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Mother Knows Better: The Donna Reed Show, The Feminine Mystique and the Rise of the Modern Maternal Feminist Movement

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Mother Knows Better:
The Donna Reed Show, The Feminine Mystique and the Rise of the Modern
Maternal Feminist Movement

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at
Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Abstract

MOTHER KNOWS BETTER: *THE DONNA REED SHOW*, *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE* AND THE RISE OF THE MODERN MATERNAL FEMINIST MOVEMENT

By Anne Mullino Newton, M.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018.

Major Director: Dr. Emilie Raymond, Professor, Department of History

In 1958, actress Donna Reed formed her own production company to create *The Donna Reed Show*, which ran successfully until 1966. One of only two female television producers working in Hollywood, Reed's show foreshadowed much of the discontent illustrated in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. The series explored Donna's frustrations with housework, her interest in professional activities outside the home, and her determination to be an equal in her marriage. However, *The Donna Reed Show* also diverged from Friedan on key issues by elevating the housewife and establishing her moral authority, thus foreshadowing more conservative "maternal" feminism as identified by Christina Hoff Sommers. *The Donna Reed Show* has been falsely grouped with other family sit-coms as conformist and has been largely overlooked for its contributions to the feminist movement by scholars, when in fact Reed created the most complex mother character on television at the time.

Introduction

In an interview with the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1964, actress Donna Reed said, “Maybe the ‘experts’ are crazy wrong when they say an unmarried woman is ‘unfulfilled,’ maybe every woman shouldn’t necessarily be married and have children – and a lot of women would be happier and more fulfilled if they didn’t.”¹ While this statement may have been surprising coming from a married mother of four in the mid-1960s, it is even more interesting coming from an actress who played a wife and mother on *The Donna Reed Show*, one of the most popular family television programs of the era. A former film star from the studio era, Reed was only the second woman to both star in and produce her hit television show, behind Lucille Ball and her hit series *I Love Lucy*. While television programming reinforced conformity and gender roles during this era, Reed often used her show to challenge those norms, especially in the way that her character, Donna Stone, expressed the desire to pursue her own career. At the same time, Reed’s focus on such themes as gaining respect for housewives, asserting herself as an equal in her marriage, and assuming the role of disciplinarian and moral teacher to her children foreshadowed “maternal,” or conservative feminism, as opposed to “women’s liberation,” as the women’s movement split in the 1970s.

Considered to be the golden age of television, the 1950s saw the use of episodic television shows which stemmed from situational comedies, otherwise known as the sitcom.² The rise of television coincided with the Cold War. The ongoing threat of nuclear war caused many Americans to look to pop culture for self-assurance and guidance. Many of these new television sitcoms

¹ Donald Freeman, “Donna Reed: Fire and Ice; TV’s Ranking Wife and Mother Offers Some Chilly Opinions about Hollywood,” *Saturday Evening Post*, March 28, 1964, 22.

² The Museum of Broadcast Communications - Encyclopedia of Television - Golden Age of Television, Accessed June 10, 2017, <http://www.museum.tv/eotv/goldenage.htm>.

focused on the concept of the white ideal nuclear family, which included a mother, father and two children. Television shows like *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963), *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966), and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966) all portrayed this ideal.³ In reassuring the American public, these family shows featured mundane plot lines that centered around issues that the average American also experienced such as raising children, dinner parties and marriage.

On the surface, *The Donna Reed Show* appears to be like any other family-oriented show of the period, having similar benign plotlines as *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* and has been falsely grouped as such. In reality, it should be grouped with *I Love Lucy*. The bullheaded and humorous Ball is known for pushing boundaries on television, most notably for her marriage to Cuban co-star Desi Arnaz and for her constant (and often slapstick) efforts to seek employment outside the home. Although Reed portrayed a calmer and gentler character, she and Ball have much in common. In addition to their pioneering work as female producers, they both challenged conventional norms about housewives, career women, and mothering. In doing so, they both foreshadowed some of the themes in Betty Friedan's famous book *The Feminine Mystique*.

Published in 1963, *The Feminine Mystique* is credited with starting what historians refer to as the second wave of feminism, which focused around issues such as legal inequalities, reproductive rights, and the workplace.⁴ *The Feminine Mystique* echoes the frustrations of the conformity of middle class women in the 1950s that Donna embodies on her show. Friedan

³ Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows: 1946 – Present*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 18, 326, 399 and 673.

⁴ "Second-Wave Feminism," *American History USA*, Accessed March 20, 2018, <https://www.americanhistoryusa.com/topic/second-wave-feminism/>.

discusses how women's intelligence was undermined by societal beliefs and gender norms of the era, and highlights "the problem with no name," that is the widespread unhappiness of housewives.

Several feminist works had been written by the time of *The Feminine Mystique's* publication in 1963, such as Simone du Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* which was published in 1949. Originally published in France, *The Second Sex* did not have widespread general readership in the United States. However, like *The Donna Reed Show*, *The Feminine Mystique* had a large impact on the nation and appealed to a general audience, in particular, a white, middle-class one. Within the first three years of publication, *The Feminine Mystique* sold over three million copies.⁵ Although Reed's show reflected many of Friedan's critiques, Reed did not always advocate similar solutions, especially when Friedan aligned with more radical feminists in the 1970s. Thus, the themes of *The Donna Reed Show* would foreshadow a more conservative type of modern feminism, characterized by scholar Christina Hoff Sommers as "maternal feminism."

In *Freedom Feminism: Its Surprising History and Why It Matters Today*, Sommers argues that throughout American history women's rights activists have been divided about the best way to advance the cause, leading to two different branches of feminist thought, egalitarian feminism and maternal feminism. During the first wave of feminism, which focused on women's suffrage, Sommers highlights 1800's Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who advocated for universal equality amongst men and women as egalitarian feminism.⁶ On the other side were those like Frances Willard, founder of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in 1873, who pushed for "women's rights by redefining, strengthening, and expanding these familial roles."⁷ Sommers

⁵ PBS, Accessed May 02, 2018, <http://www.pbs.org/fmc/segments/progseg11.htm>.

⁶ Christina Hoff Sommers, *Freedom Feminism: Its Surprising History and Why it Matters Today*, (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 2013), 30.

⁷ Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 10

characterizes Willard as a maternal feminist since she advocated women's suffrage as a way to protect the home from drunk men, saloon politics and liquor interests.

According to Sommers, differences between feminist thought, egalitarian vs. maternal, reappeared with the push for the Equal Rights Amendment first in the 1920s and again in the late 1960s and 1970s. During this "second wave" of feminism, Sommers argues that "the combined efforts of egalitarians and traditionalists achieved what neither could have done alone – extending women's rights from the ballot box to the courts, the workplace, the university and beyond."⁸ Although radical feminists have largely gotten the credit for the strides made for women's rights, Sommers argues that maternal feminists made equally if not more important contributions. Women like Donna Reed, who subtly pushed back against conceived gender norms, while also embracing their roles in the home, therefore deserve more examination.

Many scholars have analyzed the rise of television, gender roles and the role of the family in the 1950s, as well as the rise of the feminist movement. Few historians have studied the impact of all three together or the impact of the three on each other. Even less scholarship exists about *The Donna Reed Show*. The two books that do exist about the show have largely misunderstood its topic. By analyzing interviews with Reed about the purpose of the show and her feelings on gender norms, watching over one hundred episodes from *The Donna Reed Show*, as well as looking at articles from the time period, this thesis seeks to differentiate *The Donna Reed Show* from other family-focused shows of the era. For the purpose of clarification in this thesis, when referencing the actress Donna Reed, I call her Reed, and when I am referring to the character Donna Stone, I call her Donna.

⁸ Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 40.

In Search of Donna Reed by Jay Fultz is the only biography of Reed. Writing about her life and her career in Hollywood, Fultz says that Reed, “probably came closer than any other actress to being the archetypical sweetheart, wife, and mother.”⁹ Fultz also argues, “[Reed] was an early feminist who confronted the patriarchy at MGM, and she always said plenty about the unfair subordination of women in Hollywood...[but] even so, her life and career offers little comfort to the more programmatic and rhetorical feminists, who would see her as inconsistent and uncommitted.”¹⁰ While Fultz writes about Donna Reed’s life, Joanne Morreale writes about the history of the show in her work *The Donna Reed Show*. Morreale states that, “while *The Donna Reed Show* exemplifies the domestic containment of women in the postwar period and while Donna Stone wears the mask of femininity, there are several episodes in which she performs a different identity and contests her prescribed role.”¹¹ Both Fultz and Morreale recognize that Reed could sometimes be considered a feminist. Yet both authors only use a few endnotes in their work, making some of their claims seem arbitrary. Although Fultz and Morreale discuss specific episodes from the show, neither makes a connection to the larger cultural and social context of the era. Fultz writes about the *The Donna Reed Show* in one chapter of his book, focusing primarily on the actual production of the show, instead of the content. Morreale’s work goes into deeper analysis of Reed’s show than Fultz, discussing teen culture, women on television, and sit-coms. Neither author seriously discusses the rising feminist movement or TV history, or how either relates to *The Donna Reed Show*.

Scholars Tino Balio and Christopher Anderson have written about the early years of television in the 1950s and the transition from Hollywood studios to television networks.

⁹ Jay Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1998), 1.

¹⁰ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 201.

¹¹ Joanne Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 17.

Hollywood in the Age of Television, edited by Tino Balio, is a group of essays that looks at the relationship between Hollywood studios and television from the 1940s until the 1990s. Written in 1990, the work examines how studios sought to co-exist with the new television medium. Building on Balio's research, in *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties*, Christopher Anderson says, "Hollywood recognized television's ability to reach into the household, the privileged site of consumer culture, and was as eager as any manufacturer to place its products in the American home."¹² This adaptation was a relatively easy process that revolutionized Hollywood. Although neither Balio or Anderson mention Reed, they do mention *I Love Lucy* and the Desilu Production Company, which was owned by Ball and Arnaz. Even though they mention Ball, both authors fail to mention Lucy's role in her production company, female producers in general, or the impact of family-oriented shows on the growth of television, including the ways these women challenged industry and societal norms.

While Balio and Anderson focus on Hollywood and the rise of television, historians Lynn Spigel, Susan Douglas and Gerard Jones have looked at how the nuclear family and women have been portrayed on television, starting in the 1950s. In *Make Room for TV*, Lynn Spigel states that "multiple, and often conflicting, middle-class ideals of postwar America gave way to contradictory responses to television in popular culture."¹³ However, the majority of her book focuses on the physical impact that television had on the home and the impact of television on the family. Susan Douglas discusses the portrayal of women over the past fifty years in the mass media in her book, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. Douglas states that "American women today are a bundle of contradictions because much of the media imagery we grew up with

¹² Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 20.

¹³ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 186.

was itself filled with mixed messages about what women should and could not do, what women could and could not be.”¹⁴ Like Douglas, in *Honey I’m Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream*, Jones discusses the depiction of families in television since the 1950s, but her focus is on “the manner in which modern corporate culture has come to dominate our society and how we came from the confidence of World War II to our present confusion of national identity.”¹⁵

Although Spigel, Douglas and Jones all focus on different aspects of families and television, historians like Elaine Tyler May, Brett Harvey, Stephanie Coontz, Jessica Weiss and Gail Collins have written extensively on how the feminist movement impacted the idea of the nuclear family. In her work *Homeward Bound*, Elaine Tyler May looks at American families and family life during the Cold War. She argues that “public policy and political ideology are brought to bear on the study of private life, locating the family within the larger political culture... [and] post-war Americans’ intense need to feel liberated from the past and secure in the future.”¹⁶ Brett Harvey looks at how women felt about their lives during the 1950s through a series of oral histories. Harvey argues that women during this decade were full of contradictions and not the conformists they have been assumed to be.

Similar to May and Harvey, Stephanie Coontz argues in *The Way We Never Were* that there are common misconceptions about the “traditional” family of the 1950s and 1960s. Coontz argues that current culture often falls into the “nostalgia trap,” where people look back to the 1950s as the height of traditional family norms and values. While Coontz looks at misconceptions of the nuclear family of the 1950s, Jessica Weiss analyzes magazines, advice books and television shows to paint

¹⁴ Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media*, (New York: Times Books, 1994), 9.

¹⁵ Gerard Jones, *Honey, I’m Home! Sitcoms, Selling the American Dream*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992), 6.

¹⁶ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 12.

a fuller picture of middle class families from the 1950s to the 1980s in *To Have and To Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom and Social Change*. Like Coontz and Weiss, Gail Collins also addresses the misconceptions of American women and families in her work, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women From 1960 to the Present*. Collins documents the unease and discontent amongst American women prior to *The Feminine Mystique*, and explains how the feminist movement gained momentum over time. This thesis will add to the literature that discusses how white, middle class women expressed their misgivings about American gender norms in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Although Coontz, Douglas, and Collins all discuss *I Love Lucy*, they fail to mention that *The Donna Reed Show* was the only other female-led and produced show on television. Even worse, Coontz and Douglas lump *The Donna Reed Show* in with other generic family shows of the decade like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. Douglas argues that these shows “with their cookie cutter moms, television’s physical and linguistic containment of women was complete...[these] comedies about the process of raising children, in which fathers came into their own as authorities.”¹⁷ While both Coontz and Douglas are correct in that *The Donna Reed Show* does, like most sit-coms, deal with generic plotlines, there is much more beneath the surface than scholars recognize.

