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Following the post-World War II flight from the city to the suburbs, Hollywood frequently produced films representing life in the suburbs during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The female roles restricted actresses to play sweet, feminine housewives, often lacking interests outside the home. The publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 provided at least one forum for a discussion of the middle-class housewife’s inner secrets: boredom, disappointment, and loneliness. Studios, however, ignored new gender developments in society until 1967 when some movies started to portray housewives rebelling against their suburban surroundings: women having affairs, seeking therapy (whether with a psychiatrist or a bottle of vodka), and experiencing mental breakdowns. Films attempted to articulate women’s frustrations but often failed to provide prescriptions for the housewives’ turmoil. These movies presented new views with women questioning their societal roles as opposed to following traditional models from the 1950s and early 1960s. By the mid-1970s, some movies openly discussed feminist goals and issues, presenting women’s concerns to a wide audience. These changes culminated in 1975 when *The Stepford Wives* infuriated feminists and signaled the decline of housewife-focused films. These suburban stories faded into the background of Hollywood despite enjoying financial and critical success. From 1960 to 1975, Hollywood belatedly tried to address the issues and concerns of the suburban housewife by breaking away from stereotypes perpetuated in earlier domestic humor roles, but ultimately forcing these women into suburban boxes.

In recent years, research has rarely touched on the role of the suburban housewife in Hollywood films. One notable exception is *The Stepford Wives*. Despite feminist outrage from figures such as Betty Friedan, who called the film a “rip-off” of the women’s movement, Anna Krugovy Silver believes the film helped disseminate second-wave feminist ideals to mainstream
culture.¹ Jane Elliott, in her article “Stepford U.S.A.,” discusses philosophical themes demonstrated in *The Stepford Wives* including automation and time.² As a result of Bryan Forbes’ 1975 film, the repetitious life of the housewife, along with the image presented by Stepford wives, remains prominent in popular culture. Although there is a lack of research focusing on suburban housewives on the big screen, much research has been done on two separate but related fields: gendered spaces and film usage in history. Historians often ascribe gendered characteristics to various locations in society. Susan Saegert argues that American culture has constructed polar opposites: the city against the suburb, man against woman.³ Many historians argue that the suburbs created an undeniable bond between domesticity and the housewife. Laura J. Miller writes that many Americans believed that the suburbs were the most promising place for the family to flourish, but often led to the isolation of the housewife from larger society.⁴ Similarly, recent research studying women in film frequently focuses on movies produced from 1940 to 1960 and then often ignores most women, including housewives, until the 1980s. One exception is the “sexploitation” films that concentrated on the sexual activities of housewives, such as the 1964 film *Sin in the Suburbs*. This paper will not deal with such films; instead, it focuses only on movies that portray the lives of suburban middle-class housewives. While there is a dearth of research focusing on this topic, there are scholars who emphasize the importance of using film in the study of history. Ray B. Browne writes in the foreword to *Hollywood as Historian*, “If a picture, as we generally agree, is worth a thousand words, then a

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motion picture or a movie, is worth millions of words because it is words in action.”⁵ Many historians agree that Hollywood during the 1960s was hesitant to portray the housewife’s dilemma on screen. Few films positively and accurately portrayed the changing demands and struggles of housewives. Molly Haskell writes that newly liberated women were nowhere in sight, particularly citing Anne Bancroft’s character of Mrs. Robinson as “the villain” in the 1967 hit film, The Graduate.⁶ Hollywood, continuing the trend of the “happy housewife” from earlier films during the first half of the 1960s, belatedly attempted to address the concerns of suburban housewives but ultimately cemented their image as women trapped in suburban isolation.

In the post-World War II decade, young, married, middle-class couples, often with children, joined a mass exodus to settle in the suburbs. By definition, a suburb is a community within a metropolitan area outside the core city.⁷ Many white city-dwellers found their lives lacking meaning while living in cities with hundreds of thousands and even millions of people.⁸ Affordable automobiles allowed urbanites the flexibility to move to new, decentralized suburbs.⁹ Families, in particular, sought to create new lives away from perceived inner-city decay, constructing their own oases in the idyllic suburban area. In the 1960 film Please Don’t Eat the Daisies, Kate Mackay (Doris Day) and her husband Larry (David Niven) discuss moving to the “country” to leave behind the city’s chaos.¹⁰ In the suburbs, white, middle-class families enjoyed opportunities to nurture their children and allow them to grow in a positive environment.

A suburban housewife traditionally followed a standard life route: student, wife, and mother. Before marriage, she generally attended college during her search for a husband. Consequently, forty percent of suburban women possessed a BA or BS degree. Kate Mackay, for instance, was her husband Larry’s theater student before marriage. In *The Graduate*, Mrs. Robinson pursued a degree in art before marrying Mr. Robinson. Mrs. Robinson explicitly announced that she did not finish her degree; Kate Mackay never clarifies. Mary Wilson, the protagonist in the 1969 film *The Happy Ending*, dropped out of college to marry her husband, Fred. Joanna Eberhart in *The Stepford Wives* received her degree from New York University. These housewives represented in film were intelligent, educated women who abandoned careers to become devoted wives and mothers. This choice conformed to the rhetoric espoused by “experts” (usually doctors and psychologists) that emphasized a need to “rebuild” the family. Just as the government called women to work during World War II, contemporary literature in the postwar decades called for women to return home. In the 1968 comedy, *Yours, Mine & Ours*, Lucille Ball’s Helen North, despite working as a naval nurse for many years, returns to her home to care for her eighteen children. *Time* heralded the suburban housewife as “the thread that weaves between family and community--the keeper of the suburban dream.” Though positive language in popular culture promoted the role of the housewife, women fulfilled their feminine duties at the expense of educational and professional advancement.

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13 *Daisies*, Pasternak.
18 Yours, Mine & Ours, Robert F. Blumofe (Universal, 1968).
19 “AMERICANA,” 16.
Following the path directed by social rhetoric, Hollywood films used the suburban housewife to contrast an older female stereotype, the blonde bombshell. The sexy, voluptuous image oozed by stars such as Marilyn Monroe gave way to images of wholesome housewives, opening the door for successful careers for actresses including Doris Day, Debbie Reynolds, and Sandra Dee. The movie industry dedicated itself to reinforcing the conventional and socially acceptable view of the passive, sweet housewife. Hollywood and other media outlets in the 1960s worked to convey the message that the best means for women to find happiness and fulfillment was in the role of a housewife and mother.

