguous engagement with this emerging femininity.

With regard to the general cultural representation of single women in the long 1950s, it is clear that their diversity was rarely taken into account, as they were inevitably standardised under one of the three dominant images the 'spinster', the new 'career' or 'working woman' or if she had a child the 'unmarried mother'. However, despite this homogenisation and persisting prejudices from certain quarters, the opportunity for women to pursue a working identity in the public eye was a significant and empowering development, should they have the ability to embrace it. According to certain 'backlash' accounts of the period, the post-war media was entirely awash with a femininity firmly rooted in the private sphere. However, such accounts ignore clear evidence that alternative models were being imagined and often supported, increasingly through cultural representation and also by aspiring individuals. Such evidence calls for a more nuanced approach to the study of the period and to the analysis of cultural representation and gender identity because it points to not only the complexities of media production, but the media's tenuous ability to impose

gender ideals unilaterally upon an unknowing audience. The traditional figure of the spinster was gradually giving way to a different model of single femininity one defined by activity and presence, not dependency and victimisation. Although unmarried women continued to be marginalised and the emotional penalties were often grave, it was a femininity which potentially offered an alternative route to fulfilment and happiness and it should not be forgotten that it was a route taken and enjoyed by many.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion

History is a complicated tale of multiple voices contesting for authority.<sup>1</sup>

As Barbara Abrash and Daniel Walkowitz emphasise so succinctly in this quotation, the practices of the past (and the present) are generated by a complexity of processes, overseen, generated and resisted by a range of different agents and agencies. Nowhere, is this process clearer than in the historical construction of gender. The integral part that notions of gender play in the structures of culture and society mean that it is always a primary and emotive topic of importance, and the period following the Second World War was no different. The prevalence of conventional representations of gender in the discourses of the period does not indicate widespread conservative consensus, but an anxious reaction to the changes afoot. As this study has examined, the effects of total war had altered the gendered landscape of Britain significantly, affording many women opportunities for change which had first been formulated two decades earlier. The drudgery and illness associated with multiple pregnancies and births suffered by the previous generations of women, could now be controlled with increasing access, for all married women, to birth control. In addition, more and more women were taking advantage of the chance for paid employment, a consequence initially of the national production drive and then an expanding consumables industry, as well as the fledgling welfare state. The established pattern of many women's lives was changing.

However, these developments generally met with optimism by many, also generated a significant amount of anxiety within the wider cultural sphere. Britain's imperial dominance

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<sup>1</sup> Abrash, B. And Walkowitz, D. J. 'Sub/versions of History: A meditation on film and historical narrative' *History Workshop*, 38, (1994) p.205

was waning and together with an existing fear that the population was not regenerating its numbers, the role of women as producers of the nation became of prime importance. Written into the Beveridge report upon which many new post-war social policies and provisions were based, was an emphatic conviction that women must be encouraged and supported in their primary and natural role as wives and mothers if the nation was to survive. In support of this stance, the works of child psychologists and doctors such as Winnicott, Bowlby and Spence emphasised the belief that twenty-four hour mothering was vital to the mental health of future citizens. Bowlby especially, warned of the dangers that absent working mothers could pose to an undeveloped child, yet all the ‘experts’ concurred that the ‘normative’ family unit - composed of mother and father – was key if society was to be protected against the malignancy of the maladjusted delinquent. The overwhelming message produced by this pronatalist discourse was that women must focus upon their biological role as mothers and wives above all else.

