

2013

The Postfeminist Mystique - Or, What Can We Learn from Betty Draper?

Abigail Rine

George Fox University, afavale@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/eng_fac

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rine, Abigail, "The Postfeminist Mystique - Or, What Can We Learn from Betty Draper?" (2013). *Faculty Publications - Department of English*. 17.

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/eng_fac/17

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Department of English by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

The Postfeminist Mystique

Or, What Can We Learn from Betty Draper?

Abigail Rine

14 April 2013

AMC's hit series *Mad Men* has been called both "bad for women" and "the most feminist show on television". This dispute over the feminist value of *Mad Men* amplifies when you look particularly at the character of Betty Draper (now Betty Francis). On the surface, it seems problematic that I, a feminist viewer, can feel sympathy for a character such as Don Draper as he fumbles his way through a revolving door of often-nameless women and steadily climbs the ladder of material success. Like most of his male cohorts he is a liar, a cheater, a womanizer, a heavy drinker, and only peripherally aware of the rampant sexism all around him. Yet, I do sympathize with him as he struggles over four seasons to keep the identity he has cobbled together intact.

Betty, on the other hand, while initially sympathetic, gradually transforms throughout the series into a woman too cold and cruel to be pitied; more than anyone else in the show, she becomes almost monstrous, particularly in her later abusive interactions with her daughter, Sally. This does trouble my "inner feminist" that I feel more sympathy for the successful, charming, and consistently-laid Don than I do for his oppressed (former) housewife, Betty. And I'm not alone. *Slate* and the popular feminist blog Jezebel have called for Betty's character to be killed off. A headline in the *Atlantic Monthly* declares: "No sympathy for Betty Draper". *New York* magazine's website features a clip montage of Betty's worst parenting moments, entitled "Ugly Betty". And an article on its entertainment page features the interrogative title: "Why did the *Mad Men* writers make Betty Draper such a monster?"

Yes, she is a bit of a monster—but not in an uncomplicated way. So the question is, Does this transformation of Betty preclude her character from being considered a feminist depiction?

As soon as I met Betty, she had my sympathies, as I readily recognized her to be part of a familiar feminist script: the housewife archetype. In this first season, I wanted to invite Betty over to tea, advise her to dump her husband and her patronizing psychiatrist, and slide my copy of *The Feminine Mystique* across the table toward her. (Of course, in first season Betty's world, this book would not yet have been published, but in my fantasy that is a mere technicality.) Almost instantly, I had a sense of how I wanted and expected her narrative arc as a character to unfold. To me, the show seemed poised to upend the myth of the happy '60s housewife and to grant Betty some self-actualization in the process.

I got the first half of my wish, that's for sure. Betty, when we first meet her, is a young, sweet, smiling wife and mother who is convincing herself that she "has it all" (the handsome breadwinning husband, two children, a beautiful home, an ideal figure), yet hairline fissures in her placid veneer are readily visible and beginning to widen. Her pretty, ready smile vanishes into blank sadness whenever she is no longer observed by other characters and compelled to play her part.

In the second episode of the first season, Betty is experiencing sudden onsets of unexplained numbness in her hands, and these attacks strike when she attempts to perform tasks such as applying lipstick and washing the dishes. She becomes fascinated by a divorced mother of two who moves onto the block, and during one scene, when Betty drives past this woman who is out in her yard maneuvering large moving boxes, her hands go numb and she loses control of the car. To the feminist viewer, such as myself, her condition is an obvious signal of her deep psychological unease and a psychosomatic rebellion against the limited, mundane tasks punctuate her day and are supposed to bring her fulfillment.

The ninth episode of this first season provides the perhaps most iconic example of "early Betty". This episode, entitled "Shoot", opens with Betty gardening, and then pausing to watch her neighbor's pigeons, newly released from their coop, fly overhead. A small talk interaction at a party conjures the ghost of Betty's pre-marital life, when she was a model in Manhattan and Italy. We also learn more about Betty's mother, who pushed Betty to maintain her looks and weight, but saw her daughter's modeling as akin to prostitution. "She wanted me to be beautiful so I could find a man," Betty confides to her psychiatrist, "There's nothing wrong with that. But then what? Just sit and smoke and let it go until you're in a box?"