Doris Day gained great success by playing such characters. Day began her career in the 1950s when films “were all about sex, without sex.” She transitioned into the 1960s with roles that portrayed her as independent and optimistic yet trivialized and objectified. Though she was widely popular, critics often disparaged Day for her looks and saccharine charm. Film critic Dwight MacDonald in 1962 coined the phrase “the Doris Day syndrome”: she was “as wholesome as a bowl of cornflakes and at least as sexy…I suspect most American mothers would be pleased and relieved if their daughters grew up to resemble Doris Day.” She lacked the sex appeal of Marilyn Monroe, allowing female viewers to identify with her morals and domestic pratfalls. When Day portrayed housewives, she posed no immediate danger to male-dominated society. Additionally, she helped reinforce the ideal of femininity that many men sought in their wives. Husbands and Hollywood constructed femininity as passive, nurturing,

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20 Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffen, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender & Sexuality at the Movies*, 2nd edition (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2009), 232.
22 Benshoff and Griffen, *America on Film*, 232.
25 Ibid., 5.
emotional, non-aggressive, and dependent.\textsuperscript{26} Day deftly portrayed these characteristics and added a quiet sexuality that starkly contrasted bombshell roles. In \textit{The Thrill of It All}, an actress built much in the mold of Marilyn Monroe loses her spokeswoman job for Happy Soap after the company’s owner believes that his customers will better identify and connect with Day’s shiny housewife, Beverly Boyer, rather than the Monroe lookalike.\textsuperscript{27} Through the characters portrayed by actresses such as Day and her counterparts, Hollywood helped perpetuate the image of the ideal woman created in the 1950s: the suburban housewife.\textsuperscript{28}

As a result of moving to the suburbs, the many family lifestyles changed due to men’s new work-travel constraints. Husbands commuted by train (if available) or by family car to their jobs in the city, thus leaving their wives home to care for their children and the house. Once Larry Mackay becomes a successful theatre critic, his wife proposes a move to the suburbs, a plan he accommodates reluctantly. The tension between wife and husband reflects the gendered space of postwar society with the suburbs as female space and the city as male space. On the morning of his first trip to the city from home, he laments his new living situation. He says, begrudgingly, “Here I am about to start a long life as a commuter.”\textsuperscript{29} Similarly, Rock Hudson’s George Kimball in \textit{Send Me No Flowers} takes the train to and from the city with wife, Judy, picking him up in their single car.\textsuperscript{30}

As the 1960s progressed, suburban men settled into their routine of driving or taking the train into work each day and returning home in the evening. Various arenas of popular culture tried to represent the father role as growing beyond that of breadwinner and husband.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{26} Benshoff and Griffen, \textit{America on Film}, 214.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{The Thrill of It All}, Ross Hunter and Martin Melcher (Universal Pictures, 1963).
\textsuperscript{28} Robert A. Beauregard, \textit{How America Became Suburban} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 139.
\textsuperscript{29} Daisies, Pasternak.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Send Me No Flowers}, Harry Keller (Universal Pictures, 1964).
Boyer in the 1963 film, *The Thrill of It All*, for example, works as an OB/GYN doctor in the city and comes home willing to put the children to bed and assist with household tasks. Film and television showed more fathers having greater interactions with their children, providing them with emotional as well as economic security. This development in the expansion of the father-role beyond one of authoritarian figure counterbalanced the role of the over-protective mother who gained power through her time spent with children. Child psychology, revised by Dr. Benjamin Spock in the 1950s, encouraged fatherly involvement so that sons would follow their father’s example and so that daughters would gain confidence through fatherly approval. The new emphasis on father-child relationships corresponded to husbands affirming their authority in the household. In *Yours, Mine & Ours*, Frank Beardsley, following his marriage to Helen North, implements a military organizational plan to ensure their household runs smoothly with eighteen children living together. Films presented increasing father participation, ignoring the sometimes calculated motives behind this involvement to solidify the male head-of-household role in the face of increasing female influence.

While commuting to work limited daily male participation in the growth of the suburban family, society associated the suburban home with women and domesticity. In the postwar period, the male establishment perceived women in the work force as a danger to the social order. Resulting from this mentality, society firmly cemented the home as feminine. Both sexes believed women had the primary responsibility to care for their children and home. Many middle-class women saw being a housewife as their sole occupation with the move to the

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32 *Thrill*, Hunter and Melcher.
33 McLeer, “Perfection,” 90.
34 *Ours*, Blumofe.
36 Beauregard, *Suburban*, 126.
suburbs as integral to this role. Between 1950 and 1960, seventy-eight percent of women believed suburbia improved their quality of life and allowed them to satisfy the role of homemaker, “the normal family role.”

In comparison with the “dangerous” cities associated with men, many people viewed the suburbs as feminine largely because women spent a majority of their time in the home.

The physical space of the suburbs encouraged uniformity and privacy. Lois Craig writes that suburban towns were “a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads.” In the 1968 comedy, Send Me No Flowers, George Kimball (Rock Hudson) visits a suburban cemetery to pick out plots for his wife, Judy, and for himself. The owner explains the site’s set-up: all headstones uniformly measure four feet tall and are organized in an unvarying fashion, similar to many suburban communities. George remarks that the cemetery sounds like the “Levittown of hereafter.” While such conformity allowed families in the suburbs to enjoy increased privacy, it also removed them from the communal aspects of living in a large urban apartment building. In the 1963 film The Thrill of It All, the Boyer residence reflects the uniformity of suburban neighborhoods. Each house on their street has driveways, garages, front yards, and backyards. Suburban families maintained their privacy through white picket fences and front lawns. They became ubiquitous symbols of the middle class contentedly living in suburbia.

The layout of the suburban home generally provided families with space to grow and flourish. In Please Don’t Eat the Daisies, moving to the suburbs was a logical choice for Larry and Kate Mackay and their four young sons. Their cramped New York City apartment provided

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39 Flowers, Keller.
40 Miller, “Togetherness,” 401.
no room for the boys to run around, and despite its fine furnishings, it emitted a sense of disorder. By moving out to “Hooten on the Hudson,” the Mackays are able to renovate a home filled with many rooms and enjoy a backyard perfect for their boys and dog.41 The suburbs afforded couples a clean slate to create their new lives and accommodate expanding families. Inside, the Boyers’ large home features three floors with a small spiral staircase connecting the first and second levels. Rooms such as the kitchen, foyer, and living room occupy the first-floor while the upstairs features a master bedroom with two separate beds and rooms for their children and live-in housekeeper.42 The interior divisions of the house varied depending upon the family’s economic situation. The Robinsons in the 1967 film, The Graduate, reside in an affluent neighborhood, and their large home reflects their wealth and desire for space. Their home features a bar for entertaining, expansive rooms, and enough space for Mr. and Mrs. Robinson to sleep in separate bedrooms.43 Additionally, the construction of the suburban house contributed to the creation of gendered space. Homes with large windows, open-plan settings, fireplaces, and galley kitchens helped enforce high standards of cleanliness and the housewife’s work.44 Men had private studies for work and a quiet place to escape. In truth, the man’s suburban home became a refuge from his day job, but remained the housewife’s endless series of rooms to clean.45

The uniformity of neighborhoods created a distinct suburban culture, one filled with homogeneity and affluence. John Milligan, a real estate broker who spoke in 1983, said, “People don’t buy a house. They buy a neighborhood. People will buy a backyard, they’ll buy friendly neighbors who smile, they’ll buy well-kept lawns. People buy attics (I’ve always wanted an attic).

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41 Daisies, Pasternak.
42 Thrill, Hunter and Melcher.
43 Graduate, Levine and Turman.
45 Miller, “Togetherness,” 413.
Or a woman will buy a kitchen facing the street. People buy birch trees. We’re all the same.”

With the creation of modern suburbs, many Americans saw images of white, middle-class suburbanites as national icons.

