

Logan Hansen  
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Matthew Countryman

### The Stirrings of a Movement

The decade of the 1960s in America has gone down in the history books as a rather unforgettable one. It was a time when social and cultural movements of all varieties ran rampant, from the ideologies of the New Left and Black Power to the apolitical musings of artists and musicians like Jefferson Airplane and The Grateful Dead, as well as the liberal use of drugs like LSD thanks in part to Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters. In Helen Gurley Brown's nonfiction advice book *Sex and the Single Girl*, she outlines a movement of that time which falls closer to the latter end of that spectrum. The book brought to light and recommended a lifestyle option for young women that focused on taking up career opportunities and sexual exploration prior to marriage. While not a new idea, as many young women had thoughts such as these in the back of their minds and some were even embarking on such a course already, Brown's writing made more concrete a shifting mentality in 1960s America that concerned appropriate gender roles in society. The idea that women could and should fulfill a greater purpose than a domestic role at home was beginning to take root, and Brown provided one of the initial steps for the solidification of this changing dynamic.

*Sex and the Single Girl* debuted in 1962, a year not far removed from the Cold War consensus culture of the 1950s. In that prior decade, gender roles for women, as well as men, had been strictly defined. While men had been expected to be patriarchal breadwinners, women had been expected to be the anchor of the American household. The vocation of the housewife was the highest and most prestigious position a woman

should aspire to. It was their responsibility to continually grease the cogs of the American consumer machine by purchasing household goods, hence the reason advertisers would often market their products directly to middle-class women. Equally vital responsibilities were building stable, nurturing homes, as well as raising well-adjusted children. Women who strayed from this culturally defined “feminine” role were seen as psychologically neurotic – something had to be wrong with them. Take for example the findings of Becky J. White, who concluded in a 1959 study, “that girls with liberal attitudes about women’s roles came from broken homes in which there had been either a divorced or deceased parent,” (205). This analysis makes sense in that girls with a more traditional home life, who were closer to their parents, would adopt the prescribed feminine roles that were instilled in their parents’ modes of thinking. The important part of the quote, however, is White’s use of the word “broken,” suggesting that there was just something not quite right about women with career- or other-oriented goals. She went on to assert, “that girls whose interests departed from society’s expectations were less well-adjusted and experienced strain in their relationships with people,” (White 205).

Psychological research findings such as these, along with the still-popular belief in Freudian concepts like penis envy, confined women of the 1950s era to a domestic housewife role that they were supposed to be content in fulfilling. Psychiatrists and doctors only further perpetuated these notions by diagnosing women who felt unhappy in this position with psychological problems that they could typically attribute to an unhappy marriage.

Interestingly, it was only a short period before this that women had been encouraged to enter the workforce. During World War II, women were called upon to

take up the jobs that men who went overseas to fight left behind. At that time, women working in shipyards, manufacturing companies, aircraft plants and the like were not viewed as unfeminine, they were seen as fulfilling a necessary, patriotic duty. However, once the war ended, the veterans came home and needed to find employment once more. This resulted in many of those women losing their jobs and being forced to return to the household to take back up their duties as housewives and mothers full time. Traditional, male-defined roles of femininity were thus effectively back in place, and working women were no longer viewed in a positive light, though some continued to hold jobs outside of typical “women’s work” (often secretarial in nature).

On an even more personal level, 1950’s American culture also had rigid expectations when it came to female sexuality. As Susan J. Douglas explained in her book *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, “The legacy of the 1950s was that no ‘nice’ girl ever, ever, went all the way before marriage, and no nice woman ever really liked sex,” (61). Society outwardly deemed that “good girls” never engaged in premarital sex, and to do so would be equated with the murder of proper moral values. In the case of boys and men, though, it was natural for them to seek to fulfill their sexual drives; nobody could blame them for that. Thus a double standard existed, and women were relegated to cement American society through their roles as housewives while also being culturally forbidden from sex until that housewife status had been attained.

Amidst the latter years of the 1950s and the beginning years of the 1960s, there had been creeping a subtle rift in these consensus gender roles for women. Books, movies, and music were testing the waters, so to speak, “pushing the boundaries of what

you could show and what you could say,” (Douglas 62). America was on the precipice of the Sexual Revolution that would prove to be one of the defining movements of the sixties, although it wouldn’t fully take off until 1968 with the “free love” phenomenon. All over the country, young girls were receiving mixed messages from media outlets and traditional cultural stalwarts about their sexuality, and housewives were experiencing feelings of discontent and a lack of fulfillment, an issue that would later be addressed by Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique*. Before that, though, it was Helen Gurley Brown in 1962 with *Sex and the Single Girl* that dared to bring out into the open the idea that women were meant for more than finding a husband and raising the next generation of Americans – the developing mindset that more traditional American men and women were not ready to accept.

Girls were not supposed to attain a post-secondary education with aspirations of one day fostering a career. They were not supposed to give sex any thought until they found “the one.” They were supposed to devote their efforts to finding a suitable partner, getting married to him (preferably at a young age), beginning to produce the greatest joys of their lives – babies – and being content knowing they were doing their part. Brown challenged these societal norms right out the gate in her book. A memorable moment from the first chapter, satirically titled “Women Alone? Oh Come Now!” goes like this: “Theoretically a ‘nice’ single woman has no sex life. What nonsense! She has a better sex life than most of her married friends. She need never be bored with one man per lifetime,” (7). This was her way of acknowledging that single women across the nation, though they may have been few in number (or maybe not), were already breaking the rules they were told they needed to follow. It was also her way of pulling the audience in,

telling women that sex outside marriage is not only something that they needn't be ashamed about, but something they should most certainly experience for themselves.