Reed has been unappreciated and misunderstood in pop culture as well. A 2001 episode of the *The Gilmore Girls* entitled “That Damn Donna Reed,” opens with characters Lorelai and Rory watching *The Donna Reed Show*. Lorelai mocks Reed as being medicated and reading from a script written by a man, neither of which were true.¹⁸ Lorelai and Rory are speaking to generalized

¹⁷ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media*, 51.

¹⁸ Michael Katleman, dir., “That Damn Donna Reed,” in *Gilmore Girls*, The WB, February 22, 2001.

assumptions about women and television in the era, rather than *The Donna Reed Show* episode they are watching.

This thesis will address these misconceptions, while also shedding light on the history of Hollywood, as well as the development of feminism. Chapter one will discuss Reed's background, the rise of television in the 1950s and how her show came into production. Chapter two will focus on the themes "housewives" and "female careers" as they develop through the show. Chapter three will analyze the themes "marital dynamics" and "role of mother." I will also discuss how these portrayals compare to other sitcoms of the time and how they relate to Friedan's work, and the development of second wave feminism throughout the chapters. While other historians have widely misinterpreted and overlooked Donna Reed's maternal feminism, this thesis adds new context and nuance to a complicated era.

Chapter One From Film to Television

When Donna Reed won an Academy Award in 1953 for her role as a prostitute in *From Here to Eternity*, she thought she had finally shed her good girl persona. However, in an undated interview, Reed stated, “all the Oscar brought me was more bland Goody-Two-Shoes parts.”¹ Reed’s frustrations with her type-casting in Hollywood films motivated her to try television, where she hoped to gain more control over her image. While Reed did not shed her sweet persona on *The Donna Reed Show*, she did succeed in cultivating a more complex homemaker, wife and mother character than any other actress on television; a character that gives insight into the burgeoning feminist movement.

Born in 1921 in Denison, Iowa, Reed was the eldest of five children. Blonde with hazel eyes, petite at 5’4”, Reed would become known for her wholesome good looks. After graduating high school, Reed moved to California to attend Los Angeles City College in order to pursue a career in radio.² Reed was elected Campus Queen in December of 1940; her photograph in the local newspaper inspired Hollywood studio heads to invite Reed to audition.³ In 1941 she signed a contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, one of the largest and most prestigious studios in Hollywood.⁴ Reed made her film debut in 1941 in *The Get-Away*, and would go on to star in over forty films. Although some of these films were well-known, such as *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946),

¹ Peter Kerr, "DONNA REED, OSCAR WINNER AND TV STAR, IS DEAD AT 64," *The New York Times*, January 14, 1986, Accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/15/obituaries/donna-reed-oscar-winner-and-tv-star-is-dead-at-64.html>.

² Fultz, *In search of Donna Reed*, 30.

³ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 39.

⁴ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 40.

The Beginning or the End (1947), and *From Here to Eternity* (1953), for which she won an Academy Award, she grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of variety in her film roles.

Reed will forever be associated with her character from her most famous film, the ever patient wife and mother Mary Bailey. Reed made *It's a Wonderful Life* when she still was under contract with MGM; the studio "loaned" her to RKO at the request of the producer and director Frank Capra, which was a common practice at the time. Released in 1946, *It's a Wonderful Life* won a Golden Globe in 1947 for Best Director and was nominated for five Academy Awards in the categories of Best Picture, Best Actor in a Leading Role, Best Director, Best Sound Recording and Best Film Editing.⁵ In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* in 1984, Capra said, "It's the damndest thing I've ever seen. The film has a life of its own now and I can look at it like I had nothing to do with it. I'm like a parent whose kid grows up to be president. I'm proud ... but it's the kid who did the work. I didn't even think of it as a Christmas story when I first ran across it. I just liked the idea."⁶ The Library of Congress found the film so "culturally, historically or aesthetically significant," that it was placed in the National Film Registry in 1990.⁷

While *It's a Wonderful Life* is now seen as one of the most influential Christmas movies ever made, it opened to mixed reviews when it premiered in late 1946.⁸ Ticket sales were so low, that Capra's production company was placed into bankruptcy.⁹ In a scathing review, the film critic for *The New York Times* said,

⁵ "Awards," *IMDb*, Accessed October 04, 2017, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038650/awards> and "Oscars.org | Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences," *Oscars.org* | Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Accessed March 09, 2018, <https://Oscars.org/>.

⁶ Stephen Cox | Special to The Times, "On a Wing and a Prayer," *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 2006, Accessed October 08, 2017, <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/dec/23/entertainment/et-wonderful23>.

⁷ "Complete National Film Registry Listing - National Film Preservation Board," The Library of Congress, Accessed October 04, 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/film-registry/complete-national-film-registry-listing/>.

⁸ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 71.

⁹ Staff, *Newsweek*, "It's A Wonderful Legacy," *Newsweek*, March 13, 2010, Accessed October 09, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/its-wonderful-legacy-174578>.

the weakness of this picture, from this reviewer's point of view, is the sentimentality of it – its illusory concept of life. Mr. Capra's nice people are charming, his small town is a quite beguiling place and his pattern for solving problems is most optimistic and facile. But somehow they all resemble theatrical attitudes rather than average realities. And Mr. Capra's "turkey dinners" philosophy, while emotionally gratifying, doesn't fill the hungry paunch.¹⁰

The awards failed to influence audiences, and at \$3.3 million, the film earnings barely surpassed its \$3.18 million budget. When the copyright expired in the 1970s, the film entered the public domain and ran continuously on television, allowing for it to be rediscovered by the public; it quickly become a beloved favorite.¹¹ According to scholar Jay Fultz, *It's a Wonderful Life* failed to garner the reception that it does today, because it "was out of joint with the more cynical postwar era, [and] was also a casualty of the general decline in movie attendance. The loss of foreign markets, higher cost of living and tendency of reunited families to stay home at night made 1947 one of the worst business years in Hollywood history."¹² Although it is her most recognized film and she received widespread praise for her performance as Mary Bailey, Reed rarely referred to her work in the movie.

In 1953, Reed was cast as a prostitute in *From Here to Eternity*. Based on a book of the same name, the movie revolves around an army barracks in the days preceding Pearl Harbor. Reed's character Alma was a divergence from her earlier roles; Alma was the jaded prostitute who falls in love with the male lead, played by actor Montgomery Clift. Many film critics praised Reed's portrayal of Alma, as well as her ability to break out of her good girl image. William

¹⁰ Bosley Crowther, "THE SCREEN IN REVIEW: AT THREE THEATRES; 'It's a Wonderful Life,' With James Stewart, at Globe-- 'Abie's Irish Rose' and 'The Wicked Lady' Also Seen Here At the Gotham," *The New York Times*, December 23, 1946, Accessed March 09, 2018, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9E00EFDE163DDEE3BBC4B51DFB467838D659EDE>.

¹¹ Roger Ebert, "It's a Wonderful Life Movie Review (1946) | Roger Ebert," *RogerEbert.com*, January 01, 1999, Accessed March 09, 2018, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-its-a-wonderful-life-1946>, and Lily Rothman, "It's a Wonderful Life: What Makes the Christmas Movie Great," *Time*, December 21, 2016, Accessed March 09, 2018. <http://time.com/4599219/review-its-a-wonderful-life-1946/>.

¹² Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 74.

Brogdon from *Variety* praised Reed's "change of pace," and said she "reveals an ability for meaty, dramatic work scarcely suspected from her previous assignments."¹³ Surprised that many critics felt she had personally changed, in a 1953 interview, Reed stated, "Pish and tosh! Nothing cooks with a *new* me. It's just that I've been able to crawl out from under all those nicey nice parts that have been smothering me for twelve years."¹⁴ Indeed, she felt that playing the role was "the easiest thing I ever did."¹⁵ Hoping that her performance would lead to more interesting offers, Reed was dismayed when she continued to receive the same "good-girl" roles.

Reed grew continuously frustrated with being type-cast based on what she referred to as her "farm-girl roots." As Fultz states, "The career of Donna Reed illustrates how little use Hollywood had for a leading lady who was beautiful without being dumb, intelligent without being abrasive, strong without being unfeminine, sexy without being sirenish, and interesting without being neurotic."¹⁶ As Reed got older, she realized that her time on the big-screen could be coming to an end, stating in an undated interview that "time is a terrible enemy in this business, and I don't want to be fighting it too much longer."¹⁷

By the mid-1950s, as more families started to watch television, movie offers for many Hollywood stars began to dry up. Weekly movie attendance had fallen dramatically; an average of ninety million attended the movies each week in 1946, and by 1950 that number had fallen to sixty million.¹⁸ Hollywood studios produced a smaller number of movies each year, leaving actors with fewer film roles. Frustrated with the lack of interesting film roles, and realizing the money that could be made from doing a sitcom, Reed turned to the possibility of the new medium of television.

¹³ William Brogdon, "From Here to Eternity," *Variety*, July 29, 1953, Accessed November 5, 2017, <http://variety.com/1953/film/reviews/from-here-to-eternity-2-1200417558/>.

¹⁴ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 92.

¹⁵ "An Interview with Donna Reed," *Denison Review*, May 22, 1976.

¹⁶ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 95.

¹⁷ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 114.

¹⁸ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 86.

In the meantime, Reed married her agent and second husband, Tony Owen, after divorcing her first husband William Tuttle in 1945. Reed and Owen were complete opposites; fourteen years her senior, Owen was brash, while Reed was gentle. Reed told a family member that “she would no doubt be unhappy if she married Tony – but miserable if she didn’t.”¹⁹ The couple would go on to have four children; Anthony, Penny Jane, Timothy and Mary Anne. The oldest two, Anthony and Penny Jane, were adopted.²⁰

Donna gave birth to her youngest daughter, Mary Anne, shortly before filming started on *The Donna Reed Show*. When asked by a reporter how she felt about being a wife and mother, while also starring in her own show on television, Reed responded, “one morning I decided to take a close, hard look at my own family – my husband was thriving and my children were happy and well-adjusted without me patting their heads every other minute..... I knew what was right for me – work and marriage and no guilt pangs about mixing the two.”²¹ Reed’s comments about not feeling guilty about being a working mother foreshadowed her role as Donna Stone, who would also champion working mothers.

As she considered moving to television, Reed and Owen created a production company called Todon of California, Inc. Unsure about what type of show to pursue, she told directors: “I’m nervous – I can’t do comedy.”²² After looking at a picture of Reed and her family on her family’s farm in Iowa, an executive at Screen Gems, the television unit of Columbia Pictures where Reed

¹⁹ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 68.

²⁰ The couple divorced in 1971.

²¹ Donald Freeman, “Donna Reed: Fire and Ice; TV’s Ranking Wife and Mother Offers Some Chilly Opinions about Hollywood,” *Saturday Evening Post*, March 28, 1964, 22.

²² David C. Tucker, *The Women Who Made Television Funny: Ten Stars of 1950s Sitcoms*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007), 112.

had been a contracted actress, suggested doing a sitcom based around the photo.²³ Todon Company, Inc. would go on to collaborate with Screen Gems to produce *The Donna Reed Show*.²⁴

As Reed began to put together the idea for her own sit-com, the medium was rapidly gaining in popularity. The 1950s would become known as the golden age of television. The era represented a time of robust economic growth, due to a growing demand in consumer goods after World War II. Levittown and the concept of mass produced suburban neighborhoods, created in the late 1940s, paved the way for retailers to market their new found consumer goods towards families moving out of apartments and into houses. As historian Sara Evans argues, even “architecture gave spatial expression to the intensification of domesticity... suburbs emphasized the privatization of family life.”²⁵ The growth of suburbia, along with more affordable car prices, prompted President Eisenhower to sign the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 as a Cold War measure to help move goods, military equipment and people across the country. Interstate highways led to the creation of fast food chains like McDonalds, which popped up across the country. For many, life became easier and more convenient.

The growth of the suburbs, television and highways all contributed to mass consumerism, helping many Americans achieve economic security and their realization of the American dream. America was becoming so prosperous that by 1960, almost 60 percent of Americans enjoyed midrange incomes, which was twice as many as in the years before the Great Depression.²⁶ Vice

²³ Tucker, *The Women Who Made Television Funny*, 113. Reed moved to Columbia Pictures after her contract was up with MGM. "From the Archives: Donna Reed, Oscar Winner and TV Star, Dies at 64," *Los Angeles Times*, Accessed April 01, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-donna-reed19860115-story.html>

²⁴ Tucker, *The Women Who Made Television Funny*, 112.

²⁵ Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America*, (New York, NY: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 249.

²⁶ Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011), 106.