Such uniformity can be seen in a lack of racial and ethnic diversity in films. Of the nine movies examined in this paper, only two featured any diverse characters, both of which occurred well after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s: *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) and *The Stepford Wives* (1975). In *A Woman Under the Influence*, three of Nick Longhetti’s African-American coworkers and one Mexican-Indian coworker come to the Longhetti house for pasta. Nick is a married, Italian-American homeowner; it is unknown where his coworkers reside. Although Nick drives the men to his house, the men walk away from the Longhetti house after the meal. His co-workers perhaps live within walking distance from the Longhetti house or use public transportation to go home. Director John Cassavetes never fully elaborates on the workers’ neighborhoods, but their inclusion demonstrated greater racial integration within suburban households. Cassavetes portrays one African-American man singing at the table in Italian with a beautiful opera voice, confirming that African-Americans were culturally as sophisticated as Euro-American men. A year later, *The Stepford Wives* briefly featured an African-American husband and wife at the end of the film. Silver believes the introduction of this couple indicates that black middle-class women faced the same pressures as their white counterparts. The minority characters appeared as side notes in comparison with the movies’

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48 *A Woman Under the Influence*, Sam Shaw (Faces International Films, 1974).
50 Silver, “Cyborg,” 69.
predominantly white casts. Though greater integration appears in the 1970s, most films focused solely on suburban, middle-class, white women.

The uniformity, racial or otherwise, led to other shared values in suburban culture such as consumerism and materialism. Both existed symbiotically as a result of the material needs of suburban households. These homes needed furnishings, appliances, and supplies for daily living. The role of housewife required women to possess knowledge and skills in several fields including interior decorating, washing, dusting, sewing, and cooking. Suburban living created gendered consumerism because women needed to purchase items to fulfill all of their chores and to make the home as welcoming as possible. Wives additionally sought to display the status of their husbands’ careers. Consequently, families poured money into their homes, buying not only necessities but also luxury items including televisions and flashy cars. While men purchased the more expensive items, such as the actual homes, cars, and lawn mowers, films depicted the housewives buying everyday items and products specifically benefitting the household. Kate Mackay shops for curtain fabric; Beverly Boyer buys groceries for family meals. This gendered consumerism demonstrated that women possessed the capability to buy smaller, more necessary household items, leaving larger purchases and financial knowledge to their husbands. When George Kimball believes he only has two weeks left to live, he tells his wife, Judy, that he wants her to attend night school to learn accounting, banking, and book-keeping. Judy responds that she has no interest in these subjects and says, “That’s your department.” Men provided the money; women spent it.

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51 Lopata, Occupation, 151.
52 Flowers, Keller.
Suburban culture dictated that men continually acquire wealth and maintain or elevate their financial status within their social circle. In the 1967 comedy *Divorce American Style*, Barbara Harmon (Debbie Reynolds) complains to her husband Richard (Dick van Dyke) that following his promotion, he only talks about money. Richard represents a “nouveau riche” suburbanite, concerned with finances and appearances. He counters her complaints of his need for “things” by arguing that they moved to their home because they “needed a place for their washer and dryer.” While men dictated the purchase of expensive and luxury items, men technically served as the buyers of domestic items as well, because women possessed no income of their own. The argument between Richard and Barbara over household items and tasks is a byproduct of Barbara asking her husband to help her organize their home. Richard’s refusal to help his wife demonstrates the emphasis on chores as women’s work. By Barbara asking for assistance, screenwriter Norman Lear indicated that by the mid-1960s some women, who toiled daily within their homes, were becoming tired of their household duties.

Even before this time, however, many housewives felt frustrated with their position in society, but silently carried their secret unhappiness. In movies produced before the mid-1960s, housewives frequently touched upon their frustrations yet continued to conform to the stereotype of the happy housewife. Kate Mackay and her husband Larry argue over leaving New York City. Kate is unhappy with Larry’s new social crowd after he becomes a prestigious theatre critic. She says, “Darling, interesting people don’t want to make friends with housewives.” She pinpoints the dichotomy between the influential theatre types with whom Larry associates and herself. Kate has no career outside the home; she provides a comfortable, clean, and happy home to her husband and children. Kate, similar to many housewives, had few hobbies and activities solely

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53 Bearegord, *Suburban*, 139.
54 *Divorce American Style*, Norman Lear (Columbia Pictures, 1967).
55 *Daisies*, Pasternak.
her own. Larry responds to Kate’s situation, “I wish you wouldn’t call yourself a housewife. You’re so much more than that.” Representing many husbands, Larry wants Kate to be comfortable with her role as the homemaker and the supportive influence on her family, without feeling unhappy or dejected. Although she questions her lifestyle as housewife, by the film’s end, Kate firmly accepts her responsibilities as Larry’s wife and her children’s mother and promises to support his every endeavor.

Shortly after this film, concerns such as those raised by Kate Mackay gained national attention with the publication of Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique*. It provided a watershed event for society to discuss the housewife’s dilemma. Friedan believed “that something [was] very wrong with the way American women [were] trying to live their lives.” Deeming it “the problem that has no name,” Friedan linked housewives’ dissatisfaction with their lives to their role as a housewife:

> Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – “Is this all?”

“The problem that has no name” began primarily as a result of isolation in the suburbs and household work patterns. By working in and around their homes, housewives faced limited social outlets beyond their immediate family and neighbors. In suburban culture, the family increasingly isolated itself due to single family homes and possessions such as the television and the automobile. The housewife’s world view was often limited her to her neighborhood. Her

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56 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 15.
60 Miller, “Togetherness,” 410.
social circle primarily consisted of her husband, her children, friends who were guests in her home, and neighbors; these people utilized the results of her work as a homemaker.  

Doris Day’s comedy *The Thrill of It All* provided an interesting juxtaposition with Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. Both released in 1963 (Friedan’s book in February and the film in July), *The Thrill of It All* covered many of the topics discussed in Friedan’s book, but adhered to the traditional model of the housewife on film. Day plays Beverly Boyer, the wife of OB/GYN Dr. Gerald Boyer. The film opens with Beverly performing various chores: bathing her young daughter, cooking a roast for dinner, and cleaning as she bustles throughout their house. She appears the image of perfection, completing her tasks efficiently and maintaining a positive attitude about her chores. When the owners of the Happy Soap Company offer her the spokeswoman job, she responds, “I’m not an actress. I’m a housewife.” Beverly views herself only in this capacity; even after accepting the job, she continues to maintain that she is just a housewife. In her aired endorsements, she introduces herself: “My name is Beverly Boyer and I’m a housewife.”

Beverly’s new career raises many key issues regarding the woman’s role in society. When she and Gerald discuss her job offer, she cites an article he wrote for a magazine: “In some cases, household duties, as important as they are, are not sufficient to gratify a woman’s desire for expression.” His article ties in with the message that Friedan and other experts emphasized: many women who stayed at home often failed to find the promised fulfillment of happiness and contentment. Gerald tells his wife that he did not refer to her when writing the article. He assumes she is content with caring for their two children, participating in the PTA, and engaging in her hobbies, which include bottling homemade ketchup. Beverly assures him she is quite

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61 Lopata, *Occupation*, 137.
62 *Thrill*, Hunter and Melcher.
happy and that she would “never conscientiously go out looking for a job.” Though Gerald does not completely approve of her career, Beverly promises it will not interfere with her wifely duties and they agree she can become the Happy Soap spokeswoman.