Betty exhibits a full emotional range in this episode: awe at the pigeons, glee as she parades in her old modeling outfits for her friend Francine; sadness as she describes her former modeling

life to her psychiatrist; sudden indignation at his insistence that she is angry at her mother; pure excitement at the chance to model again—and then acute disappointment when the opportunity vanishes. The modeling gig, as it turns out, was just a ploy by a rival ad agency trying to woo Don. It was never about her, at all.

When that door closes, she tries to convince herself, via Don, that it is better for her not to work, as she is so busy keeping house and raising the children. Well, we get a sustained look into the “busyness” the next day, as Betty settles back into domesticity. She makes her children breakfast in the morning, does a load of laundry... and by 1 o’clock she’s finished her housework and is sitting alone at the kitchen table, still in her nightgown, smoking in silence. From there, she wanders into the yard and begins shooting at her neighbor’s pigeons with a BB gun, a lit cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. The winged freedom of the birds that charmed her at the beginning of the episode now highlight her own domestic confinement in a daily life that is marked by monotony and unfilled time—and we see Betty’s anger, normally simmering beneath the surface, erupt.

In this first season particularly, Betty’s character seems to be an unambiguously feminist depiction, a character veritably sprung from *The Feminine Mystique*. Scenes of Betty in isolated domesticity are interspersed with shots of Don sleeping with his mistress-of-the-moment or knocking back whiskey with his male colleagues, wooing clients. This contrast underscores how Betty is thoroughly sequestered in the private, domestic sphere of her suburban home. Her character, moreover, seems poised to recognize this oppression and embark on a trajectory toward nascent feminism.

Four seasons later, however, I no longer expect a feminist awakening from Betty. Rather than progressing in terms of self-actualization, Betty has regressed. The woman who seemed on the brink of realizing that the wounds she received from her mother are now generational: she’s inflicting similar wounds on her daughter. The woman who seemed imprisoned in her marriage to Don only leaves him when she has another restrictive marriage waiting to catch her. Betty has hardened and become cold and cruel, particularly to those positioned less fortunately than she, such as her maid Carla, and her children. Betty has become a controversial and divisive character, and if there is any consensus about her, it is that she no longer holds our sympathies.

Betty’s descent shows itself most disturbingly in the middle of the fourth season. By this time, Don and Betty are divorced and when their two older children go to stay with their dad in Manhattan for a weekend, Don pawns them off on a babysitter to go out with his girlfriend. Sally, the 11 year-old daughter sneaks into the bathroom and cuts off her hair into a choppy bob. When Don delivers the children back to Betty, she is enraged upon seeing Sally’s hair, yelling, “What the hell happened to you?” Sally confesses that her haircut was self-inflicted, and Betty strikes her across the face. Don attempts to defend Sally: “Kids do this. You never did this?” “All I wanted was to have long hair,” Betty replies, “If fact when my mother was mad at me, she threatened to cut my hair.”

The insight Betty seemed to gain in the first season about her mother's negative impact on her has faded; Betty seems oblivious to the fact that, although the mechanisms have changed, she's turning into her mother by venting her frustration and anger on her children and policing her daughter's compliance with gender norms through verbal and physical abuse. Later in that same episode, Sally experiences the first throes of adolescent sexual awakening and is caught "playing with herself" by a friend's mother at a sleepover, who immediately takes her home. After the woman leaves, Betty grabs Sally by the chin, demanding, "What is wrong with you? You don't do those things. You don't do them in private, and you especially don't do them in public." When Sally denies any wrongdoing, Betty snaps back, "Don't you lie to me, or I'll cut your fingers off."

In the finale of this season, Carla, the Drapers' long-time maid and nanny, becomes the latest collateral damage of Betty's anger. She is summarily fired without a chance to say goodbye to the children she has helped raise from birth

We typically expect feminist representations to fall into roughly two camps: the empowered or disempowered woman—and ideally we want to see a trajectory that takes a character from disempowerment to empowerment. Initially, Betty is clearly ensconced in the former camp—when we first meet her, she is the frail housewife with the numb hands. She is oppressed, alienated, silenced, and brimming with barely-repressed anger. Yet, instead of moving toward combating her oppression, she burrows deeper. A knee jerk reaction might be to doubt that the vilification of a female character, particularly one so clearly oppressed as Betty, could be feminist. Yet I would argue that the feminism of *Mad Men* is not undermined by Betty's characterization; rather, it depends upon it. Betty, with all her anger, coldness, and emotional immaturity, anchors the world of *Mad Men* in a crucial way, and her representation connects meaningfully to the conversations about gender and feminism in our current postfeminist era.