President Richard Nixon summarized the general character of the United States on a trip to the Soviet Union in 1959 by stating,

There are 44 million families in the United States. Twenty-five million of [them] live in houses or apartments that have as much or more floor space than the one you see... Thirty-one million families own their own homes and the land on which they are built. America's 44 million families own a total of 56 million cars, 50 million television sets and 143 million radio sets. And they buy an average of nine dresses and suits and 14 pairs of shoes per family per year.²⁷

Nixon celebrated America's status as a large, consumerist nation, while others questioned its conformity. Artists like Jackson Pollock and William de Kooning critiqued the conformity and materialism of the era in their paintings, while authors like Ralph Ellison and J.D. Salinger did so in their novels.²⁸ The poverty rate, first recorded by the Census Bureau in 1959, sat at twenty-two percent.²⁹ Additionally, while white middle-class Americans saw vast social change, African Americans remained excluded from the mainstream of American life, especially in the Deep South. These critiques and social problems were often overwhelmed by the celebration of mass culture. With television reaching into the homes of millions of Americans, networks and sponsors used this new platform to portray the ideal nuclear family to reinforce not only gender norms and conformity, but to also reinforce American superiority.

While television dominated the home front, the Cold War and the looming threat of nuclear war overshadowed much of the 1950s culture. The end of World War II and the subsequent collapse of Europe led to an almost fifty-year rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States. Scholar Thomas Doherty states, "As prosperity became an expectation not a dream, as the

²⁷ *The American Yawp Reader*, Accessed November 22, 2016, <http://www.americanyawp.com/reader/26-the-affluent-society/richard-nixon-on-the-american-standard-of-living-1959/>.

²⁸ Eugenia Kaledin, *Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 13 and 14.

²⁹ "Poverty in the United States," *Debt.org*, Accessed March 09, 2018, <https://www.debt.org/faqs/americans-in-debt/poverty-united-states/>.

dread of social insecurity faded amid the cornucopia of postwar affluence, the nexus of American culture folded ever inward – to information and expression, to media access and on-screen visibility.”³⁰ As Americans turned inward in an increasingly dangerous world, they looked to the family and television for these self assurances.

Television began with the switch from radio programming to live and recorded TV broadcasts. At the beginning, the shift from radio to TV was a slow process, having experimentally begun in the 1920s, but the medium quickly took off by the 1950s. By the middle of the decade, Americans “were buying 20,000 television sets a day and two out of every three families owned at least one set.”³¹ Although television today broadcasts continuously, twenty-four hours a day, in the 1950s, stations only broadcast twelve to eighteen hours a day due to high production and broadcast costs.³² The average cost of a 30-minute episode in 1949 was \$12,000, by 1952 it was \$20,000.³³ Television producers turned to advertising to help defray these expenses.

Four networks originally ruled the broadcasts. NBC was the top network with CBS a close second, but DuMont and ABC lagged behind.³⁴ In the beginning, programming consisted of variety shows, live television or short movies, most being broadcast from New York. Eventually, television moved to situational comedies or Westerns. Each show had a sponsor, who dictated product placement, plotlines and content. If a program upset its sponsor, it often either lost funding or the show was cancelled. Hollywood studio chiefs originally looked down on television, but as the medium took off, they soon established television branches in their film companies.

³⁰ Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 3.

³¹ Brett Harvey, *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History*, (San Jose: ASJA Press, 2002), xv.

³² Harvey Sheldon, *The History of the Golden Age of Television*, (Lexington, KY: Harvey Sheldon, 2012), 4.

³³ Anderson, *Hollywood TV*, 64.

³⁴ Jones, *Honey, I'm Home!*, 63.

Television was not the only challenge that Hollywood faced. Fears over communism resulted in the Second Red Scare, which pervaded nearly every aspect of American culture in the 1950s. Created in 1938, but most powerful in the 1950s, the House Un-American Activities Committee, known as HUAC, investigated communist activity within the United States.³⁵ HUAC targeted many sectors of American professional life, such as government, education and the entertainment industry. In 1947 HUAC launched the notorious Hollywood Ten hearings, which were investigations of communist influence in the motion picture industry.³⁶ In an effort to avoid outright censorship, the studio chiefs issued the “Waldorf Declaration,” and placed Hollywood writers, producers and actors who were thought to be associated with the Communist Party or had communist leanings, on professional blacklists that lasted until 1961. Television star Lucille Ball, questioned by HUAC in 1952 about her past association with the Communist Party, stated in her memoirs,

The mere accusation of Red activity against someone – a writer, actor, or director – could put that person under a permanent cloud whether he was guilty or not. An actor could be “cleared” for one show and not for another – all on the same network. A writer could be denied credit for his work or find himself permanently unemployed by any studio. Television sponsors, fearing a boycott of their goods, quaked in their boots if anyone on their shows was even remotely tinged with the label of “controversial.”³⁷

In the meantime, Hollywood felt compelled to become outwardly anticommunist.

The combination of the Red Scare and the postwar baby boom led the television industry to idealize the nuclear family, or as scholar Stephanie Coontz defines it, the white, middle-class family with a male-breadwinner and stay at home female.³⁸ As scholar Sara Evans states,

television entered 5 million new homes per year with a powerful capacity to generate cultural norms and present a homogenized image of middle America that blurred

³⁵ History.com Staff, "HUAC," *History.com*, 2009, Accessed November 9, 2017. <http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/huac>.

³⁶ Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 23.

³⁷ Lucille Ball and Betty Hannah Hoffman, *Love, Lucy*, (New York, NY: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1996), 188.

³⁸ Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 65.

differences of ethnicity and class. Differences along the lines of gender were perhaps the most powerful social division recognized and enforced in this portrayal of American life as relentlessly white and middle class.³⁹

A reflection of the conformity that developed from the backlash against the previous two tumultuous decades and coinciding with the nuclear threat of the Cold War, the ideal family epitomized stability.

Sitcoms based around idealized nuclear families, like *Leave it to Beaver*, *I Love Lucy*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*, and *The Donna Reed Show*, would go on to be the mainstay of television programs in both the 1950s and 1960s. According to historian and journalist David Halberstam, “Few Americans doubted the essential goodness of their society. After all, it was reflected back at them not only by contemporary books and magazines, but even more powerfully and with even greater influence in the new family sitcoms on television.”⁴⁰ These breezy sitcoms all reflected the confidence that Americans felt in their country’s future. Positive and simple plotlines focused on daily issues that impacted the average American family, such as raising children and marital relationships.

Television was not the only purveyor of this message, and because of the disruptions of the Great Depression and World War II, many were eager to marry and settle down. Marriage rates of those who came of age during the war soared during the postwar era: 96.4 percent of women and 94.1 percent of men, most of whom married by their mid-twenties.⁴¹ According to scholar Jessica Weiss, “the emphasis on maturity in the 1950s was spurred by the trend in youthful marriage, quieting worries about the instability youth might bring to marriage...The twin specters of

³⁹ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 252

⁴⁰ David Halberstam, *The Fifties*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), x.

⁴¹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 23.

communism and atomic war also called for national sobriety and a responsible mature citizenry.”⁴² The emphasis on marriage and family stability was so great, that in an interview with *Newsweek*, anthropologist Dr. Mead argued that there was such a thing as overdomesticity. “Marriage is supposed to be the apex of the woman’s existence – in fact, the only purpose in life. She goes to school or takes a job only to get a man. There is nothing a woman can do today that we might label ‘happiness’ that is not connected with a man,” Mead explained.⁴³ The government also promoted the idea of the stability of the family, along with the notion that the success of the middle-class family reinforced American’s dominance over the Soviet Union. Vice President Richard Nixon promoted the superiority of the American family in the famous “kitchen debate” against the Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in 1959.

Housewives in the 1950s, more so than in the previous decades, represented more than just stay-at-home mothers. They represented the stability and security of the family, which in turn represented the stability and security of America. If housewives were content, America was content. Politician Adlai Stevenson, in a commencement address at Smith College in 1955, placed the burden of keeping men “Western” and continuing a free society on housewives. He stated,

women, especially educated women such as you, have a unique opportunity to influence us, man and boy, and to play a direct part in the unfolding drama of our free society. But I am told that nowadays the young wife or mother is short of time for the subtle arts, that things are not what they used to be; that once immersed in the very pressing and particular problems of domesticity, many women feel frustrated and far apart.⁴⁴

⁴² Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 25.

⁴³ “Young Wives with Brains – Babies, Yes – But What Else?,” *Newsweek*, March 7, 1960, 60.

⁴⁴ “A Purpose for Modern Woman (1955), Adlai E. Stevenson,” Accessed October 10, 2016, http://www.wwnorton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch32_04.htm.

In telling women that their roles were in the home, Stevenson reassured educated women that they may feel that housework was dull, but they are indeed preserving a free society. He goes on to compare marriage to the freedom of choice. Stevenson thus makes women feel like they have some agency in choosing to marry, preserving freedom and doing their duty to their country. Stevenson almost makes marriage sound patriotic. However, Mead's point about "overdomesticity" and Stevenson's on women being overqualified for "dull" housework touched on a theme that Friedan expanded upon in *The Feminine Mystique*. Not all wives resisted the domestic sphere. Many women stated that they were happy and dedicated to being wives and mothers; nevertheless, the undercurrents of women's unhappiness in their singular role within the home became a matter of national concern.

Doctors often addressed women's concerns with prescription pharmaceuticals. Anti-nerve medication like Valium became popular during the 1950s to help people cope with their anxieties. Valium use became so widespread amongst women, that it was given the nickname "mother's little helper." The drug was originally marketed towards both men and women. However, the focus on masculinity during the era made men hesitant to try a drug that was supposed to help with nerves.⁴⁵ Thus, anti-depressants were prescribed at an exponentially higher rate to women than to men. Nonetheless, doctors largely perceived female unhappiness as a personal problem, not a social concern.

Moreover, most family-oriented television shows proved oblivious to the issue. Shows like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* featured white, middle-class families that revolved around the father and children, giving the mother very little to do except keep house. June Cleaver

⁴⁵ "Take Some Pills for Your Hysteria, Lady: America's Long History of Drugging Women Up," *Vice*, April 28, 2015, Accessed October 01, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/gqmx9j/here-lady-take-some-pills-for-your-hysteria-253.

from *Leave it to Beaver*, was often pictured cleaning and cooking in heels and pearls, deferring to her husband Ward on important decisions. Only *I Love Lucy* and *The Donna Reed Show* portrayed women as having both a strong role within their family, and yearning to expand or move beyond the domestic sphere.

A precursor to *The Donna Reed Show*, *I Love Lucy*, adapted from Ball's popular radio show, *My Favorite Husband*, aired from 1951 to 1960 on CBS.⁴⁶ Sponsored by Philip Morris, Ball served as co-producer, along with her husband Desi Arnaz who played a Cuban singer and bandleader. Scholar Thomas Doherty argues, "In a decade misremembered as all whitebread homogeneity, male dominance, and stately decorum, the first breakout television show was brazenly multicultural, emphatically female-driven, and loopily anarchic: Lucy Ricardo and Ricky Ricardo, zany redhead and hot-blooded Latin, cornfed girl and exotic spice, wild woman and straight man."⁴⁷ Despite, or because of, these differences, the show proved wildly popular. It pushed boundaries in other ways as well. *I Love Lucy* was the only program on television to show a husband and wife with two twin beds pushed together; since Ball and Arnaz were married in real life, this was considered appropriate. Also taboo: pregnant women. When Lucy was expecting her second child, the network agreed to write Lucy's pregnancy into the storyline. Although this decision was somewhat controversial, the episode when Lucy gave birth to Ricardo, Jr., was one of the most popular. More than forty-four million viewers tuned in, beating the twenty-nine million viewers who had turned in for President Eisenhower's televised swearing in the day before.⁴⁸

I Love Lucy paved the way for female led shows, and perhaps its success is what led the ABC network, desperate for a hit, to take a chance on Reed. *The Donna Reed Show* was ABC's

⁴⁶ Jones, *Honey, I'm Home!*, 63.

⁴⁷ Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 49.

⁴⁸ Jones, *Honey, I'm Home!*, 73.

first show starring a woman. Her show entered an oversaturated market of family-oriented television. However, most of the programs already on television revolved around the father. Sharing common threads with *I Love Lucy*, *The Donna Reed Show* is told from the point of view of Donna Stone. Her husband, Alex, is a pediatrician with a home office, another first for television, as most shows featured a father who worked outside of the home. This allowed him to be a continual presence in the plotlines. The Stones have two teenage children, Mary and Jeff, who viewers watched mature throughout the course of the show.

Although both *I Love Lucy* and *The Donna Reed Show* featured female leads, the women and thus the shows, were dramatically different. *I Love Lucy* took on a slapstick style comedy that *The Donna Reed Show* did not. *I Love Lucy* was filmed in front of a live audience, while *The Donna Reed Show* used a laugh track. *I Love Lucy* focused on the same plotlines continuously, with the same outcome. While Ball is the lead character, she often defers to her husband, making it clear that Arnaz has the control in the relationship. Even though Ball does strain in her role as housewife, it is often in an effort to be famous, not necessarily because she wants a career. Conversely, Reed had more moral and household authority on her show than other female characters lacked, and she pushed for stronger social commentary in her scripts. While Ball embraced the gender norms of the decade, like taking the blame for the consequences of her antics, Reed on the other hand often pushed back against gender norms and stereotypes of the era, and often refused to apologize.