Financial issues abound in *The Thrill of It All* over Beverly’s new career and the issue of providing for one’s family. A major reason she accepts the spokeswoman job is because of its salary. The Happy Company offers to pay her $80,000 a year to appear on television once a week. The proposal floors Beverly—she actually falls into a basket of tomatoes—but she quickly realizes how this additional income could benefit her family. Beverly wants to feel useful and contribute to her family’s well-being beyond the conventional roles of mother and wife. In addition to having a break from her home once a week, Beverly can now financially contribute to the Boyer household. Widely accepted cultural practices, however, enforced the idea of the husband as the wage-earner and the wife as a full-time homemaker. Gerald, though hesitant over the spokeswoman job and surprised by its salary, allows Beverly to continue since he sees it makes her happy. Frustrations, however, come to blows after the Happy Soap Company buys the Boyers a $5,000 swimming pool, unbeknownst to both Beverly and Gerald. He believes that she purchased the pool with her money and he is furious. She cannot buy a pool with “her” money. “If the family wanted a swimming pool,” Gerald explains, “it would be purchased with ‘our’ money.” “Our” money by Gerald’s definition comes from his earnings as a doctor. He does not want to accept or use her salary money for household expenses; Gerald feels emasculated and abandoned. Though with good intentions, Beverly inadvertently threatens

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64 *Thrill*, Hunter and Melcher.
65 Ibid.
67 *Thrill*, Hunter and Melcher.
their relationship when accepting the job, thereby overstepping the boundaries established for the typical housewife.

Such identity crises often plagued suburban housewives. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* encouraged them to ignore the question of “Who am I?” as many women responded with answers such as “Tom’s wife…Mary’s mother.” Beverly Boyer confronts the changing nature of her identity when women recognize her in a restaurant as the Happy Soap “girl”. She, not Gerald, receives recognition and acclaim from people, and they inquire as to who Gerald is. Beverly calls him “Mr. Beverly…Dr. Beverly…no Dr. Boyer.” Following a fight with her husband, Beverly worries over her identity; she wonders if she is still a doctor’s wife. Similarly, as late as 1968, Frank Beardsley addresses his wife, Helen, as “dearest mother of eighteen.” In the early 1970s, society became especially cognizant of the identity crises facing housewives. Marjorie Franco in the popular woman’s magazine *Redbook* wrote, “Take a woman who is a wife and mother. Subtract the husband and the children. She is nothing you can name. She is dependent on others for her identity.” Beverly, living in the 1960s, chooses to maintain the social identifications as someone’s wife and mother because she fears losing both her husband and children as a result of her busy career.

*The Thrill of It All* provided a timely lens on the status of suburban marriages and illustrated many of the issues raised by *The Feminine Mystique*. The film, however, firmly maintained societal notions of housewives, doing little to advance the ambitions of its protagonist, Beverly. When her husband, Gerald, can no longer support her career, he devises a
plan for them to have another child, thereby requiring Beverly to return to their home full-time. They then fight over their rights. He wishes to deny her the ability to contribute financially to their family and Beverly demands to know why she cannot participate in their financial security. She questions, “What happened to my rights as a woman?” In this moment, Beverly represents the thousands of housewives who identified with *The Feminine Mystique*. Yet, *The Thrill of It All* ignores Beverly’s question and instead deals with Gerald’s plight as the husband whose wife left the household. He rages that she suffocates his rights as a man and needs to get reacquainted with her children; he then deems her job “an asinine career.” Gerald finally tells Beverly to “go back to being a wife.” Following this fight, Gerald decides to fake an affair with another woman (by rubbing lipstick on his shirts, among other machinations), hoping jealousy will force Beverly to abandon her career. As a result, Beverly does give up the spokeswoman job and pronounces that she is “just a doctor’s wife.” The film ends with Beverly and Gerald implying that they will have another child and that Beverly is no longer a career woman.

Despite *The Feminine Mystique* voicing the concerns of many housewives, Hollywood evaded portraying women’s struggles on screen in a positive light. Studios sought to avoid controversy and displayed little interest in producing films that seemed feminist. Prior to the release of Friedan’s book, films from the 1960s followed the same moral and cultural patterns from the 1950s. Historian Molly Haskell believes that the ten-year span between 1963 and 1973, from a feminist’s point of view, was the most disheartening in screen history. The

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74 *Thrill*, Hunter and Melcher.
76 *Thrill*, Hunter and Melcher.
77 Benshoff and Griffen, *America on Film*, 280.
burgeoning demands of the women’s movements caused backlash in commercial films. As Marjorie Rosen wrote in 1973, “the sixties’ woman may have seized on a more productive lifestyle than ever before, but the industry had turned its back on reflecting it in any constructive or analytical way.” Witnessed in *The Thrill of It All*, couples often stayed together under the pressures of convention, and the man continually overshadowed his female counterpart. Into the middle half of the decade, Hollywood focused on producing films with the safe, sweet, and familiar female leads in the guise of popular musicals including *The Sound of Music*, *Mary Poppins*, and *My Fair Lady*. The public preferred these happy tales set in bygone days rather than seeing their own troubles on screen.

Although films highlighted many changes in American society, common motifs identifying the suburban housewife persisted in many films produced between 1960 and 1975. Everyday tasks and actions associated with the suburban housewife appeared on the big screen. In many films, the housewife served breakfast to both her husband and children. Kate Mackay, for instance, prepares the first meal of the day for her family, during which Larry complains about the bread. Judy Kimball’s hypochondriac husband George refuses to eat to prevent his stomach from feeling upset; she says, “I don’t know why I bother to cook.” Following this exchange, George changes his mind and eats a slice of toast. During one of the trysts featured in the 1967 film, *The Graduate*, young Benjamin Braddock asks Mrs. Robinson what she did that day. She responds, “I got up, fixed breakfast for my husband.” Mary Wilson’s husband in *The

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79 Haskell, *Reverence*, 323.
81 Bingham, *Virgin*, 22.
83 *Daisies*, Pasternak.
84 *Flowers*, Keller.
85 *Graduate*, Levine and Turman.
*Happy Ending* barely looks up from his morning paper to ask her to start cooking eggs.\(^8^6\) Similarly, in *The Stepford Wives*, Joanna Eberhart serves breakfast to a noisy table filled with children while her husband Walter sits reading the newspaper. The only conversation Walter interjects is, “Honey, can I have some more coffee please?”\(^8^7\) No matter when the movies were released, they linked women from Kate Mackay to Joanna Eberhart together in the bond of fellow housewives.

Unlike many ordinary suburban women, many housewives featured in Hollywood movies received assistance from housekeepers. When the Boyers receive an invitation to a dinner party, Gerald tells Beverly to hire a babysitter; Beverly does not want to do so when they already pay a housekeeper (to whom she gave the evening off).\(^8^8\) Similarly, in *Divorce American Style*, Richard Harmon raises the issue of the housekeeper and finances following a party that he and wife Barbara host. After the departure of their guests, Barbara asks him to help her clean up. Richard quips that he pays $250 a month for a housekeeper and now must work as “a houseboy.”\(^8^9\) These comments called attention to the fact that movie families possessed flexible incomes that allowed them to afford outside assistance. Including housekeepers in Hollywood films helped emphasize the fact that the suburbs excluded families below certain income levels.\(^9^0\) Housekeepers additionally stressed the endless chores associated with maintaining the home and the idealized suburban image of successful wife, mother, and homemaker.

Many films often praised and glorified the values and responsibilities of the suburban housewife. It was her unexpected sex appeal, however, that received much attention in films.