The reformulated traditional white, English family complete with companionate marriage and new suburban semi-detached was imagined as a principle means of post-war reconstruction. The dominance of this image within all areas of post-war culture gave the illusion that it reflected a reality - an homogenous society built upon the ‘home-centred family’, conventional gender roles and social stability. However, this prevalent representation was a façade born of the fear and ambiguity harboured by certain elements of society for the changes underway, especially with regard to the diversifying feminine role. Yet, despite the fact that very few women could ever meet the specifications demanded by the projected feminine ideal, the narrow image of the professional housewife continued to be the model upon which all women were measured, and upon which they measured themselves. The role and identity of woman as wife and mother during the long 1950s was promoted above all



others and the connotations could be devastating. Firstly, the pressure of expectation to attain and maintain this gendered norm could impact significantly on the way women perceived themselves. Secondly, those women who did not, or could not, embody the prescribed identity could face, at best, social and cultural ‘sidelining’ or at the worst, vilification. The spinster and the unmarried mother, as this study has demonstrated, were particularly vulnerable to such criticism in all manner of guises; criticism largely engendered by a moral framework which maintained that there existed right and wrong arenas for sexual reproduction and the practice of feminine sexuality. These two figures were often perceived as embodying two opposing types of feminine deviancy. The spinster, who was assumed to be celibate, represented thwarted maternal and sexual longing, a bitter, unnatural creature whose identity was largely defined by loss. Alternatively, at the other end of spectrum, the unmarried mother was traditionally perceived as immoral, delinquent and ruled by sexual desire, but also increasingly as a maladjusted and mentally unstable individual prone to excesses of behaviour. The effects of such stereotypes, however, were the same. They were a warning that alternative femininities to the accepted norm were unnatural and wrong, identities one should never aspire to if complete social acceptance was to be expected.

However, in spite of the difficulties posed by their marginal position, there is evidence that many post-war unmarried women, with or without children, were increasingly resisting and re-negotiating the restrictive labels which sought to define and confine them. Simultaneously, representations within popular culture were also contributing to the imagining of a more positive configuration of single femininity. The moral frameworks which had previously policed and limited women’s sphere of action were gradually fracturing, as new opportunities and different ways of thinking diversified and proliferated following the war. Paradoxically, it was often those features of post-war provision designed

to encourage and support the traditional family unit, which provided the means by which those outside the norm might construct and imagine alternative identities and patterns of living. The changes and rebellions which occurred, however, were not generally noisy, organised affairs practised on a large scale, but subtle, sometimes unconscious events which have often gone unnoticed and unexplored. A reason for such oversight can often be found in the contradictory nature of contemporary autobiographies, testimonies, magazines, novels or film; their content is not always so easily categorised by resistance or acquiescence to gendered norms, as it can generally contain a measure of both. The long 1950s was not a period of diverse, widespread and open challenges to long held gender conventions, yet neither was it an era of stagnant, smug conservatism. However, it was a period signified by revision and transition and gradual momentum, a period of ground work which provided the conditions in which second wave feminism might take root.

With regard to the unmarried mother as both imagined figure and individual, many changes and developments were taking place, if not always progressive. For centuries the dominant moral doctrines of the Church had policed and defined feminine sexuality and acceptable circumstances for the reproduction of children. Consequently, any individual who deviated from the conventional formula had always been assessed in terms of sin; to produce a child out of wedlock was not only a moral crime against society, but also against God. Even, the few charitable agencies before the war prepared to aid the unmarried mother, did not alter this punitive attitude, but contributed to its dominance through their construction as centres for moral and spiritual rehabilitation. They may have posited the notion that some women could be saved and diverted from a life of continued sin, and eventually developed into useful, god-fearing citizens, but this idea was based on the belief that they were initially dangerous and deviant before intervention began. Significantly, this approach toward

unmarried motherhood was perpetuated and somewhat strengthened in the period, by the state's continued reliance on the Church and their moral welfare workers providing the majority share of support and temporary accommodation.