Reed was the founding producer and co-owned the production studio that produced *The Donna Reed Show*. However, only Tony Owen is listed as the weekly producer in the end credits.⁴⁹ Reed's daughter, Penny Stigers, said in an interview that her mother "wanted to be more than just

⁴⁹ "Full Cast & Crew," *IMDb*, Accessed March 27, 2018, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0051267/fullcredits?ref_=tt_cl_sm#cast.

the star of the show, she came up with story ideas, she helped decide casting decisions, today on a credit, you'd put her as co-producer."⁵⁰ It is unknown why Reed was not listed as a producer in the credits, but the studio could have demanded it because she was a woman. Her husband could have requested Reed be left off the credits due to their marital dynamic, or perhaps she herself declined it.⁵¹ Although Reed is not credited, many scholars refer to Reed as the producer. As Morreale says, Reed "produced the show alongside her husband, Tony Owen.... While Tony Owen handled the financial details, Donna Reed was responsible for the day-to-day production details such as writing, direction, and overseeing sets and costumes. Donna Reed was one of the first female television executives, although her work, like that of so many women in the 1950s, was largely uncredited."⁵²

Reed used her position to shape the content of the show, although she did have to answer to the sponsor of the program, The Campbell's Soup Company. Campbell's sponsored other family shows, like *Lassie*, that focused on women and children, out of the belief that they were the main purchasers and consumers of their product.⁵³ Without having access to the production files, it is impossible to know if the program's sponsors objected to any of the plotlines featured on the show. However, those involved in its production claim Reed had the final word. Paul Petersen, who played Donna's son Jeff, said in an interview in 2009 that Reed, "often had to withstand some pretty significant pressure from both ABC and Campbell's Soup when we had pushed the

⁵⁰ "Donna Reed 1998 Biography," *YouTube*, July 11, 2017, Accessed March 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSYaK81jSWU>.

⁵¹ Lucille Ball was not listed as a producer in the end credits on her show as well, even though she co-owned the production company, Desilu, that produced her show. Additionally, Mary Pickford was a well-known female producer in the 1910s and 1920s, so while a female producer was rare, it was not unheard of in Hollywood. See: Susan Stamberg, "How Movie Darling Mary Pickford Became The Most Powerful Woman In Hollywood," *NPR*, February 27, 2018, Accessed March 29, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/27/589061990/mary-pickford-darling-of-the-silver-screen-to-major-hollywood-force>.

⁵² Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, 3.

⁵³ The Campbell Soup Advertising Collection · SOVA, Accessed March 09, 2018, <http://sova.si.edu/record/NMAH.AC.0367>.

envelope.”⁵⁴ Writer Paul West characterized Reed as “the steel fist in the velvet glove,” and director Andrew McCullough said, “in conferences she picked up what was wrong with a script and how to fix it.”⁵⁵ This rubbed some people the wrong way. In an article in *TV Guide* in 1960, journalist Marian Dern reported that some people who worked with Reed, “claim she wears the pants in their production company a little more frequently than a lady should.”⁵⁶ Dern goes on to tell a story about Donna’s husband Tony Owen, stating, “Once when a producer phoned Tony Owen in Palm Springs to ask how he liked the new batch of scripts he is reported to have replied, ‘I don’t know. Donna hasn’t read them yet.’”⁵⁷ Dern characterizes Reed’s authority in a positive way, and never mentions any problems with Campbell’s.

Reed also helped hire the screenwriters, another area in which she subtly pushed against prevailing norms. Two of the writers, Alfred and Helen Levitt had been questioned by HUAC and were placed on the blacklist in the early 1950s, leading Alfred to write under the name Tom August.⁵⁸ The Levitts’ identity remained secret throughout their work on the show, and they always worked off set. According to Fultz, “the Levitts always felt that Donna knew their true identity and that she was the one who let them go on working.”⁵⁹ Future feminist and political activist Barbara Avedon also wrote twenty-three episodes for the show, which was unusual for women during the decade.⁶⁰ Having worked together on *The Donna Reed Show*, Avedon and Reed

⁵⁴ "Donna Reed: My Mom, My Mother," *YouTube*, December 05, 2012, Accessed March 27, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ib_XB1kmJbc&t=1463s.

⁵⁵ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 131.

⁵⁶ Marian Dern, “Sweet, Sincere and Solvent,” *TV Guide*, June 20, 1964, 11.

⁵⁷ Marian Dern, “Sweet, Sincere and Solvent,” *TV Guide*, June 20, 1964, 11.

⁵⁸ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 129.

⁵⁹ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 130.

⁶⁰ Avedon would become a well-known feminist in Hollywood, having gotten her big break writing for *Father Knows Best* and *The Donna Reed Show*. She would go on to co-create *Cagney* and *Lacey* in the 1980s.

"Barbara Avedon," *IMDb*, Accessed November 12, 2017, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0042853/>.

Screenwriting in Hollywood has been widely open to women, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, which also saw women working in a variety of roles behind the camera. Female scriptwriters were common in the 1940s, as many men went off to war. Television also opened up roles for women behind the scenes, however, few women served in

would work together again with the non-profit organization Another Mother for Peace, founded in 1967 in opposition to the war in Vietnam.⁶¹ In addition to Avedon working for the show regularly, writer and director Ida Lupino directed the episode “A Difference of Opinion” in 1959.⁶²

As popular as *The Donna Reed Show* would become, it was almost cancelled after the first season due to poor ratings. James Aubrey, the head of the network, and his wife personally liked the show so much, that he renewed it for a second season.⁶³ Although the Nielson ratings were only at 8 during the first season, by the second season the ratings were holding steady at 19, and the show was renewed again.⁶⁴ The show went on to win several nominations and awards throughout its eight-year run, including Reed receiving the Golden Globe in 1962 for best female star in television.⁶⁵ By 1965, the show was so popular that it was broadcast in over twenty-six countries.⁶⁶

In fact, by 1963, *The Donna Reed Show* was ranked number ten of the top forty shows, with a rating of 23.9 by the Nielsen report.⁶⁷ *The Donna Reed Show* had a wide reach in audience, with more than twenty-three percent of people watching television tuning-in for the show. In comparison, for the past several years Sunday Night Football has been the highest watched television show with over nineteen-million viewers in 2016, however, that only accounted for a little over six percent of the twenty-one percent of the households watching television at the same

executive roles. See: Lizzie Francke, *Script Girls: Women Screenwriters in Hollywood*, (London: British Film Institute, 1994).

⁶¹ "Purposes « Another Mother for Peace," Another Mother for Peace, Accessed March 09, 2018, <http://anothermother.org/about>.

⁶² "Ida Lupino," *IMDb*, Accessed March 29, 2018, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0526946/#director>.

⁶³ Harvey Sheldon, *The History of the Golden Age of Television*, 533.

⁶⁴ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 122.

⁶⁵ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 139.

⁶⁶ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 153.

⁶⁷ "Top 40 Programs from First Nielsens of the 1963-1964 Season," *Television Obscurities*, April 01, 2016, Accessed March 09, 2018, <https://www.tvobscurities.com/2009/11/top-40-programs-from-first-nielsens-of-the-1963-1964-season/>.

time.⁶⁸ In addition, by 1965 fifty-four million households owned a television, while in the 2017-2018 television year, Nielsen estimated that over 119 million households owned a television.⁶⁹ Put into perspective, *The Donna Reed Show*'s reach and influence looks all the more impressive. While there are many more options for viewers to choose from on television today, *The Donna Reed Show*'s percentage of viewership led Reed to have a much larger impact on her viewers than television shows of today.

It is important to note that when *The Donna Reed Show* aired, the Civil Rights movement had come to prominence in the effort to break down legal barriers and bring African-Americans into mainstream political culture. Indeed, no family television shows centered around a black family, and minorities might win guest starring roles, but not leads, on television.⁷⁰ *The Donna Reed Show* struggled to feature several minorities throughout its run. Writer Nate Monaster complained to Owen in 1962 about the lack of minorities on the program, saying, "They don't have to become your neighbors, but for heaven's sake, get them on the show."⁷¹ Monaster soon wrote an African-American in the show as an extra, having gotten the sponsor's approval.⁷² In 1965, Monaster created a neighbor for the Stones who was an African-American boy. Fearing that the show would be banned in the South, the network and sponsors demanded that the role be

⁶⁸ Although Sunday Night Football is a sports program, it is considered a television show by the Nielsen ratings. Lisa De Moraes, "Final 2016-17 TV Rankings: 'Sunday Night Football' Winning Streak Continues," *Deadline*, May 30, 2017, Accessed May 02, 2018, <http://deadline.com/2017/05/2016-2017-tv-season-ratings-series-rankings-list-1202102340/>.

⁶⁹ "These 10 Lowest Rated TV Shows from the 1965–66 Season Prove Just How Much Has Changed," *Me-TV Network*, Accessed May 02, 2018, <https://metv.com/stories/these-10-lowest-rated-tv-shows-from-the-1965-66-season-show-how-much-has-changed> and "Nielsen Estimates 119.6 Million TV Homes in the U.S. for the 2017-18 TV Season," *What People Watch, Listen To and Buy*, Accessed May 02, 2018, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2017/nielsen-estimates-119-6-million-us-tv-homes-2017-2018-tv-season.html>.

⁷⁰ Emilie Raymond, *Stars for Freedom: Hollywood, Black Celebrities, and the Civil Rights Movement*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), xiii.

⁷¹ Leibman, *Living Room Lectures*, 164.

⁷² Leibman, *Living Room Lectures*, 164.

changed to a Caucasian.⁷³ Professional baseball player Willie Mays appeared as a guest star on three separate occasions. Mays appeared in “My Son the Catcher” and “Play Ball,” along with fellow player Don Drysdale, which aired in 1964 during season six.⁷⁴ Mays appeared on the show again in 1966 in “Calling Willie Mays,” in which he gives the Stones tickets to see him play baseball.⁷⁵ In these appearances, Mays plays a close family friend of the Stones. He is warmly embraced by the Stones and their friends: they shake his hand and have him to their home for dinner. A small gesture, but one that was rare on television programming during the Civil Rights era.

Contrastingly, Mays made a brief cameo on *Bewitched* in “Twitch or Treat” in 1966, in which he is greeted kindly by Samantha, however, none of the actors on the show interact with him physically; Samantha simply waves to him from across the room.⁷⁶ Interestingly, both *The Donna Reed Show* and *Bewitched* aired on ABC and had Willie Mays as a guest in the same year, but only *The Donna Reed Show* treats Mays equally to their white guests. While *The Donna Reed Show* did feature African-American characters more effectively than other family-oriented television shows, the show largely focused on white, middle-class women.

It was during the fifth season of *The Donna Reed Show* that Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. The idea for the book came in 1957 when Friedan surveyed her fellow Smith College classmates for their upcoming fifteenth reunion. Expressing her surprise at the survey results, Friedan noted, “a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique. I

⁷³ Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, 23.

⁷⁴ William Roberts, dir., “My Son the Catcher,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, April 16, 1964, and Gene Nelson, dir., “Play Ball,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, October 1, 1964.

⁷⁵ Lawrence Dobkin, dir., “Calling Willie Mays,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 29, 1966.

⁷⁶ William Asher, dir., “Twitch or Treat,” in *Bewitched*, ABC, October 27, 1966.

wondered if other women faced this schizophrenic split, and what it meant.”⁷⁷ When Friedan went to Smith’s campus to talk to current students, one senior told her, “A girl who got serious about anything she studied – like wanting to go on and do research – would be peculiar, unfeminine. I guess everybody wants to graduate with a diamond ring on her finger.”⁷⁸ Friedan found that most women felt that a wife’s role was through her husband and that housewives were having an identity crisis, which resulted in women having both a public and private identity.

Friedan states that popular culture created a public identity for housewives through advertising, television commercials and commercial products like washing machines, food mixes, and beauty products that had discouraged them from realizing their individual potential.⁷⁹ Friedan argues:

As so many roles in modern society become theirs for the taking, women so insistently confine themselves to one role. Why, with the removal of all the legal, political, economic, and educational barriers that once kept woman from being man’s equal, a person in her own right, an individual free to develop her own potential, should she accept this new image which insists she is not a person but a ‘woman,’ by definition barred from the freedom of human existence and a voice in human destiny?⁸⁰

Friedan does not specifically blame sit-coms for their role in creating this image in *The Feminine Mystique*, but she would go on to criticize television programming in later interviews.

However, Friedan also admits that not all barriers had been removed, saying that in 1963, women still had a long way to go in order to have both legal and political equal standing to men. Women had gained the right to vote in 1920, saw gains in education after World War II, and worked outside the home than ever before. Still, in the 1960s, women were paid far less than men for working the same job, and women were unable to open credit cards, bank accounts or take out

⁷⁷ Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 103.

⁷⁸ Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 39.

⁷⁹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 70.