\(^{8^6}\) *Ending*, Brooks.
\(^{8^7}\) *Stepford*, Berne and Scherick.
\(^{8^8}\) *Thrill*, Hunter and Melcher.
\(^{8^9}\) *Divorce*, Lear.
Hollywood historically maintained a strict double standard for the appearance of stars. Unlike males in the profession, an actress’s career hinged as much on her acting ability as on her “acceptable” looks.\footnote{Anne E. Lincoln and Michael Patrick Allen, “Double Jeopardy in Hollywood: Age and Gender in the Careers of Film Actors, 1926-1999,” \textit{Sociological Forum} 19 (2004): 627.} Doris Day’s success derived from her “girl next door” appearance.\footnote{Monaco, \textit{the Sixties}, 122.} The image of the housewife in the early 1960s, according to Betty Friedan, was often “young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine.”\footnote{Friedan, \textit{Mystique}, 36.}

Housewives in film repeatedly focused on their physical appearance, suggesting both conformity to contemporary styles and insecurity. Before a play opening, Kate Mackay proudly announces to her children’s babysitter, “I’ve lost five pounds and bought a new dress for it.”\footnote{Daisies, Pasternak.} The new dress and weight loss suggest Kate’s desire to appear attractive in the eyes of the theatre crowd. Barbara Harmon in \textit{Divorce American Style} wears a hair piece to give herself a more fashionable style.\footnote{Divorce, Lear.} In 1969, Mary Wilson went the furthest of the film housewives to date; she received a facelift, but dejectedly informed her friend that “no one noticed.” Mary also joined a health club and started an intense exercise regime following her husband’s affair and her own mental breakdown. The women she encounters at the club share similar misgivings about their appearances and the fast approaching reality of old age. One acquaintance called all of the women at the club, “zombies killing time.”\footnote{Ending, Brooks.} In \textit{Yours, Mine & Ours}, before going on her first date with Frank Beardsley, Helen North receives style advice from her teenaged daughters. When she expresses concern over fake eyelashes, her daughters remind her that she was younger when she married their father and now needed help.\footnote{Ours, Blumofe.} The robotic double in \textit{The Stepford Wives} shares many similar characteristics with Joanna but with one exception: a noticeably enhanced
The Stepford Wives presented interesting ideas about women’s image in the first half of the 1970s. The Stepford men replace their wives with robots designed to cater to their sexual desires. These “Stepford wives” represented some male opinions of what made a woman desirable in the eyes of men.

The fashions worn by housewives throughout the long decade provided commentary on their daily activities as well as the image projected to society. When staying at home with their children, the housewives primarily wore comfortable attire. Kate Mackay renovates her home in denim pants and a button-up shirt. Beverly Boyer bottles ketchup and bathes her daughter wearing jeans and a cotton shirt. Helen North Beardsley dons a loose pink housecoat to hide her pregnancy and finish her family’s laundry. In the privacy of their own homes, housewives felt comfortable wearing relaxing attire not always befitting the external image they presented to their neighbors and friends. While preparing a roast for dinner, however, Beverly dons a dress and an apron, presumably because Gerald is on his way home from work. Moreover, women often changed their dress when leaving the house and encountering those outside their immediate social circle. While shopping in a department store, Kate Mackay wears a fashionable “Jackie O” suit. Similarly, when Beverly Boyer represents the model housewife in her Happy Soap advertisements, she wears tailored and professional dresses. When golfing at the country club, Judy Kimball looks polished in a sweater and skirt ensemble. At the club dance in the evening, she switches into a classic white dress and white cardigan.

98 Stepford, Berne and Scherick.
100 Daisies, Pasternak.
101 Thrill, Hunter and Melcher.
102 Ours, Blumofe.
103 Thrill, Hunter and Melcher.
104 Daisies, Pasternak.
105 Thrill, Hunter and Melcher.
106 Flowers, Keller.
Fashion also separated women conforming to the housewife mold and those rebelling against it. In *The Graduate*, Mrs. Robinson uses her clothing as a means to ensnare Benjamin Braddock. After promising him that she has no intentions of seduction, she asks that he please unzip her dress, revealing a leopard print bra. Her patterned undergarment hardly implies the demureness associated with housewives of her time. In *Send Me No Flowers*, George Kimball imagines his wife Judy taking up with their dry-cleaning delivery boy. In his dream, Judy dances around in pants and navy blue sweater, an outfit much different from her normal, more styled ensembles. Mabel Longhetti in John Cassavetes’ 1974 drama, *A Woman Under the Influence*, dresses differently than the housewives portrayed by Doris Day. Unlike the prim and proper styles of women such as Kate Mackay and Beverly Boyer, Mabel wears a sweater over a comparatively short dress. The outfit appears disjointed, representing her quirky personality, contrasting her with the put-together wives of the early 1960s. Mabel, however, links the continuity of the accepted housewife-image when her husband’s co-workers come to her house for spaghetti. She wears an apron to suggest femininity and also comfort in her domestic domain.

Similar to Mabel, Joanna and Bobbie in *The Stepford Wives* make fashion decisions that decisively separate them from the rest of the women in their new town. Carol van Sant, their seemingly perfect neighbor, first greets the Eberharts to Stepford with a casserole. In comparison to Joanna, who wears a bandanna, large hoop earrings, relaxed attire, and no bra, Carol van Sant dons a frilly apron and appears quite polished. Bobbie, Joanna’s best friend, often wears daring fashions including cut-off shirts baring her midriff. Following her transformation into a Stepford wife, Bobbie dresses in long sleeves, a long skirt, and a padded uplift bra. She

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107 *Graduate*, Levine and Turman.
108 *Flowers*, Keller.
109 *Women*, Shaw.
tells Joanna, “Dave turned me loose in Bergdorf [& Goodman]...I went mad.” Her new clothing alarms Joanna, but Bobbie responds to Joanna’s qualms by stating, “I want to look like a woman.”\textsuperscript{110} \textit{The Stepford Wives} indicated to society that if women wanted to be viewed as feminine and proper, they needed to follow fashions resembling Carol van Sant and not the quasi-liberated Bobbie and Joanna.

Traces of the 1960s social movements began to impact the lives of suburban housewives, demonstrating that these women were not completely immune to change. Mabel Longhetti’s welcoming of her husband Nick’s African-American coworkers reveals the strides the Civil Rights movement made into the suburbs.\textsuperscript{111} \textit{The Stepford Wives} most prominently exhibited the social changes that impacted women in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Joanna and Bobbie attempt to start consciousness raising sessions but meet resistance from their robotic (and anti-feminist) neighbors. During their investigations of Stepford, Joanna and Bobbie believe there might be something in the water and send a sample to a lab in New York City.\textsuperscript{112} Their suspicions demonstrate the growing acceptance and understanding of the environmental movement. Although the films did not outwardly comment on the diverse social movements, the changes brought to society resonated in the daily existences of suburban women.