However, as interest in child psychology began to burgeon following the war a diversification in stance toward unmarried mothers began to occur. It was maintained that these women and girls were not innately immoral but mentally unstable, their pregnancies generally a symptom of a neurotic character. John Bowlby criticised past punitive attitudes toward such women, maintaining that a professional, unemotional approach must be adopted instead. He called for greater intervention from the state and consequently a significant break from the influence of the Church. However, although this development, together with increased emphasis on the dangers of 'maternal-deprivation' in childhood, could have proved positive, his assumption that most unmarried mothers would make unsuitable parents persisted, over-shadowing any potentially progressive aspects of his work. Instead of spiritual rehabilitation, he suggested that such mothers required intensive support and training from psychologists and social workers instead. Arguably, this anxiety for the welfare of unmarried mothers stemmed less from a genuine professional concern, than it did from the simple fear that emotional and mental defectives could only beget more defectives. As with the earlier Church influenced approach to illegitimate pregnancy, Bowlby's stance homogenised all unmarried mothers as dangerous and 'other' from the outset.

Despite, the fact that this new 'expert' discourse continued to demonise the unmarried mother, however, it did provide one important function. It challenged the monopoly and therefore, validity of a long established representation, which narrowly couched her only in terms of sin and immorality. The development of this alternative perception signified (if not

hastened), the beginning of an important diversification in the way unmarried mothers would be henceforth imagined and treated. By the beginning of the 1960s literary and filmic representations of the unmarried mother were not only appearing more frequently, but they were also being used to subvert conventional notions governing gender, race and class. These representations were challenging the cruel prejudice which blighted unmarried mothers, as well as the norms which defined and limited feminine agency more generally. Some of these texts not only highlighted the emotional and social difficulties of unmarried motherhood, but also utilised the subject to imagine alternative femininities undefined by relationships to men. A contentious idea indeed, considering the exaggerated contemporary emphasis on the wedded state.

Although positive images of this figure only began to appear in any number toward the end of the long 1950s period, a series of independent, regional studies illustrated that many unmarried mothers had dared to head loving family units long before. These studies showed that, contrary to common belief, women from all classes experienced illegitimate pregnancy, but that the outcome of those pregnancies would generally depend on the mother's social and familial background. Whether through greater access to abortion, secrecy or the pressure of expectation, most women from middle and upper-classes were apparently choosing not to raise their illegitimate children, whereas, those women regarded working-class would often take their babies home. This notable divergence of experience resulted not from a general working-class sexual laxity, as often proposed, but from significant differences in ideas, practices and values surrounding marriage, respectability and sex. It was found that the parents of babies from working-class backgrounds would often marry following the birth of their child, or if this was not possible, both mother and baby may return to the home of her parents. Alternatively, following the increased availability of limited

national assistance, some working-class mothers were also establishing their own homes independently from their families and the children's fathers. Of course, there were many instances in which working-class women were unable to keep, or forced to relinquish their babies, but contemporary accounts suggest that this was not the predominant outcome. Although records from mother and baby homes along with contemporary testimonies indicate initial familial turmoil following the news of illegitimate pregnancy, they also show that expectant working-class grandparents frequently grew accustomed to the idea and were prepared to support their daughters in the face of general social opprobrium.

Despite, the expected censure and material difficulties of unmarried motherhood contemporary accounts, such as those recorded by sociologist Dennis Marsden, also indicate that misery and shame were not always the defining features of fatherless families, as is commonly assumed. Contrary to Bowlby's beliefs, none of the women interviewed had purposely become pregnant and neither were they ignorant of, or unaffected by, the shame and guilt which accompanied their position. However, whilst many testimonies indicated an awareness of the disgrace associated with illegitimate pregnancy, significantly many mothers felt that their consequent success at parenting had absolved them. The majority of such interviewees did not focus on the circumstances around their children's conception, or the absent fathers, but the efforts they had made to bring up their children well and the pride that they had in them. It might be argued that, this re-focus in interview was simply an attempt to evade or downplay the shame of unmarried status, however, it was rare that any excuses were offered for their sexual transgressions, which were often recalled with candour. Therefore, it would be right to suggest that, these women were no longer being defined by their status as unmarried mothers as cultural norms demanded, but their capabilities as good, independent mothers.