⁸⁰ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 70.

a loan without a man's co-signature.⁸¹ Professional schools, like medical and law schools were still mostly closed to women. Further still, even after the birth control pill gained FDA approval in 1960, many states banned birth control, and domestic violence was rarely prosecuted. Women made up over fifty-one percent of the population by 1963, yet they had very little influence in a male-dominated world.⁸²

Friedan's work focuses solely on white, middle class women in the 1950s. Her book completely leaves out minorities or working class women, based on the assumption that white, middle-class frustrations were problems that all women felt. *The Feminine Mystique* speaks specifically to women like Donna Stone; she is a white middle-class homemaker. Nonetheless, *The Feminine Mystique* inspired women of all classes to challenge societal gender norms of the era. Scholar Sara Evans argues of these shared frustrations, "by the end of the decade, growing numbers of women possessed a new sense of rights, sisterhood, and language with which to describe personal experiences in group and political terms. This reemerging feminism issued a broad challenge to American cultures – a challenge that would reverberate for the rest of the century."⁸³ Friedan had set in motion a backlash against the expected gender roles within and outside of the home. Friedan would go on to found the National Organization for Women in 1966, which set to fight for "full equality for women, in full equal partnership with men."⁸⁴ With the founding of NOW, more radical women entered into the movement, causing the women's movement to split into radical and more moderate strands.

⁸¹ Coontz, *Strange Stirring*, 10, 11 and 12.

⁸² Coontz, *Strange Stirring*, 15.

⁸³ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 264

⁸⁴ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 75.

While many women responded positively to Friedan's argument, there were some women who felt she "not only attacked a postwar culture that consigned women to the domestic sphere itself" but "all the women who chose to live there."⁸⁵ They outright opposed Friedan, as well as the more radical feminists who pushed NOW more to the left. Reed represented a great swath of women who fell somewhat in the middle.

Although Reed foreshadowed some of Friedan's argument, the actress did not necessarily seek to overturn societal roles. She focused more on empowering women within those roles, particularly within the home. Reed's Donna Stone reflected the dissatisfaction with the cultural emphasis on domesticity, but her character clearly values being a wife and mother. By seeking to embolden women to demand more choices within and outside of the home, Reed channeled what scholar Christina Hoff Sommers labels the "maternal feminist movement." Sommers argues that this aspect of the movement has been undervalued:

According to popular wisdom, the great victories of second-wave women's liberation were won by bra burning, street-protesting radicals in the late 1960s and 1970s. Two things are wrong with this standard view. First, no bras were ever burned... More important, the second wave actually began in the early 1960s and was moved by a coalition of Republican and Democratic women (and men). The radicals came later...⁸⁶

Reed, a registered Republican, represents this earlier, more moderate wave by pushing back against conceived gender norms, all while supporting women's roles within the home.

Reed was proud of what she accomplished with *The Donna Reed Show*, saying that, "We started breaking rules right and left... We had a female lead, for one thing, a strong, healthy woman. We had a story line told from a woman's point of view that wasn't a soap opera."⁸⁷ However, Friedan looked down upon family-oriented television shows, commenting to *TV Guide* in 1978,

⁸⁵ Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 50.

⁸⁶ Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 41.

⁸⁷ Tucker, *The Women Who Made Television Funny*, 114.

Why is there no image at all on television of the millions and millions of self-respecting American women who are not only capable of cleaning the sink, without help, but of acting to solve more complex problems in their own lives and in society? That moronic housewife image denies the 24,000,000 women who work today outside the home, in every industry and skilled profession, most of them wives who take care of homes and children too.⁸⁸

Although she was speaking in 1978, Friedan seems to be castigating the entire genre. Despite that Reed had declared herself a feminist at that point and had aligned herself with the movement, Friedan never gave the show any credit. Shelley Fabares, who played Reed's daughter, expressed frustration that Reed was never recognized for pushing television beyond the norm. She said in a 2011 interview: "It makes me angry. She was very much in the foreground of women being in charge. She did a lot of things moms on TV didn't do at that time – she ran for things. She bucked Alex on certain issues."⁸⁹

The Donna Reed Show, similar to many sit-coms at the time, revolved around issues that would have been common amongst families during the 1950s and 60s. Popular topics included new trends like airplane travel, the rise of rock and roll, and the distraction of television shows within the broader themes of raising children and marital strife. Conflicts are often resolved in a way that would have been comforting to parents of the decade. However, as Fabares suggests, *The Donna Reed Show* nevertheless stands apart from other sit-coms, and not only for Reed's position as producer but also in the themes it pursued. As the next chapter illustrates, it championed women's capabilities, both as housewives and in the workforce.

⁸⁸ Tucker, *The Women Who Made Television Funny*, 118.

⁸⁹ Susan King, "Classic Hollywood: 'The Donna Reed Show'," *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 2011, Accessed March 09, 2018, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/dec/26/entertainment/la-et-classic-hollywood-20111226>.

Chapter Two Not Just a Housewife

“Every housewife has a personality, we are not part of a herd.”¹

Donna Reed’s portrayal of Donna Stone presented a more complex character than was typical of 1950s television. While other family sit-coms portrayed women as docile and superfluous to the plotline, *The Donna Reed Show* challenged these notions, not only with Reed as the producer and star, but in the way she elevated the role of housewife and promoted female careers as early as season one in 1958. That Donna embraced her role as wife and mother while also advocating for professional opportunities may seem paradoxical, but in fact, Donna represented the feelings of many women who would come to embrace maternal feminism. Reed’s character pushed the idea that women were intelligent, capable individuals deserving of respect both as housewives and in the public sphere.

The standard definition of a housewife is “a married woman in charge of a household.”² Although not stated in the definition, housewives are assumed to be responsible for caring for the family and doing the housework. The function and assumptions about housewives have changed over time, but housewives in the 1950s were considered the ultimate paragons of femininity. More than sixty-percent of all women were housewives in the 1950s.³ Twenty-five percent of Americans at the time were considered poor and sixty-percent of Americans over the age of 65 had an income below \$1,000.⁴ More than forty-percent of African American women with small children worked

¹ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “Just a Housewife,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 28, 1960.

² “Housewife,” *Merriam-Webster*, Accessed February 26, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/housewife>.

³ Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 15.

⁴ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 31.

outside of the home, many working in domestic jobs, and amongst two-parent black families, the poverty rate exceeded fifty-percent.⁵ The overall poverty rate in the United States in the 1950s was around twenty-two percent, and demonstrates the large disparity between black and white families.⁶ The happy middle-class home that Donna Stone portrayed on television was not the norm for many Americans. Nevertheless, while many in America were struggling, the middle-class was growing at an exponential rate. In comparison to only thirty-one percent in the 1920s, by the 1950s, almost sixty-percent of Americans were making a middle-class income, which was between \$3,000 and \$10,000.⁷

Although America was extremely diverse, the image of the ideal American housewife dominated popular culture in the 1950s. According to scholar Stephanie Coontz, “by the mid-1950s, advertisers’ surveys reported on a growing tendency among women to find ‘housework a medium of expression for... [their] femininity and individuality.’”⁸ However, magazine advertisements and television commercials from the era are notorious for their explicit sexism and portrayal of rigid gender roles. One magazine advertisement for aluminum bottle caps states in bold letters, “You mean a woman can open it?”⁹ Another advertisement for an electric mixer claims that, “The Chef does everything but cook – that’s what wives are for!”¹⁰ Various others tell of husband-pleasing coffee, faster kitchen cleaning time and one for a postage meter goes so far as to

⁵ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, (New York, NY: BasicBooks, 1992), 32.

⁶ "Poverty in the United States," *Debt.org*, Accessed March 10, 2018, <https://www.debt.org/faqs/americans-in-debt/poverty-united-states/>.

⁷ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 24.

⁸ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 28.

⁹ Jim Edwards and Harrison Jacobs, "26 Sexist Ads Of The 'Mad Men' Era That Companies Wish We'd Forget," *Business Insider*, May 08, 2014, Accessed December 22, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/26-sexist-ads-of-the-mad-men-era-2014-5/#53-alcoa-aluminums-bottle-caps-open-without-a-knife-blade-a-bottle-opener-or-even-a-husband-5>.

¹⁰ Jim Edwards and Harrison Jacobs, "26 Sexist Ads Of The 'Mad Men' Era That Companies Wish We'd Forget," *Business Insider*, May 08, 2014, Accessed December 22, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/26-sexist-ads-of-the-mad-men-era-2014-5/#53-alcoa-aluminums-bottle-caps-open-without-a-knife-blade-a-bottle-opener-or-even-a-husband-5>.

ask its readers if it's "Always illegal to kill a woman?"¹¹ Television commercials were not any better; a 1957 Pepsi commercial states that in order for women to stay trim and attractive, they need to follow a modern trend towards a lighter diet by drinking Pepsi.¹² Betty Friedan claimed that advertisers were "the most powerful of [the mystique's] perpetrators...flattering the American housewife, diverting her guilt and disguising her growing sense of emptiness."¹³

Along with advertisements, Hollywood and television programming further projected the image of the happy housewife. The treatment of women on television evolved over time, but by the mid-1950s, women on TV were portrayed as fully entrenched in the home. Art History professor Patricia Mellencamp explains,

The importance in early 1950's comedy of idiosyncratically powerful female stars, usually in their late thirties or forties; and the gradual erosion of that power that occurred in the representation of women within comedy formats. In situation comedy, pacification of women occurred between 1950 and 1960 without a single critical mention that the genre's terrain had altered: the housewife, although still ruling the familial roost, changed from being a humorous rebel or well-dressed, wise cracking, naïve dissenter who wanted or had a paid job... to being a contented, if not blissfully happy, understanding homebody.¹⁴

According to this view, once *I Love Lucy* went off the air in 1957, the remaining female stars on television were happy, understanding homebodies like June Cleaver of *Leave it to Beaver*, Harriet Nelson of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, and Margaret Anderson of *Father Knows Best*. These mothers had very little independence or identity outside of their husbands and their lives fully revolved around their families. Indeed, *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and*

¹¹ Jim Edwards and Harrison Jacobs, "26 Sexist Ads Of The 'Mad Men' Era That Companies Wish We'd Forget," *Business Insider*, May 08, 2014, Accessed December 22, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/26-sexist-ads-of-the-mad-men-era-2014-5/#53-alcoa-aluminums-bottle-caps-open-without-a-knife-blade-a-bottle-opener-or-even-a-husband-5>.

¹² AcmeStreamingDOTcom, "Awesomely Sexist Pepsi Commercial From 1957," *YouTube*, December 13, 2009, Accessed March 09, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=113mRmchumY>.

¹³ Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 38.

¹⁴ Nina Clare Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television*, (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1995), 202.

Harriet put the father at the forefront with little understanding of the importance or the perspective of the housewife. However, what Mellencamp fails to acknowledge is that in every episode of *The Donna Reed Show*, Donna Stone is at the center.

The focus on the father was so entrenched in American culture that some family-oriented sit-coms were even named after the father's primary role in the family, like *Father Knows Best*. *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, which aired from 1961 to 1966, was originally going to be called *Head of the Family*.¹⁵ Donna's primary role in her show led some in Hollywood to jokingly refer to *The Donna Reed Show* as *The Madonna Reed Show* and *Mother Knows Best*.¹⁶ In fact, one of the considered names for *The Donna Reed Show* before the show aired was *Mother Knows Better*.¹⁷ Unlike other family oriented shows, the viewer is able to see the mother's point of view through Donna, and moreover she expands her role of housewife to extend beyond the home.

This portrayal was a deliberate one on the part of Reed. She commented in a 1963 interview, "I don't portray the All-American Mom, and Carl Betz is not the All-American Daddy, either. So help me, if we had to do *that* type of TV mother and father every week, I'd go off my rocker."¹⁸ In doing so, Reed more realistically reflected social trends in the U.S. Although over two-thirds of women between the ages of 25-34 were housewives in 1960, more married women worked outside the home than in previous decades.¹⁹ Furthermore, the popularity of the show indicated that Reed had touched a chord with viewers, similar to how readers responded to Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* in 1963. Just as Friedan would, Reed highlights a housewife's individuality, her frustration at the limitations on the role, and the need for women to have access

¹⁵ "The Dick Van Dyke Show (TV Series 1961–1966)," *IMDb*, Accessed March 23, 2018, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054533/?ref_=ttr_tr_tt.

¹⁶ Tucker, *The Women Who Made Hollywood Funny*, 118.

¹⁷ Tucker, *The Women Who Made Hollywood Funny*, 118.

¹⁸ Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, 27.

¹⁹ Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 50.

to equal opportunities in professional careers. Her character does not necessarily see women and men as the same, but she does push against women being treated as inferior to men.

Throughout the series, Donna Stone makes it clear that she had a life before she got married and had a family. In several episodes, old friends of Donna's stop by and make mention of her childhood. In one, Donna is referred to by her maiden name, which reminds the viewer of her individuality and independence from her husband. The series also discusses Donna's desire to be an aspiring actress before she married, again showing that she had a life before her marriage and dreams of her own. During the course of the show, Donna refers to her experiences in college, as well as to references of her nursing career before she got married. In a nod to Reed's background, Donna Stone grew up on a farm in Iowa. By showing her individuality, Donna makes a point to differentiate herself from her husband, which was something that most television wives did not do.

She also openly chafes at the term housewife in her show. In the episode "Just a Housewife," which ran during the second season in 1960, Donna is offended by a radio host interviewing women in "The Housewife Corner" at the grocery store.²⁰ "The Housewife Corner" was a reserved section of the store where the host interrogates the female shoppers about their purchasing preferences. During these questions and answer sessions, the radio host continues to refer to the female shoppers as "just housewives." Donna notices that women always seem to apologize when they say they are "just housewives," especially when the radio announcer is extremely condescending to the female shoppers. At one point he says with sarcasm, that "housewives are instrumental in making policy."²¹ Taking offense, Donna complains to her family at dinner that men are not treated in the same condescending way, nor do men feel that they have

²⁰ Oscar Rudolph, dir., "Just a Housewife," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 28, 1960.