As the 1960s progressed, suburban housewives frequently voiced frustration with their lives and marriages, which were often the origin of their unhappiness and struggles. Unhappiness often stemmed from remaining confined to the household and abandoning ambitions after marriage to become wives and mothers. Benjamin finds out that Mrs. Robinson married Mr. Robinson out of necessity: she was pregnant with their daughter, Elaine.\textsuperscript{113} In \textit{The

\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Stepford}, Berne and Sherick.
\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Woman}, Shaw.
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Stepford}, Berne and Sherick.
\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Graduate}, Levine and Turman.
Happy Ending, Mary and Fred engage in premarital sex, and following their encounter, Mary calls their actions “immoral.” They decide to get married, and while at the altar, Mary envisions scenes from old Hollywood romance films. For most housewives, their lives often diverted from the scripted ones presented in films such as Please Don’t Eat the Daisies and The Thrill of It All. Their lives in the suburbs lacked the happy endings promised by society and found by Doris Day and Debbie Reynolds. As Friedan in The Feminine Mystique commented, “if a woman had a problem in the 1950s and 1960s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage or with herself.”

As a result of their marital unhappiness, some suburban housewives turned to adultery. These films focused on women initiating the affairs as well as the private anguish suffered by the housewives as a result of these transgressions. Housewives having affairs often became vilified for their role as “sexually aggressive” women. British film critic Alexander Walker, in his review of The Graduate, wrote, “Bancroft, from the word go, has the in-heat imperiousness of the man-destroying woman with whom Mike Nichols obviously finds some aghast fascination. She’s not concerned with love, only sex.” Mrs. Robinson reflects the supposed “new woman,” breaking away from the constructed gender ideals, versus Friedan’s housewife who “was not even expected to enjoy or participate in the act of sex.” Mrs. Robinson shatters this stereotype by engaging in behaviors usually reserved for men, although at the price of being labeled a wanton woman. Studios found that the best response to the women’s movement was to emphasize sexual elements in their message, and as a result, films began to exploit the female

114 Ending, Brooks.
115 Friedan, Mystique, 19.
117 Friedan, Mystique, 81.
body with increasing nudity.\textsuperscript{118} Walker’s reading of Mrs. Robinson, though harsh-sounding, reflects the new mentality of Hollywood in dealing with women’s sexuality. Mrs. Robinson locks Benjamin into Elaine’s room while she stands before him, naked. She tells him that she is available (for sexual acts) and that they can form some kind of arrangement. While she propositions the young man, director Mike Nichols’ camera flashes on different parts of her body.\textsuperscript{119} Unlike Doris Day’s housewives, Mrs. Robinson uses her sexuality to achieve her aims, embodying the new, sexually aggressive woman feared by society. Her mimicking of male behavior poses a threat to the stability of marriage and family.

Released four years after \textit{The Feminine Mystique}, \textit{The Graduate}’s sexual content represented a drastic change in the direction of Hollywood film. Nichols, in fact, originally offered the role of Mrs. Robinson to Doris Day, who refused the character. Day in her memoirs wrote, “I realized it was an effective part…but it offended my sense of values.” She also declared, “I can’t picture myself in bed with a man, all the crew around us…I am really appalled by some of the public exhibitions on the screen by good actors and actresses.”\textsuperscript{120} As the 1960s ended and the 1970s began, housewives in films often faced the decision of committing adultery with varying degrees of responses. Mary Wilson in \textit{The Happy Ending} ponders the notion but reveals that the thought of having an affair frightens her.\textsuperscript{121} After Mabel’s husband, Nick, falls through on their date, she gets drunk at a bar and a man named Garson (O. G. Dunn) brings her back home.\textsuperscript{122} Given that he has to half-carry her into the house and that she sobers up for a moment to fight him off, their sexual encounter appears to be a rape. Mabel is devastated after

\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Graduate}, Levine and Turman.
\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Ending}, Brooks.
\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Woman}, Shaw.
realizing the events of the evening. These films demonstrated that affairs endangered the housewife’s morality and happiness, often leading to severe and damaging consequences. Although Mabel’s husband, Nick, never discovers her drunken encounter, her anguish further initiates her descent into despair and unhappiness.

For the housewives in film, their affairs presented the idea that their needs were solely physical. Before a sexual encounter, Benjamin Braddock asks Mrs. Robinson, “Can we say a few words to each other?” She snappishly replies after a small fight over the issue, “I don’t think we have much to say to each other.” In their limited conversation that follows, Mrs. Robinson reveals that her life is one of boredom: waking up, fixing her husband breakfast, and staying in the house. She further divulges the fact she and Mr. Robinson sleep in separate bedrooms. Mary Wilson, when fighting with her husband, deems their bed a “no man’s land”, telling her husband that they have “nothing to say to each other.” In her attempted affair, she believes she looks for “just” sex, when in fact, Mary wants someone to listen to her thoughts and opinions. Both Mrs. Robinson and Mary are products of an American culture that denied women the opportunity to fulfill their potentialities, “a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role.” Adultery was a theme used to illustrate the perils of the freedoms housewives sought when fighting their stereotype. In early films echoing *The Feminine Mystique*, Molly Haskell writes that “women were torn between the mind-numbing and soul-destroying confines of domestic duty on the one hand, and that exhilarating call to independence.” Housewives used adultery as a means of escape and comfort, but films consistently focused on the negative aspects of engaging in these relationships.

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123 *Graduate*, Levine and Turman.
124 Ibid.
125 *Ending*, Brooks.
Heavy drinking and alcoholism also became a predominant motif in housewife films as the 1960s progressed. In stark contrast to the Doris Day films, where women participated in light social drinking, the housewives, beginning with Mrs. Robinson, turned to the bottle as a way of numbing their pain. The rise of drinking corresponded with the growing devaluation of housework. In earlier times, housework required more effort, time, and skill, thus receiving greater recognition; with the rise of modern technologies, housewives worked less and gained less satisfaction from their daily chores. The housekeeper began to disappear from films as fewer families required assistance from an extra domestic hand. Housewives frequently lacked activities to fill this spare time, turning to drinking as a means to pass the day.

Women also openly admitted their drinking as a fault. After Benjamin drives Mrs. Robinson home, she offers him a drink. She asks him, “What do you think of me?” He responds that he thinks she is a very nice person. She then drops a bombshell: “Did you know I was an alcoholic?” The film never mentions her alcoholism again but features several scenes in which Mrs. Robinson drinks, albeit moderately. Mrs. Robinson’s admission of her former condition supports the belief that being an alcoholic makes one a “bad” person. This vice lends to Nichols’ characterization of Mrs. Robinson as The Graduate’s villain. When Helen North meets Frank Beardsley’s children for the first time, she asks for a light screwdriver to loosen her nerves. Acting as bartenders, the Beardsley sons spike Helen’s drink, and consequently, she gets drunk in what Frank deems “an alcoholic Pearl Harbor.” She sobs over her behavior and for “acting like an idiot.” Despite Mrs. Robinson representing a reformed alcoholic and Helen North a one-time slush, Mary Wilson in 1969’s The Happy Ending is an alcoholic and a very

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129 The Graduate, Lawrence and Turman.
130 Ours, Blumofe.
unhappy housewife. Her husband, Fred, searches her belongings for hidden stashes of alcohol until finding a bottle of vodka in her snow boot. Her drinking poses a problem as Fred appears concerned over his discovery. One of her first lines in the film is “I could use a vodka.” At one point in the movie, Mary causes a car accident and fails the sobriety test. She does not, however, check into rehab to deal with her issues and insecurities.