Despite the continuance of homogenising, punitive treatment and representations of the unmarried mother during the long 1950s, it is wrong to presume that all experiences of unmarried motherhood were the same, or that they were all defined by disgrace, loss and misery. Although most women suffered a great deal in many different ways for their perceived crime against morality and the nation at large, there were some mothers who were able to resist contemporary prejudice and practice, and establish alternative and happy families. With limited national assistance payments and support from friends and family, some unmarried mothers were able to construct families in which a different conception of feminine identity was possible; an identity which was defined outside the boundaries of marriage and a dependency on men.

At the opposite pole of perceived feminine deviancy, those women categorised as spinsters were also challenging the validity of established representations which would have them condemned to lives of unhappiness and loneliness. Continually over the decades as greater emphasis had been placed on the nuclear family and a woman's domestic role as housewife and mother, the single woman had been represented as a surplus oddity; a woman embittered and stunted by her failure to marry and have children – an 'old maid'. This figure, largely unchallenged, had continued to symbolise single femininity into the long 1950s, and strengthened by the works of inter-war sexologists had perpetuated ideas that feminine independency was not only undesirable but also unnatural. Arguably, for the single women of the post-war era such notions could prove particularly damaging because unlike the 'surplus women' of the previous generation, they could not construct their identities as unfortunate victims of war. They were unable to argue that their opportunities for matrimony had been

reduced in the same way, as the death rate of serving soldiers in the Second World War was considerably less than in the previous. Therefore, the post 1945 spinster was unable to legitimise her single status as an unfortunate consequence of events outside her control. At a time when the large majority of women were married, suspicion might easily be cast upon a single woman's character, agenda and/or sexuality.

The scorn with which single women had historically been, and continued to be perceived, significantly impacted upon the ways post-war spinsters imagined themselves. During the years following the First World War some single women had begun to challenge the inequity of their treatment and representation. A variation of the 'old maid' model had begun to emerge and was largely related to the single woman's increasing freedom both within areas of employment and society at large. This image of the spinster stood in opposition to that of the 'old maid', she was defined not by a solitary, limited lifestyle but an active involvement within the local community and the wider world. These 'Excellent Women' or spinster -citizens were often considered the backbone of Church and Charity organisation, a factor which should have ensured their position as respectable and indispensable citizens. However, the construction of spinsterhood which had afforded them a level of acceptance in the inter-war period, had ultimately limited the development of a more positive identity built upon agency and success. Early post-war images of the spinster promoted by organisations such as the N.S.P.A. or individuals such as Margery Fry, perpetuated notions that independent femininity was a burden to be borne, an unfortunate consequence of events or even a failure. Their identities as vital members of the market economy or as key contributors to social organisation were consistently overshadowed. Their representations of single femininity supported naturalised beliefs that marriage and motherhood were the only feminine norm. Their attempts at resisting damaging stereotypes,

therefore, were hampered by a continued association of spinsterhood with sublimation and loss.

The emotional effects of this disparaging image of single women can clearly be seen in the autobiographies and papers of certain successful professional women at the time. For example, in their early career's Barbara Pym and Diana Athill plainly demonstrated fear and regret when contemplating their spinsterhood. Athill in particular, recalls an overwhelming sense of failure which impacted significantly on her sense of self for many years. She admittedly went into a self-induced social hibernation during this period of her life, existing not living despite her growing success as an editor and publisher. Similarly, Pym's novels and letters convey a woman dissatisfied and critical of the identity she is expected to assume, but simultaneously they also betray a woman humbled by it.

However, as opportunities and acceptance of women in work increased over the period, it would appear that certain single women, including Diana Athill, were beginning to appreciate the satisfaction and validation which could be found in their role and identity as workers. Increasingly, they no longer perceived their employment as a mark of failure or as a mere necessity, but an alternative route to self-fulfilment and happiness. Of course, the emergence of this new empowered woman-worker was predictably met with suspicion and criticism, just as alternative femininities had been in the past. A critique generated perhaps, from the fact that notions of 'freedom, escape and financial power' had 'more often been attached to single men' rather than single women.<sup>2</sup> She was frequently represented as a new kind of femme fatale, a woman hardened by her experiences of the public sphere and the

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<sup>2</sup> Holden, K. *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914 - 1960* (Manchester and New York, 2007), p.3.



denial of her supposed softer, more feminine qualities. Arguably, this is still a model which persists today.