²¹ Oscar Rudolph, dir., "Just a Housewife," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 28, 1960.

to apologize for their careers. The next day at the supermarket, Donna goes on air to challenge the radio host's "just a housewife" phrasing, and protests that housewives are also philosophers, nurses, diplomats and psychologists, thus asserting that housewives wear many hats within the home. "Just" a housewife is an unfair title, she says, that does not give women enough respect. Moreover, throughout the episode Donna argues that all housewives are different, and therefore even the term "housewife" is an inappropriate label.

Donna's daughter Mary is also outraged at the idea of women being labeled as "just housewives." Mary states that a woman is behind every great man and that "modern women will no longer be chained to the stove."²² While the women are upset, the men seem amused, with Donna's husband and son teasing Donna and referring to her as the "Princess of the Pantry." Upset with them, Donna and Mary make the men do the dinner dishes, declaring that they want them to know how it feels to be "just a housewife." The men in the episode find it silly that the women are upset over the term "just a housewife," while the women seek to prove that the phrase is offensive and that they deserve more acknowledgement for their importance to a well-functioning home. Donna's friends cheer her on, stating that husbands will now have new respect for their wives. The episode resolves with the supermarket changing the name of the radio show to "Shopper's Corner" and Donna's husband promising to not use the word housewife.

"Just a Housewife" exemplifies the discontent discussed by Betty Friedan. As she writes in *The Feminine Mystique*,

The problem that has no name stirring in the minds of so many American women today is not a matter of loss of femininity or too much education, or the demands of domesticity. It is far more important than anyone recognizes...We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home."²³

²² Oscar Rudolph, dir., "Just a Housewife," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 28, 1960.

²³ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 22.

Friedan is speaking to the lack of personal identity that women felt, exactly what Donna is referring to in “Just a Housewife.” Friedan argues that women are not seen as people in their own right, but as “just” women. Donna is upset that housewives receive little respect for their expertise in the home, even though they are just as skilled as men who win praise for their careers. While the renaming of the program to “Shopper’s Corner” was not exactly revolutionary, the episode clearly advocates more respect for homemakers.

In a related episode “The Ideal Wife,” Donna pushes back against being labeled as a “goody-goody.”²⁴ The episode opens with Donna and Alex entertaining friends at their house. Several of the wives tell Donna that she is the “ideal wife;” she cooks, she cleans and she never makes a fuss when her husband has to rush off to work. Taking offense, Donna comments to Alex that, “Women are only nice to other women when they feel sorry for them. When they envy them, they slander her, now that’s a compliment.”²⁵ Although it is unclear if Donna’s friends really do feel sorry for her, her comments, while slightly disparaging to women, also convey the message that there is more to women than meets the eye. Donna goes out of her way to try to undermine her saintly reputation by making her children do their chores before going out with friends and insisting that the dry cleaner return to his store to pick up her forgotten dress. The dry cleaner is shocked that Donna has asked him to go back to retrieve her dress, as Donna has never done that before.

As Donna fights against her “goody-goody ideal wife” reputation, she discovers that there is a difference between being a “goody-goody” and a pushover. Her pushback is short-lived. By the end of the episode, Donna has decided that being overly demanding is not for her, and Alex says he is relieved that the “revolution” is over. Throughout the episode Donna attempts to decide

²⁴ Oscar Rudolph dir., “The Ideal Wife” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, March 11, 1959.

²⁵ Oscar Rudolph dir., “The Ideal Wife” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, March 11, 1959.

what type of mother and wife she wants to be, who she feels is ideal for herself. Indeed, it shows that the ideal wife does not exist. By Donna pushing back against not being perfect, she makes it clear that her perfect façade is just that, a façade. In addition, Donna Stone was so closely linked with Donna Reed, that Donna could have been gently making references to her personal abhorrence of her own reputation as being labeled a “goody-goody.” Also noteworthy is that although Alex is relieved when her “revolution” is over, he never tells Donna how to behave or what type of wife and mother he wants. He seems to understand that Donna needs to figure out what she wants. Alex’s reaction speaks to Donna’s agency and own authority in her marriage.

Donna also asserts her identity in the episode “Rebel with a Cause.” Donna is selected to participate in a survey about the “average woman.”²⁶ Twenty-four women were selected in her town of Hilldale by a company doing research on how long it takes the average woman to do household chores. Donna invites the man completing the survey to dinner, and he tells the family that Donna is the epitome of a typical woman, so much so that he accurately predicts what she is going to serve for dinner. Mary, offended for her mother, remarks that she always felt her mom was special. Complaining that she is considered “average” that night to her husband Alex, Donna says she’s “not a statistic, I’m a human being,” to which Alex remarks that, “as usual, you’re making a mountain out of a molehill.”²⁷

While Donna is still smarting at being called average, the newspaper editor, who is a friend of the family, enlists her to interview another family friend about a real estate deal in town. In slapstick behavior somewhat uncharacteristic of her character, Donna tries to sneak into a hotel to track down her friend. Interestingly, as a woman, Donna is not allowed to get any information about guests at the hotel. It is with the aide of an unwitting man, that Donna is finally able to get

²⁶ Gene Nelson dir., “Rebel with a Cause” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, November 8, 1962.

²⁷ Gene Nelson dir., “Rebel with a Cause” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, November 8, 1962.

upstairs where the guest rooms are located. When her friend opens the door, he refers to Donna as Donna Mullenger, another reference to the real-life actress, whose original name was Mullenger before she changed it to the stage name Reed. The next morning the family is reading the newspaper at breakfast and is stunned to realize that they are reading an article written by Donna herself.

Like other episodes, “Rebel with a Cause” speaks to Donna’s refusal to be either average or ordinary. Frustrated that she is considered to be “average” and still saddled with the housewife label, Donna decides to prove otherwise. The episode ends with Donna writing an article for the local newspaper, a feat that speaks to both the continued narrative that Donna enjoys writing throughout the series, and that a woman can be both housewife and do something for herself, outside of her family. The episode picks up on themes from “Just a Housewife” where Donna is incensed that housewives are seen as a group of domestics with no personal identity; in “Rebel with a Cause” Donna is angry that she is considered average. While in “Just a Housewife” Donna is upset about the way the group as a whole is being treated and fights for the understanding of all housewives, in “Rebel with a Cause” she goes to great lengths to differentiate herself as an individual worthy of respect.

The effort to elevate the role of housewives takes an interesting turn in the episode “Geisha Girl.” Airing in February of 1961, during the program’s third season, this episode seems to advocate more respect for the American housewife by contrasting her against women in another culture. When Dr. and Mrs. Simple move into the neighborhood, many of Donna’s female neighbors refuse to entertain the new couple because Mrs. Simple is Japanese.²⁸ Their hostility is not due to racial prejudice however, but because Mrs. Simple serves her husband’s every whim.

²⁸ Norman Tokar, dir., “Geisha Girl,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 16, 1961.

She gives him a massage every night and serves him a lavish lunch each day. While the husbands are enthralled with the idea of being waited upon, the women in the neighborhood are upset, calling “Dr. Simple a threat against the American woman’s way of life.”²⁹ Ironically, the women blame Dr. Simple for his wife’s actions, instead of the wife, perhaps assuming that that his wife’s actions are due to his demands. Donna resolves the tension when she takes Mrs. Simple out to lunch, and explains to her that customs in the United States are different than in Japan. “Even the Statue of Liberty is a woman,” she points out.³⁰ Donna also tells Mrs. Simple why the other wives in the neighborhood feel upset; she is too subservient to her American husband. Mrs. Simple then goes shopping with Donna, replacing her traditional Japanese dress with an “American” skirt suit. Dr. Simple is ecstatic when his wife walks in their house with Donna after shopping.

While Donna and her friends do not see the irony in their criticism of Mrs. Simple, the episode compares to others in the series that portray American housewives as having some independence from their husbands. And it goes even further by correcting other women who do not exert that same independence. The storyline of a Japanese woman meeting and marrying an American man during the occupation of Japan after the war would have been a familiar one to many Americans. While Reed deserves recognition for casting a Japanese actress during a time when few minorities appeared on television, there are clear innuendos about the superiority of American culture. As historian Ella Taylor states, television, “increasingly ignored cultural diversity, adopting the motto ‘least objectionable programming,’ which gave rise to those least objectionable families.”³¹

²⁹ Norman Tokar, dir., “Geisha Girl,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 16, 1961.

³⁰ Norman Tokar, dir., “Geisha Girl,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 16, 1961.

³¹ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 31.

In the episode “Dear Wife,” which aired in 1961, Donna actually discourages her daughter Mary from marriage, at least at a young age.³² The friction starts when the family attends a wedding of one of Mary’s friends who is only nineteen years old. Donna and Alex comment that the girl is too young to get married, and thus become worried that Mary, who is eighteen, will want to follow in the footsteps of her friend. Lamenting how the girl’s mother might feel, Donna says to Alex that all she saw was, “a little girl standing up there, completely unprepared for the responsibility for marriage.”³³ Alex only focuses on the expense of the marriage, responding to Donna in jest: “I know how the father felt, broke.”³⁴ Although Donna does not explain exactly what responsibilities marriage entails, she is clearly very worried that their daughter will marry before she is ready, especially after Mary dreamily announces that she caught the bouquet.

In an era when seventy-five percent of women between the ages of twenty and twenty-four were married, Donna and Alex’s critical discussion of early marriage is interesting.³⁵ While the show never reveals exactly what age Donna and Alex got married themselves, it is very clear that Donna is not only concerned that young marriages may be unstable, but they do not allow women to develop their independence. Later in the episode, Donna tells Mary that, “Your father and I, we want you to grow up, we want you to stand on your own.”³⁶ Although Donna does not state exactly what she means by this, Mary does eventually attend college. The whole episode is another statement against women being dependent on men. Donna is not discouraging marriage, but she is encouraging her daughter, and female viewers, to be independent women before settling down, if for no other reason than to be able to stand up for herself in a marriage. Both Donna and Alex are

³² Stanley Cherry, dir., “Dear Wife” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, June 14, 1962.

³³ Stanley Cherry, dir., “Dear Wife” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, June 14, 1962.

³⁴ Stanley Cherry, dir., “Dear Wife” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, June 14, 1962.

³⁵ Andrew J Cherlin, "THE 50'S FAMILY AND TODAY'S," *The New York Times*, November 17, 1981, Accessed December 29, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/11/18/opinion/the-50-s-family-and-today-s.html>.

³⁶ Stanley Cherry, dir., “Dear Wife” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, June 14, 1962.

upset about the prospect of their daughter marrying young, but Donna is clearly the more distressed out of the two, possibly because she realizes that married women, with their lack of legal rights, have more to lose than men.

The episode “Trees,” airing in 1965 during *The Donna Reed Show*’s last season, proved the most metaphorical, and perhaps most radical, assertion of the individuality and authority of the housewife during the series. Donna holds a meeting of her female neighbors to protest the city’s plans to cut down a tree in front of her house.³⁷ Donna asks, “Are we going to be passive victims to regimentation? Slaves to conformity? Thank you women of Elm Street. And remember, united we stand.”³⁸ The women then dress in identical outfits and go into the city commissioner’s office chanting in unison, “This is the world of the future. We are the women of Elm Street. We dress alike and talk alike and think alike and we are miserable. Who made us this way?,” all while pointing to the commissioner, “You. Is this what you want? We don’t want uniformity. Do you want us to be like this?”³⁹ As scholar Joanne Morreale states, “While they are arguably discussing trees, their comments could be referring to any number of ways in which women were encouraged to conform at the time, and the image suggests that women united could take control of their lives.”⁴⁰ Clearly, the women are protesting against the removal of a tree, yet, the deeper meaning of the episode encourages women to resist conformity. Blaming the commissioner, a man, for their conformity, speaks to the male domination of postwar society. In the end, the tree is saved and life returns as normal for the Stones. However, the message is clear, women uniting together can beat the system. Although the episode ran in the mid-1960s, when rebellion against traditional society was becoming more popular, the episode is still somewhat radical for a family sit-com.

³⁷ Andrew McCullough, dir., “Trees” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, November 11, 1965.

³⁸ Andrew McCullough, dir., “Trees” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, November 11, 1965.

³⁹ Andrew McCullough, dir., “Trees” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, November 11, 1965.

⁴⁰ Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, 90 and 91.

Throughout the series Donna continues to subtly push the boundaries on who and what the average housewife represented. This would have resonated with a multitude of viewers, especially ones that felt a sense of boredom or questioned their role as homemaker. In addition, Donna's questioning of the portrayal of housewives, while still flourishing in her role as mother and wife, would have hit home to her female viewers. She makes the point that women can be both respected and cherished within their role in the home. While Donna clearly enjoyed being a housewife, she also demanded respect from the men in her life, sending the message that housewives should be applauded for their important function in postwar society.