Few films, however, featured the same extent of alcoholism as Mary’s. Many movies focused more on the escapist necessity of drinking. Mabel keeps telling the bartender to pour her Seagrams; her intoxication leads to a one-night stand. In *The Stepford Wives*, Joanna and Bobbie break into Walter’s scotch to relieve the monotony of their day. The film, however, issued a strong statement about women and drinking. When Carol van Sant malfunctions at a party while drinking a cocktail, her husband afterwards demands that she apologize to Joanna and Bobbie. Carol explains that she was once an alcoholic; the van Sants moved to Stepford because her husband blamed the city for her alcoholism. Her apology and the control of the Stepford men indicate that the image of an inebriated woman was socially unacceptable and unbecoming.

Some films prominently featured the mental turmoil of housewives and presented psychotherapy and hospitalization as prescriptions for their problems. Barbara Harmon in *Divorce American Style* sees Dr. Zenwin, a “marriage therapist and lay psychiatrist,” although her husband, Richard, opposes her therapy. Barbara tells Richard that he would not understand her problems but does warn him, “We’re choking to death.” The film emphasized that the issue

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131 *Ending*, Brooks.
132 *Ibid*.
133 *Woman*, Shaw.
134 *Stepford*, Berne and Scherick.
is almost solely Barbara’s. In one scene, she tells Richard, “I’m nutty.” While Richard, albeit begrudgingly, accepts his wife’s psychotherapy, Fred Wilson in *The Happy Ending* denies Mary’s suggestion of seeking professional help. Mary recognizes her need to speak to someone outside of their marriage, but Fred believes the problem is Mary. He suggests that she find a hobby. Mary suffers in her depression until finally overdosing on pills. Conversely, Walter Eberhart tells Joanna to seek therapy when she questions living in Stepford. Joanna, who believes that something is happening to the women in Stepford, tells Walter she does not need help. He, however, “wants a second opinion.” Joanna concedes to her husband’s demands but sees a female psychiatrist who urges her to get out of Stepford. The films demonstrated that women, not men, needed therapy and proved Friedan’s theory that housewives and their spouses viewed the wife as the problem in marriages.

In the most serious of instances, housewives on film found themselves struggling for their lives. Mary Wilson, after discovering that her husband had an affair, takes twenty-eight sleeping pills. The film often flashes to Mary thinking of the ambulance and the events that transpired. In *A Woman Under the Influence*, Mabel Longhetti’s quirks and eccentricities become the cause of concern for her family members. Following the film’s release, *The New York Daily News* critic Rex Reed wrote, “Blanche DuBois is alive and sick and living in the suburbs. She’s called Mabel.” Though Mabel admits to her doctor that she has anxieties, she firmly rejects the idea that she needs hospitalization. She, however, gets put into a hospital against her will after being given a sedative injection at her husband’s directive. The housewives’ prescription drug abuse

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135 *Divorce*, Lear.
136 *Ending*, Brooks.
137 *Stepford*, Berne and Scherick.
138 *Ending*, Brooks.
140 *Woman*, Shaw.
and breakdowns represented understandable reactions to their restrictive domestic roles.\textsuperscript{141} Women, such as Mary and Mabel, are “mad” because of their limited social position as housewives. As director John Cassavetes of \textit{A Woman Under the Influence} said after the release of the film, “I really believe that all women are crazy. They’ve been driven crazy by playing a role they can’t fulfill.”\textsuperscript{142} Following hospitalizations, Mary and Mabel take varying approaches to restarting their lives. Mary, unlike many of her contemporaries, makes a break with her past life as she remains separated from her husband, finds a job, and attends night school classes.\textsuperscript{143} Mabel, who reveals that she received shock treatment during her stay in the mental hospital, returns to her husband and family in completely different dress, controlled and quiet. After she asks guests to leave her party, she promptly starts her household duties where she left off by cleaning.\textsuperscript{144} Husbands, such as Nick Longhetti, tolerated some childlike and dependent behaviors from their wives who returned from hospitals as long as their wives began doing their chores again.\textsuperscript{145} From the wives’ perspective, they needed serious medical treatment such as shock therapy to resume their gendered roles.

Later films broached the controversial issue of divorce. In \textit{The Graduate}, Mr. Robinson visits Benjamin and tells him the consequences of the young man’s relationship with Mrs. Robinson: “My wife and I are getting a divorce soon.”\textsuperscript{146} For a marriage that lasted many years, often without the physical relationship, the outcome of Mrs. Robinson’s philandering seemed shocking. Benjamin even tells him the sex did not mean anything. Despite Mr. Robinson’s pronouncement, the couple sits next to each other at their daughter Elaine’s wedding, saving

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\textsuperscript{142} Degener, “Director,” 6.
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Ending}, Brooks.
\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Woman}, Shaw.
\textsuperscript{145} Degener, “Director,” 12.
\textsuperscript{146} \textit{Graduate}, Levine and Turman.
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public face for their family and friends despite their private struggles. Released in the same year as *The Graduate, Divorce American Style* presented the inner-workings of a divorce in the 1960s. When Barbara Harmon seeks legal advice following a blow-up with her husband, the attorney mentions divorce. Barbara displays shock at his suggestion; the lawyer responds that she acts as though she had never heard the word before his announcement. Divorce in the 1960s was tantamount to a disgrace. Not shockingly, after many years of marriage, Barbara appears reluctant. Unlike Barbara, the Harmon sons seem unfazed by the announcement of their parents’ divorce. One informs her that many children come from “broken homes.” The movie, though presenting the issues associated with divorce (custody, alimony), harkened back to older Hollywood models with Barbara and her husband, Richard, getting together again after their year-long divorce.

Few housewives gained the strength and resolve to make permanent changes in their lives. In *The Happy Ending*, Mary remains separated from her husband following her escape to the Bahamas. When he comes to visit her at her night school classes, he asks if she would marry him again. Mary tells him that although she still loves him, love is not enough: “We’re not the same anymore.” The film ends ambiguously, implying that the Wilsons remain separated, but divorce receives no mention. Through *The Graduate* and *Divorce American Style*, Hollywood presented the belief that divorce created more problems than it solved. As with many issues facing housewives during the fifteen-year span under analysis, movies skimmed along the edge of women’s problems. With housewives beginning to pursue life-changing choices, 

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148 *Divorce*, Lear.
150 *Divorce*, Lear.
151 *Ending*, Brooks.
152 *Rosen, Venus*, 347.
Hollywood addressed some of their concerns, but failed to provide clear answers for a way to
self-fulfillment and happiness.

Later housewife films began to reflect the social issues raised by the growing feminist
movement. Prior to the emergence of the Third Wave, women became involved in a myriad of
social protests including the Civil Rights movements, welfare rights activism, university protests,
and the antiwar movement opposing the Vietnam War.\(^\text{153}\) As a result of female activities in
reform organizations, particularly the Civil Rights movement, many women started to recognize
the limitations of being a woman.\(^\text{154}\) A raised consciousness over their status and position in
society ignited the feminist movement. Betty Friedan’s 1963 opus, *The Feminine Mystique*,
resonated among middle class housewives who Susan Hartmann says “embodied a contradiction
between the intellectual and social stimulation of their college years and the isolation and routine
of domesticity.”\(^\text{155}\) Women began to work together, forming organizations to fight for their
liberties. Coalitions such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) championed many
causes, in particular the Equal Rights Amendment of 1972.\(^\text{156}\) By 1975 women such as Joanna
Eberhart gained beneficial knowledge and power as a result of the efforts of the feminist
movement. Although *The Stepford Wives* and other housewife films represented backlash
against the burgeoning women’s movement, the influences of many different social movements
found themselves entering suburbia and the big screen.