Betty adds much-needed complexity to the narrative of the victimized '60s housewife. Second-wave feminism has received plenty of criticism over the years; perhaps the most valid criticism involves its simplistic account of power. While this "wave" was hardly monolithic, it's fair to say that the women's liberation movement was chiefly concerned with the plight of white, middle-class women and specifically sought to address imbalances of power between men and women, without much attention to other forms of privilege, nor how gender compliance can itself be a source of power, albeit limited.

The unsympathetic Betty of the later seasons reveals that, really, the figure of the upper-middle class housewife is *not* an utterly powerless one. In fact, Betty wields power ruthlessly, when she can get it. She uses her Grace Kelly looks to jump from one wealthy husband to another; she mistreats her maid, she abuses her children—particularly policing Sally's attempts to transgress traditional femininity. While men within patriarchy benefit from the "patriarchal dividend",

Betty exemplifies how women who play by the rules of gender, race, and class are allowed a small stipend, too. This depiction destabilizes the simplistic notion of “woman as victim”, illuminating the complexities of power in a Foucauldian sense: power is not something one simply “has” or does not “have”; rather, it is a complex matrix in which certain positions are privileged over others. While Betty is positioned in a disadvantaged way as a woman, her beauty, her race, and her wealth grant her access to other forms of cultural currency.

Furthermore, Betty’s character illuminates the continued relevance of feminism for our era, which is increasingly skeptical of feminism, having instead turned its attention to the plight of men. As the female portion of the American workforce edged over 50 percent in 2010, anxiety about the roles and purpose of men has skyrocketed. Hanna Rosin’s article for the *Atlantic Monthly*, hyperbolically entitled “The End of Men” exemplifies this rising anxiety—as have several recent television shows, like the mercifully short-lived sitcom *Work It*, in which men masqueraded as women to gain employment.

Indeed, the world of *Mad Men* represents, on the surface level, the mirror image of the dire emasculated picture being painted by mass media. One can look up from the pages of Rosin’s article about the endangered species of men to see the dashing Don Draper raking in copious amounts of money, success, and sex in Manhattan, before going home to a hot dinner with his thin, blonde housewife and two children in the ‘burbs. In this current cultural moment of anxiety about the destabilization of the traditional male role, the stylistic throwback to an era of clear-cut gender monoliths has unsurprisingly gained mass appeal. Men and women alike seem dazzled by the aesthetic of the *Mad Men*, which depends upon the polarization of masculinity and femininity and veers away from androgyny in any form.

This explains, in part, the undercurrent of ambivalence toward second-wave feminism that runs through *Mad Men*. Even while it stares unflinchingly at the rampant sexism of the ‘60s, this backward look maintains an air of nostalgia for an era where hegemonic masculinity and male entitlement were solidly anchored by domesticated femininity and allowed to rule over the public sphere unquestioned.

The implicit danger of romanticizing the pre-women’s lib world is held firmly in check by the show’s nuanced and in-depth characterizations, particularly of Don and Betty. On the surface, Betty and Don each embody the hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity of their time—ideals that we have yet to fully shirk. They are a couple that has played by the rules of gender and achieved the pinnacle of what those rules promise. However, their wounded characterizations ultimately reveal those ideals to be a sham. Don and Betty, after all, are terrible parents, terrible partners, and they are both deeply unhappy and unfulfilled.

Perhaps most importantly: without Betty, *Mad Men* would lose touch with the domestic sphere entirely, and this is the sphere where feminism had made the smallest gains. Viewers are startled

by how vastly the workplace of *Mad Men* differs from the workplace of today, yet Betty's world is eerily familiar, as the bulk of household work and childcare continues to fall at the feet of women. Women have entered the workforce en masse, yes, but the realm of the home remains thoroughly feminized, and Betty shows us the cost of that feminization, to both women and men.

However unlikeable she's become, Betty's character underscores the importance of feminism, then and now, by showing us its absence, and in doing so, she holds the nostalgia of *Mad Men* in check. She reveals, through her cold cruelty and sporadic bursts of rage, the steep price of the patriarchal dividend that we are all, men and women, continuing to pay. So, do I sympathize with Betty Draper? I do, yes: because there, but for the grace of feminism, go I.