Unlike the mother characters in other family sit-coms, Donna also works outside of the home, in volunteer and professional activities. Even though Donna is not employed, she is constantly engaged outside of the home, running committees, meeting friends, and is clearly an active member in the community. Throughout the series Donna is involved in women's clubs, charity drives, and volunteering at the hospital and at the local homeless shelter. Interestingly, Donna never refers to the Parent Teacher Association at her children's school, which would have been an obvious extension of her role as a mother. Instead, she is involved in more work that is not directly connected to her family. Friedan would also strongly advocate for women to do "meaningful work outside the home as the solution to the 'problem that has no name,'" a concept that Donna fully embraces on her show.⁴¹ Donna's activities outside of the home are more than what most wives did on other television shows; June Cleaver is never seen running errands on *Leave it to Beaver* and Lucy never talks about being active on committees.

Reed also uses Donna's volunteer activities to show her importance to the home. Mary, Jeff and Alex often try to take over the house-hold chores, much to their frustration. In these

⁴¹ Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 275.

episodes, when the running of the house is left to someone other than Donna, the house devolves into chaos. In the episode, “Donna Directs a Play” which aired in February 1961, Donna is asked to step in to direct a play for the local school.⁴² Donna enjoys directing the production, but her family is inept at housework and the house becomes a mess. In a similar episode from season one, “Mrs. Lovelace Comes to Tea,” the Stones hire a maid to help take care of the house while Donna runs a charity drive.⁴³ Similar to Donna’s earlier assertions about housewives, these episodes highlight that a house does not run itself.

Another running theme in the show is Donna considering developing her own career. Her greatest interest is writing. During the series, Donna’s strength as a writer is seen with several articles and letters to the editor being published in her local newspaper. Most of these pieces revolve around parenting or women, but in the episode “Rebel With a Cause,” (discussed earlier) she reports on a local business. Donna’s interest in being an author is at odds with how other women on television were portrayed. Most television wives had no other interests except for their husbands and families, and were depicted as vapid. One editor of a popular women’s magazine, quoted by Betty Friedan, furthers this notion,

Our readers are housewives, full time. They’re not interested in the broad public issues of the day. They are not interested in national or international affairs. They are only interested in family and the home. They aren’t interested in politics, unless it’s related to an immediate need in the home, like the price of coffee. Humor? Has to be gentle, they don’t get satire. Travel? We have almost completely dropped it. Education? That’s a problem. Their own education level is going up. They’ve generally all had a high-school education and many, college. They’re tremendously interested in education for their children – fourth-grade arithmetic. You just can’t write about ideas or broad issues of the day for women. That’s why we’re publishing 90 per cent service now and 10 per cent general interest.⁴⁴

⁴² Robert Ellis Miller dir., “Donna Directs a Play” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 2, 1961.

⁴³ Oscar Rudolph dir., “Mrs. Lovelace Comes to Tea” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, May 13, 1959.

⁴⁴ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 28.

The Donna Reed Show turns this notion inside out by depicting women on the show as interested in things other than their families, both in Donna's volunteer and professional work.

In season eight, after taking an aptitude test, Donna decides she wants to pursue writing professionally. The episode titled "Author, Author!," which aired in 1965, shows Donna writing in secret.⁴⁵ While Donna does not specifically talk about her work, her family teases her that she is working on the "great American novel."⁴⁶ Throughout the episode, the viewer can see the tension between housework and the pull of writing. The episode concludes with her family finding and reading Donna's work, and being shocked by what they read. Donna's story is an unflattering portrait of her family: her husband not helping with housework and her children not listening when asked to help.⁴⁷ Donna's characterization of her daily life, speaks to the same sense of discontentment that Friedan mentions in *The Feminine Mystique*. This, between working on her writing and doing housework also, reflects the maternal feminist's understanding of balancing housework and a career.

The episode "The Career Woman" from season two in 1960 deals directly with the tensions many women felt between family life and a career. The episode highlights Donna's friend, Molly, who is a clothing designer and comes to visit.⁴⁸ Initially, Donna was worried that her friend would not recognize her, as she had become a wife and mother, and Molly had traveled the world. Molly had just recently become engaged and was worried about sacrificing her career to be a wife. Donna seeks to show Molly how satisfying being a wife and mother can be, by inviting her to stay in her home and spend time with their family. In the beginning of the episode, Molly asks Donna, "Whatever happened to your dream of becoming the world's greatest actress?" to which Donna

⁴⁵ Jerrold Bernstein, dir., "Author, Author!," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, November 4, 1965.

⁴⁶ Jerrold Bernstein, dir., "Author, Author!," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, November 4, 1965.

⁴⁷ Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, 68.

⁴⁸ Lawrence Dobkin, dir., "Career Woman," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, April 28, 1960.

wistfully responds, “No regrets. Not since I met Alex. I think that was the real dream I had all along.”⁴⁹ However, throughout the episode both women make references to sacrifice, in particular when Molly refers to Donna’s outdated coat. Donna says, “If you marry David you’ll have to resign yourself to be a season behind in waistlines,” to which Molly replies, “If that were the only sacrifice I’d have to make, I’d make it.”⁵⁰ Later, Donna takes Molly out to lunch, and Molly is surprised to see Donna talking to so many people in the restaurant. Clearly taken aback, and impressed at her friend’s popularity, Molly begins to see that being a wife and a mother does not mean having to sacrifice your independence. In the end, Molly decides that she does want to give up her successful career for marriage.

Women struggling with the idea of whether or not to work outside of the home had become a common topic in popular magazines throughout the 1950s. An article in the September 1951 issue of *Good Housekeeping*, titled “Why I Quit Working” deals with this same question. Jennifer Colton was a working mom who quit her job to stay at home with her children, a move that she claims she did not regret. Colton writes about her struggle with her decision:

Just over a year ago, I was suffering from that feeling of guilt and despondency familiar to most working mothers who have small children. During the hours I spent in the office, an accusing voice chanted continuously, “You should be home with the children.” I couldn’t have agreed more, which only created an additional tension: the frustrated anger of one who knows what is right but sees no way of doing it. Children need clothes as well as attention; they must be nourished with food as well as love.⁵¹

Colton goes on to list the pros and cons of working and staying at home with her children. Maternal feminists recognized that many women wanted to stay home with their children and enjoyed being homemakers. While they championed working women, maternal feminists argued that sometimes

⁴⁹ Lawrence Dobkin, dir., “Career Woman,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, April 28, 1960.

⁵⁰ Lawrence Dobkin, dir., “Career Woman,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, April 28, 1960.

⁵¹ Jennifer Colton, “Why I Quit Working,” *Good Housekeeping* (September 1951), W. W. Norton & Company, http://www.wwnorton.com/college/history/america7_brief/content/multimedia/ch32/research_01a.htm.

women needed to make choices at certain periods of their lives and that choosing to be a wife and mother was a choice worth making.⁵²

Although “The Career Woman” concludes with Molly deciding to quit working, other episodes show Donna considering a variety of professional pursuits. For example, Donna also becomes interested in local politics. In the episode “A Woman’s Place,” which aired January 10, 1963, Donna decides to run for town council.⁵³ The episode opens with Donna coming home and announcing to her family that the committee, Women’s Independent Voters and Entertainment Society, WIVES for short, has asked her to run.⁵⁴ While Mary and Jeff are excited for their mother, Alex asks her how she feels about it. Donna responds, “I don’t know how I feel about it. When they invited me to the meeting, I had no idea they were going to ask me to run for office.”⁵⁵ When Alex asks why they asked her in particular, Donna says that she does not remember what they said, but that she is very flattered and that she needed time to think it over. She is worried that she does not have any experience and that it will take time away from her family. Shocked that her mother is not jumping at the opportunity, Mary tells her mother, “Mother, you can’t just think of yourself at a time like this. You are representing all of American womanhood.”⁵⁶ Donna then turns to her husband and asks him if she should accept. Alex tells her that, “I think you should make up your own mind about it.”⁵⁷

Convinced by her daughter, flattered that her female committee asked her to run and excited to be the first female candidate, Donna throws her hat into the ring and begins to campaign. Although initially encouraging her to run for a seat, her family realizes that the campaign trail

⁵² Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 10.

⁵³ Andrew McCullough, dir., “A Woman’s Place,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 10, 1963.

⁵⁴ Andrew McCullough, dir., “A Woman’s Place,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 10, 1963.

⁵⁵ Andrew McCullough, dir., “A Woman’s Place,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 10, 1963.

⁵⁶ Andrew McCullough, dir., “A Woman’s Place,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 10, 1963.

⁵⁷ Andrew McCullough, dir., “A Woman’s Place,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 10, 1963.

keeps Donna away from her familial duties, as she returns home late every night. Alex has a nightmare that his wife will become the first female president and that *he* will become the housewife, even redoing the White House to bring back its historical charm, much like Jackie Kennedy did in 1962. When he wakes up, Alex tells her that he wishes she would not run.⁵⁸ Exhausted from campaigning, Donna finally admits to her husband that she did not really want to run in the first place and that her place is in the home with her family. Nevertheless, the fact that she originally ran with the support of her husband and family was a bold step for early 1960s television. By 1963, women comprised only two percent of senators and two-and-a-half percent of representatives in the U.S. congress, so the storyline of a female running for elected office went beyond social norms.⁵⁹

During the third season, in the 1961 episode, “The Poodle Parlor,” Donna considers opening her own business, based on her friend’s idea to open a dog store solely for poodles.⁶⁰ Alex and her husband’s friend scoff at the idea, but this only leads Donna to become more determined. In a conversation with Alex, Donna says that he doesn’t think that there is a place in business for women, to which he responds that “it’s a mans world.”⁶¹ Donna then retorts that she always hears that from men. When Alex continues to mention that women had no place in the business world, Donna says that women can do anything men can do and uses Elizabeth Arden, who created a cosmetic empire and became one of the wealthiest women in the world, as her example.⁶² Alex also tells Donna that although she is a “wonderful, intelligent woman,” he resents anything that would cut into her time as a wife and mother.

⁵⁸ "The White House Restoration," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/The-White-House-Restoration.aspx>.

⁵⁹ Coontz, *Strange Stirring*, 15.

⁶⁰ Jeffrey Hayden dir., “The Poodle Parlor” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, March 3, 1961.

⁶¹ Jeffrey Hayden dir., “The Poodle Parlor” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, March 3, 1961.

⁶² Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Elizabeth Arden," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, July 25, 2017, Accessed March 09, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elizabeth-Arden-American-businesswoman>.

Even knowing her husband is against her opening her own business, Donna continues to look into opening a store. Donna and her friend go to their banker for advice on how to start a business. Not surprisingly, the banker is not only a man, but tells the women that opening a business is very complicated and time consuming, from hiring employees, leasing a store, installing fixtures and running at a loss until the establishment catches on. The banker tells the two women, “Mrs. Stone, I pride myself on one thing, I always have an open mind, but I must admit, when a lady comes in here asking for a loan to go into business, my first instinct is to close the vault.”⁶³ As the women leave the bank, Donna refers to she and her friend as, “a couple of career women without a career.”⁶⁴ At the time, women were not able to open lines of credit or take out loans without a man’s co-signature, so even if Donna and her friend still wished to pursue opening a business, they would have needed their husbands’ assistance.

Ultimately, Donna and her friend decide not to open the Poodle Parlor. In looking at the Kennel Club registrations, the women realize that only seven poodles are registered in Hilldale, and therefore their poodle parlor would not have enough customers to sustain a business. Nevertheless, Donna and her friend tell their husbands that the obstacles seem too challenging, and they recognize that they will have to sacrifice too much of their family time. The episode makes it clear that they lack support from men, their husbands and the banker. Not only are the men condescending, but the law is against the women. Although the episode has a light and comedic tone, it highlights the social and legal discrimination women face. The episode also is significant because the women only choose not to go into business because of the limited number of poodles in Hilldale, not because men discouraged them. However, the women let the men assume that they changed their minds because of their duty to their families, not because their

⁶³ Jeffrey Hayden dir., “The Poodle Parlor” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, March 3, 1961.

⁶⁴ Jeffrey Hayden dir., “The Poodle Parlor” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, March 3, 1961.

original plan would not be successful. While the women never reveal why they lied to their husbands about the real reason why they decided not to pursue opening their own business, the viewer can assume it is because the women still have not given up the idea of going into business one day. Moreover, even though she does not always put them into action for herself, Donna consistently advocates for women working outside of the home.

Contrary to the way in which women were portrayed on television and in advertisements of the era, more and more women were beginning to work outside of the home. By 1963, forty-one percent of all women between the ages of twenty-five to forty-four had entered into the labor force.⁶⁵ Although the housewife was the social ideal, there were many women who began to turn to the labor force after their children had grown. After the war, the service industry was the fastest growing sector of the economy, as opposed to manufacturing; therefore the service sector helped generate jobs that had been deemed appropriate for women, including clerical work, waitressing and domestic work, as well as lower-level jobs in education and health care.⁶⁶ Combined with more attainable goods on the markets, these jobs led more women to seek paid work. Since women were getting married and having children at a younger age, they were discovering that they could have a career after their children had grown and left the home. Jessica Weiss argues that, “wartime hiring loosened cultural barriers against married women employees.”⁶⁷ Donna Stone echoes this idea, by contemplating going into the workforce herself, as well as encouraging her friends to do the same.