The release of these housewife films sparked various critical reactions and financial
outcomes. Doris Day, for her early housewife comedies, received praise for her work as she
elicited laughter, maintained the status quo of women, and combined style and wit to defend

\(^{155}\) *Ibid.*, 56.
\(^{156}\) *Ibid.*, 103.
virtue. Her wholesomeness and enterprising spirit allowed Day a long and successful career. Mrs. Robinson, played by Anne Bancroft, became the first housewife on film to achieve great success critically and financially. Compared to Doris Day’s housewives who were often the primary focus of films, Mrs. Robinson received consideration as a supporting character as the seductive older woman. The Graduate’s popularity stemmed from the public’s acceptance of the film as Benjamin Braddock’s coming-of-age tale as opposed to the housewife’s story.

Roger Ebert, reviewer at The Chicago Sun-Times, heralded The Graduate as “the funniest American comedy of the year.” The Graduate was the highest grossing film of the 1960s with $44.1 million in domestic rentals. Produced for just $3 million, it broke house records for attendance in nearly ninety percent of the theaters in which it played. Unlike The Graduate, Richard Brooks’ The Happy Ending focused solely on Jean Simmons’ unhappy Mary Wilson and received disappointing results; the move was a financial failure. A Woman Under the Influence approached the status of a hit. Although critics disliked the film, the public bought into Cassavetes’ gritty image of a broken housewife. Within six months of its opening in New York City, the movie made close to $15 million. The Stepford Wives, addressing contemporary feminist issues in a stylish and clever fashion, barely broke even, returning just $4 million in rentals.

Following some of these films that questioned the societal role of women, The Stepford Wives (1975) unwittingly led to the reinforcement of the suburban housewife stereotype. The

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157 Rosen, Venus, 303.
158 Haskell, Reverence, 263.
159 Mark Harris, Pictures at a Revolution (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 381.
161 Monaco, Sixties, 184.
162 Haskell, Reverence, 336.
163 Cook, Illusions, 200.
165 Cook, Illusions, 243.
film faced tremendous outrage from leading feminists. Betty Friedan deemed the movie a “rip-off of the women’s movement,” a notion Anna Krugovoy Silver disputes; she believes the film is indebted to Friedan’s groundbreaking work. The movie chronicled Joanna Eberhart’s move to Stepford, Connecticut, with her husband and two children, but there seems to be something too perfect about the wives in the small town.

The film, targeting key points in feminist literature such as *The Feminine Mystique*, emphasized the plight of the dissatisfied housewife, the artificiality of female beauty and the critique of the nuclear family. Many critics denied that the movie was in fact faithful to popular feminist discourse of its time. These robotic wives recall older days when housewives felt fulfilled working in their homes. In Stepford, they constantly clean, polish, and bake. In actuality, their repetitious lifestyle is not their choice; the Stepford Men’s Association murders and replaces the women with robots created to fulfill their husbands’ image of the ideal wife. When Joanna discovers the conspiracy, she demands to know the men’s logic behind the replacements. The Men’s Association leader, Dis, explains, “Think of it the other way around. Wouldn’t you like some perfect stud waiting on you around the house, praising you, servicing you, whispering how your sagging flesh was beautiful, no matter how you looked?”

The husbands found a way to turn away the tides of feminism and locked the wives into a frozen landscape in “The Town that Time Forgot.” In controlling their wives, the men created the sanitized and standardized image of the suburban housewife. *The Stepford Wives* stressed the loss of individuality of these women. The wives are interchangeable and conform to exaggerated

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166 Silver, “Cyborg,” 60.
169 Berne and Scherick, *Stepford*.
images of feminine beauty and behavior. In the final scene, the women all shop in the grocery store wearing sunhats, gloves, and frilly dresses.

One of the major factors for feminist anger over the film was the manner in which the director and writer displayed their ideals. They believed it condensed their analysis. Jane Elliot writes, “[the film and its novel basis] push second-wave feminist discourse through the sieve of the uncanny and what comes out the other side is in essence a ‘feminist’ remake of a preexisting story of social domination.” Feminists including Friedan saw the film as a parody, co-opting the important principles of their agenda. The primary goal of the liberal feminist movement by the time of film’s release was the consolidation of power between different groups to disseminate the goals of the movement into political legislation and American culture. Groups such as NOW and figures such as Friedan believed that The Stepford Wives hindered their efforts through its presentation of the housewives. The robotic doubles emphasized male reaction to women’s feminist consciousness and served to turn back the clock to fulfill men’s needs above those of women. The Stepford wives raised feminist issues and concerns until men took action against these independent women by murdering them and then replacing them with robots. The robots, programmed by men, all share the same vocabulary, domestic interests, and manner of dress, as well as the same desire to gratify men’s sexual desires while ignoring the reality of women’s sexual drive. The film reinforced the stereotyped image of the suburban housewife wearing an apron and cleaning her kitchen. The uniformity and domesticity of the wives seen in the movie added to the contemporary lexicon. The Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of the

172 Silver, “Cyborg,” 72.
173 Stepford, Berne and Scherick.
175 Silver, “Cyborg,” 63.
176 Ibid., 62.
177 Ibid., 73.
adjective, Stepford, reads, “robotic; docile, acquiescent; (also) uniform, attractive but lacking in individuality, emotion of thought.”

Elliott writes that the Stepford vision of the housewife continues to persist in the popular imagination. The societal image of the suburban housewife returned to one of domestic perfection and wholesome, syrupy, feminine beauty as a result of the 1975 thriller.

The suburbs, though viewed as the best location for families to flourish, became a place of exile for many housewives. The ideals of uniformity and repetition plagued the women living there and served as the basis for both propaganda and criticism. While sources such as Time praised the new suburban culture, singer-songwriter Malvina Reynolds in 1962 sang out against its conformity. She sang, “Little Boxes on the hillside/Little boxes made of ticky-tacky/Little boxes, little boxes/Little boxes all the same.” The housewives featured in films produced between 1960 and 1975 were products of the suburban society that confined them to becoming homemakers and abandoning career opportunities in the name of upholding traditional roles for women. Doris Day’s domestic humor roles in Please Don’t Eat the Daisies, The Thrill of It All, and Send Me No Flowers addressed many issues women faced but still adhered to societal customs. Although questioning their rights, Day’s housewives consistently followed the gender roles ascribed by American society. In the late 1960s, beginning with The Graduate, films challenged the view of housewives in their frank and naturalistic portrayals of depressed and discontented women. Of the women on screen, only Mary Wilson of The Happy Ending makes a break with expectations and chooses to remain separated from her husband. In The Stepford Wives, the men affirm the idea that the ideal woman reflects the older stereotype of the

housewife as exemplified by Doris Day. Though unintentionally, the “Stepford” wife remains the current example of the suburban housewife living during this fifteen-year time span. After waiting many years to address “the problem with no name,” films continued to uphold the status quo for housewives. Despite presenting serious issues of these women, the vision of the suburban housewife represented in Hollywood films produced between 1960 and 1975 ultimately became one of a woman happily wearing an apron, living in her little box.
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