For a host of single women, confused about what to do when it came to the sex question, this was the kind of affirmation they needed to be confident that it was really no one's decision but their own. The music, the books, the movies, they were subtly suggesting that *maybe* it was okay. The Shirelles came out with the song "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" in 1960 with a somewhat hidden message underneath – "good girls" wanted to do what only "bad girls" were purported to: have sex. Elia Kazan directed the film "Splendor in the Grass" (1961), telling the tale of two teenagers in love, forced to throw away their natural bond because of their preaching parents who insisted, "that a good girl doesn't go too far...and that there are TWO kinds of girls..." (Scheuer). While a little more ambiguous than The Shirelles' ode of longing, Kazan's film still hinted that sexual repression could have negative consequences. Neither that song, nor that movie, nor any other media up to that point, however, had put the message in such a pointed, straightforward manner as *Sex and the Single Girl*. Here was a woman not afraid to address what others were too timid to be upfront about, who saw that American society was approaching a period of change in terms of women's roles, professionally, socially, sexually, and otherwise.

In the chapters following "Women Alone? Oh Come Now!" Brown outlines and explains, often in detail, who the potential suitors in a single girl's life might be, how they could be found and wrangled in, the importance of working for an amiable company and boss, general health and lifestyle tips, including a discussion about finances, and a chapter walking a girl through an affair from beginning to end, undoubtedly a cringe-

worthy compilation of pages for proponents of traditional femininity. Throughout the book, she is uplifting and glamorizing the potential life a single woman can enjoy. In the beginning she even states, “I think a single woman’s biggest problem is coping with the people who are trying to marry her off!” (4). This she mentions because women in their thirties, or even their upper twenties, were looked down upon or seen as an abnormality if they had not yet married. Brown herself states she did not get married for the first time until she was thirty-seven years of age, and she did not regret staying single all that time one bit.

As Brown describes it, women who forfeit the single life too soon miss out on a lot of opportunities for growth and discovering themselves. “Those [women] who grab on to men so that they can collapse with relief...who never have to reach, stretch, learn, grow, face dragons or make a living again are the...unfulfilled ones,” (Brown 267). She iterates that marriage is not the ultimate question in the life of the modern day woman in the early 1960s, that women owe it to themselves to take their lives at least a few steps further by exploring the job market, as well as the pool of potential male mates.

The aforementioned chapter detailing the process of an affair is of special interest in terms of women breaking from prescribed gender roles. Whereas traditional feminine roles would have women avoiding sex until they were bound to one man through marriage, this chapter highlights the perks of single women engaging themselves in sexual affairs before the thought of matrimony should even come across their mind. It is interesting to note that what Brown calls an “affair” does not necessarily need to involve a woman becoming entangled in the life of an already married man. By affairs, she simply means any sexual relationship prior to a woman’s marriage, whether it be with a

bachelor or a man who has already pledged his love and loyalty to another woman. She describes these affairs as rewarding but also risky at times, for girls can put their hearts on the line with a man that has no plans of commitment or who may make false promises. These kinds of situations are wholly normal in today's world, but were much more taboo – at least society would have women believe – during the sixties.

On that note, it seems pertinent to mention that next to nothing found in *Sex and the Single Girl* seems revolutionary or radical to modern day readers. While that may be the case, it is simply a nod to just how different things were at the time the book was published. It was an instant hit back then because it offered the tantalizing words that women long-oppressed by the ideals of men had been yearning to read. Brown's book proved to be one of the first of many to come that would end up defining the cultural shift of women's attitudes about their own femininity during the decade, as the Women's Liberation Movement began picking up steam. Another work published only the year after *Sex and the Single Girl*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, would highlight in much more depth what Friedan coined "The Problem That Has No Name," the restlessness and poor sense of self worth that white middle-class women experienced while attempting to find purpose in their roles as housewives and stay-at-home mothers.

Lastly, while *Sex and the Single Girl* was certainly a showcase of Brown's progressive attitude toward women's societal roles of the time, which definitely hit home with women across the nation, it is interesting to note that she still drew her narrative based on the framework of the male-dominated culture. Numerous times throughout the book, she explains that some actions should be taken for the benefit of men. Women should dress nice and wear makeup, *to attract a man*. They should be able to cook well in

order to host dinner parties, and *to please men*. They should do whatever they can to get on the good side of their male bosses in the workplace. Therefore while her message was focused around women living their lives the way they wanted to, it was still somewhat founded in male influence, evidence that not even the most radical of women were able to completely break out of the mindset that had pervaded America in the 1950s and before – not just yet anyway.

In the 1960s, America changed for many people; a chief group among those affected by the social and cultural movements of the time was women. In less than a decade, women would go from confinement in the kitchen and the household to publicly protesting for their liberation in all aspects of society. Many factors contributed in setting women down this path for true freedom in America, and paramount among them was Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl*. It was a book that helped surface the underlying thoughts and desires of women nationwide. It proclaimed there was nothing wrong with a woman who had career goals. There was nothing wrong with a woman enjoying sex outside of marriage. Most importantly, it stirred in women for the first time the belief that these things – a career and a sex life – were aspects where men and women should be on equal footing. Once that was established, it created the sort of cognitive dissonance that was necessary to push women to fight for their rights in all other arenas of American life.



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