However, in the long 1950s there appears to have been a growing awareness, within the ranks of younger middle-class women especially, that this alternative feminine identity was becoming increasingly accessible and desirable, an awareness that a different life from that of their mothers' and grandmothers' was possible. A development significantly engendered no doubt, by the fact that 'girls leaving school were able to choose from a wider variety of jobs than the previous generation' ever had.<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps one of the reasons why the new generation of so-called teenagers created so much anxiety, they were living proof that trends and attitudes had changed, irrevocably. Katherine Holden argues that 'the frequent denigration of spinsters made it harder for this younger generation to see singleness as a positive choice', and in many instances this was true, but this gendered prejudice no longer held the same power, it had been weakened by the discourse of expanding opportunity.<sup>4</sup> The decision to strive for independence, as Alison Hennegan's testimony illustrates, was certainly not easy or unproblematic at this time. Girls and women who chose to embrace a life which ran contrary to the accepted feminine norm, or even the tenets of the emerging dual –role, knew that they would be 'swimming against the tide', but this was a price it would seem, that more were prepared to pay.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Spencer, S. 'Women's dilemma's in post-war Britain: Career stories for adolescent girls in the 1950s' *History of Education*, 29:4 (2000), p329.

<sup>4</sup> Holden, K. *The Shadow of Marriage*, p.39

<sup>5</sup> Although the Federation of British Professional and Business Women contained both married and unmarried women, it is significant that between 1941 and 1951 its membership grew from 68,000 to 90,000. See: Perriton, L. 'Forgotten Feminists: The Federation of British Professional and Business Women 1933-1969, *Women's History Review*, 16:1 (2007), p.87

Paradoxically perhaps, this study has been fundamentally structured around two categories of unmarried women, although its aim has been to expose their existence as fractured, temporally specific and contested concepts. Additionally, it has also sought to explore the impact and influence they have had upon the women they were used to represent, but also their use and development as tools for self identification. The rather simple title of this thesis gives the impression that these are relatively straightforward processes - to represent and to experience - yet it hides infinite complexity and diversity. As illustrated here, not only were these representations hybrid products of both past and emerging gendered discourses influenced by, and affiliated with a myriad other discourses and material processes, but they were also understood, mobilised and internalised in different ways, by different people, at different times. In essence, this study has generated far more questions than it has answered and, therefore, its findings also should not be classed as 'representative', but instead the products of a small, narrow foray into some aspects and moments of post-war constructions of single femininity. In particular the research might be expanded to include analysis on the impact of race or age upon the experiences of single women. In addition, further research is needed into the post-war construction of other single or alternative feminine identities, such as the widow, the divorcee, or the lesbian. This, and any related study, would also benefit from a sizable collection and analysis of oral testimony, in order to further examine the reciprocal relationship between cultural representations of femininities and individual subjectivity.

However, to appreciate a study's limitations in the examination of such a vast and problematic subject is not to underestimate the importance of such studies, or the significance of their findings. The work presented here is a contribution to a recent, essential effort to understand this period of British history more fully and to challenge misconceptions which

subsequent representations and studies have fostered. It has illustrated that contrary to accepted beliefs, certain unmarried women and cultural representations of them were beginning to challenge and resist the policed marginality of the single woman's position. It has argued that in view of much evidence, the period of the long 1950s should not be considered a nadir for opportunity of independent feminine thought and action, but a period in which women were increasingly questioning the validity of restrictive gendered norms and realising the potential of greater choice and agency. In conclusion, it is only through such work as this, that scholars can ultimately refine their understanding and interpretations of the way in which notions of gender were not only imagined, practiced and mobilised in the past, but also how they are in the present.

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