Donna’s assertion of her identity, advocacy for housewives, and professional pursuits represent the variety of questions middle-class women faced in the postwar period. As early as the

⁶⁵ Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 50.

⁶⁶ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 253.

⁶⁷ Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 51.

late 1940s, public surveys began reporting that women were “seized with an eerie restlessness.”⁶⁸

In an undated interview from the 1950s, housewife Carol Freeman said, “I always felt there was something wrong with me that I was so unhappy in the suburbs.”⁶⁹ As Betty Friedan wrote in *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963:

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning... Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the 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?”⁷⁰

Friedan demonstrates that some women were beginning to question their role as housewife and whether or not the role of homemaker was enough.

The Donna Reed Show speaks to these issues in ways that overlapped but did not always tally with Friedan. To be sure, Reed felt she was a champion for women. She stated, “My TV series certainly aggravated men... Hollywood producers were infuriated that Mom was equal and capable.”⁷¹ However, in Friedan’s view, Reed’s efforts to assert the individuality and intelligence of housewives were counter-productive. She feared that “by making their role in the home equal to man’s role in society,” women could “be prevented from realizing their full capabilities.”⁷² In other words, by making women believe that their roles in the home were just as important as men’s roles in business, Friedan felt that it kept women in their “place.” Friedan also felt that volunteerism was another way in which women were being taken advantage of and overlooked, remarking that, “no one valued them much at all.”⁷³

⁶⁸ Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 72.

⁶⁹ Harvey, *The Fifties: A Woman’s Oral History*, 109.

⁷⁰ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 15.

⁷¹ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 132.

⁷² Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 284.

⁷³ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 503.

Conversely, Donna Stone portrays the opposite, that women could be both homemakers and individuals within the context of their home. Reflecting the maternal feminist movement, *The Donna Reed Show* demonstrated that women needed equality that also allowed for differences between men and women.⁷⁴ Reed also embraced the idea that whatever avenue women chose, homemaker or career woman, they could still advocate for the progression of women's rights. Donna's individuality within her role as a homemaker, speaks to the actress' own agency within her television show and the authority she had on set. Even though *The Donna Reed Show* reflects many of the trends of the era, it also pushes back against the stereotypes that dominated the decade. In addition to defining housewives and advocating for female careers, Reed would also give more authority to women on television in her relationships with both her children and her husband.

⁷⁴ Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 57.

Chapter Three Wife and Mother

The phone sits ringing on a desk. The camera pans out and a woman is seen running down the stairs to answer the phone, while the husband walks out of his office. The wife hands the phone to her husband while she goes over to the front door to hand her children their lunches and kisses them goodbye.

Donna: (in the kitchen making breakfast, standing at the stove) Mary, Jeff, you'll be late for school.

Jeff: (walking into the kitchen) I'm never late, Mary's the one, how can it take forty minutes just to get dressed, I make it in five minutes flat.

Mary: (walking in right behind Jeff) Any little boy can get dressed in five minutes flat, the difference is that girls wash.

Jeff: Thirty-five extra minutes just to wash, how can you get so dirty just sleeping?

Donna: (while putting breakfast on the table) Come on Jeff.

Jeff: Where's the man of the curbside manor?

Donna: Your father is in his office taking a look at Eddie Barkley.

Jeff: What's the matter with Chicken Barkley?

Mary: You and your vulgar nicknames.

Donna: (while she is finishing dishing up breakfast places) I'm with you, Mary. We'll know that, just as soon as your father's had time to examine him.

The mother takes a seat at the head of the table and joins her family eating their breakfast.¹

The above scene from *The Donna Reed Show*'s first episode, "Weekend Trip," set the tone of the series, in one simple yet important way: Donna Stone sits at the head of the table, a place typically occupied on television by the father.² The scene correctly portrays how Donna sees

¹ Andrew McCullough, dir., "Weekend Trip" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, September 24, 1958.

² Andrew McCullough, dir., "Weekend Trip" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, September 24, 1958.

herself as the moral authority with both her children and her husband. While chapter two analyzes Donna's understanding of housewives and career women, this chapter looks at her relationships within her family, as a mother and a wife. According to Christina Hoff Sommers, maternal feminists embraced the idea that women could "employ their freedom in distinctive ways and for distinctive purposes."³ Donna embodies this by not only seeking to change the way women were treated inside and outside the home, but also by setting the tone of her familial relationships. As a mother, Donna is the moral authority and disciplinarian within her home. As a wife, Donna is the problem-solver who pushes to be treated as an equal partner, and when she is not, resorts to manipulation to get her way. In both cases, *The Donna Reed Show* addresses social concerns with these relationships.

Even though wives and mothers won praise in the 1950s, some critics blamed them for the so-called "masculinity crisis" taking place in the postwar period. According to scholar Wini Breines, "the deep anxiety about masculinity after the Second World War was closely linked with fears of female strength."⁴ Women's roles during the war led to men's insecurities about their own roles in society. Hollywood and the media fed off these insecurities, producing movies like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Some Like It Hot* (1959) that focused on adrift male leads.⁵ In 1958, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. published an essay in *Esquire* entitled "The Crisis of American Masculinity," detailing a growing problem, which according to scholar Steven Watts revolved around anxieties about changing gender norms:

Men were now performing tasks once relegated to women – "changing diapers, washing dishes, cooking meals" – while growing numbers of females were becoming doctors, lawyers, bankers, and executives. In this scene where a "blurring of function" had become the norm, women had emerged as an "expanding aggressive force, seizing

³ Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 12.

⁴ Breines, *Young, White and Miserable*, 33.

⁵ Steven Watts, *JFK and the Masculine Mystique: Sex and Power on the New Frontier*, (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, an imprint of St. Martins Press, 2016), 15.

new domains like a conquering army,” while men adopted a defensive posture “hardly able to hold their own and gratefully accepting assignments from their new rulers.”⁶

Schlesinger’s essay touched on widespread fears that the crisis in masculinity was to be blamed on the growth of corporate America, as well as the societal and economic changes brought about by World War II.⁷ Due to these fears, scholar Rebecca Jo Plant argues, “during the postwar era, middle-class women continued to be defined primarily in relation to their familial roles, and they continued to face pervasive discrimination in the public realm.”⁸

Although women were championed as fulfilling their feminine destinies as housewives and mothers, simultaneous undercurrents of fear about what these mothers were doing to society emerged. Scholar Nina Leibman argues, “although popular journals such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* epitomized the virtues of motherhood, the importance of maintaining the home, and the necessity of being a good wife, there was another strain – that of anti-maternalism – rampant in postwar America.”⁹ Books like *Generation of Vipers* by Philip Wylie extolled anti-maternalism. Published in 1942, the book became an instant best seller, selling more than 180,000 copies by 1955 and named as “one of the most important nonfiction works of the first half of the twentieth century” by the American Library Association.¹⁰ Wylie’s series of essays identified a number of national failings, but his most famous chapter was “Common Women,” in which Wylie accused American mothers of being tyrants and feminizing their sons, feeding into American’s fears about masculinity. He argued, “the adoration of motherhood has even been made

⁶ Watts, *JFK and the Masculine Mystique*, 13.

⁷ Watts, *JFK and the Masculine Mystique*, 13 and 14.

⁸ Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 17.

⁹ Leibman, *Living Room Lectures*, 197.

¹⁰ Plant, *Mom*, 19.

the basis of a religious cult.”¹¹ Referred to as “momism,” meaning “an excessive popular adoration and oversentimentalizing of mothers,” the word became widely used.¹² Plant says of Wylie,

he also railed against women’s purported habits of consumption and the social and political activities that they pursued, often in the name of motherhood. He hoped to curb not only mothers’ influence over their sons but also their power as consumers, their demands to be indulged by husbands and honored by the state, and finally, the censorious and sentimentalizing force they exerted in American culture. At base, Wylie challenged the idea that women should be regarded as morally superior beings, entitled to special prerogatives and deserving of influence simply because of their sex or their status as mothers.¹³

Although momism spoke to widespread fears, it was primarily applicable to white, middle-aged, middle-class American women.¹⁴ Ironically, as Plant argues, “by the 1960s, many middle class mothers, regardless of their employment status, felt condemned by a culture that subjected them to unremitting criticism.”¹⁵

Women were well aware of the cultural concerns surrounding mothers. Echoing the antipathy that appeared towards women after the war, Friedan wrote in *The Feminine Mystique*,

by unfortunate coincidence, this attack against mothers came about at the same time that American women were beginning to use the rights of their emancipation, to go in increasing numbers to college and professional schools, to rise in industry and the professions in inevitable competition with men. Women were just beginning to play a part in American society that depended not on their sex, but on their individual abilities.¹⁶

Women were thus stuck between reasserting the independence they had after World War II and going back to their roles in the home. At a crossroads, television executives faced the issue of how

¹¹ Philip Wylie on "Momism" (1955), Accessed March 09, 2018, <https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/history/files/lavender/momism.html>.

¹² Merriam Webster; the full definition of “momism” states that, “that is thought to allow overprotective or clinging mothers unconsciously to deny their offspring emotional emancipation and thus to set up psychoneuroses.” “Momism,” *Merriam-Webster*, Accessed March 30, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/momism>.

¹³ Plant, *Mom*, 21.

¹⁴ Plant, *Mom*, 21.

¹⁵ Plant, *Mom*, 148.

¹⁶ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 221.

to portray women within the family-centered plots of their programs. Reed took advantage of the new roles that women were starting to pave for themselves, and combined them with traditional women's roles within the home, creating a mother character on her television show that represented both tradition and change.

While no one on *The Donna Reed Show* ever uses the term “momism,” the program nevertheless challenges the notion. Popular culture in the 1950s often portrayed two different types of mothers, the domineering mother or the attractive housebound mother. Embodying the role of the domineering mother was Angela Lansbury's character, Eleanor Iselin, in the 1962 film, *The Manchurian Candidate*. Unbeknownst to her husband and son, Eleanor is a Soviet agent working to manipulate them into overthrowing the United States government.¹⁷ The movie speaks to the litany of fears Americans had about the Cold War, communism and women manipulating men. The alternative was Jane Wyatt, the actress who played Margaret Anderson on *Father Knows Best*. As she said about her character, “My only complaint was you never saw her reading a book, or going to the office, or playing tennis. Mom always had to be around with nothing to do.... Just to say ‘wash your hands.’ So I just sat around waiting to go on.”¹⁸ However, Donna Stone's mother character is neither the domineering nor housebound type. As mentioned in chapter two, Reed's character on *The Donna Reed Show* is seen reading, volunteering in the hospital, attending meetings, and working in her husband's office. These activities are important not only to Reed's concept of the housewife, but also show that Donna did not live solely through her children and husband.

When the show first aired in 1958, the Stones' children, Jeff and Mary, were already “old” compared to other family television shows. Paul Peterson, who played Jeff Stone, was thirteen

¹⁷ *The Manchurian Candidate*, directed by John Frankenheimer, (MGM, 1962), DVD, (MGM, 2006).

¹⁸ Leibman, *Living Room Lectures*, 205.

when the show debuted, and Shelley Fabares, who played Mary, was fourteen. In contrast, fans could see Lucy's baby, "little Ricky," grow up on the show, and *Leave it to Beaver* saw Beaver come of age. Even Jay North, who starred as Dennis on *Dennis the Menace*, was a young boy when his show debuted in 1959. Starting a family-oriented show with older children was a gamble. True to form, Reed said in an interview, "there are plenty of women my age who look no older than I do and they have teenage children. In Hollywood it just wasn't done. So we did it!"¹⁹ Having older children gave Donna the opportunity to address trickier moral questions than if the children were young, and allowed for the focus of the show to be on Donna.

Other family-oriented television programs portrayed the father as the moral authority and disciplinarian. Leibman states, "both the film and television texts were overwhelmingly consistent in predicting familial success on an uncontested structural valuation of paternal fatherhood and masculine dominance."²⁰ Fathers on television were the ones who provided the moral guidance instead of mothers. In "It's a Small World," the pilot episode of *Leave it to Beaver*, brothers Wally and Beaver try to collect bottle caps to win a bicycle, only to con the company into giving it to them.²¹ However, their father Ward Cleaver intervenes. Ward tells the boys, "You weren't entitled to a bike. Boys, we've talked about this before. A responsible person doesn't take things he hasn't earned. You have to be worthy of what you get in life. You have to work for it."²² While the boys are disappointed that they have to give the bike back, they finally agree with their father. The entire episode revolves around the father and his sons. The mother, June, is so far in the background, that she is primarily seen in the kitchen and does not even notice her children lowering a bicycle out

¹⁹ Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, 95.

²⁰ Liebman, *Living Room Lectures*, 216.

²¹ Jerry Hopper, dir., "It's a Small World," in *Leave it to Beaver*, CBS, April 23, 1957.

²² Jerry Hopper, dir., "It's a Small World," in *Leave it to Beaver*, CBS, April 23, 1957.

of their bedroom window. Ward never discusses what to do about the ill-gotten bike with his wife, and then decides to intervene on his own.

Unlike in the Cleaver household, on *The Donna Reed Show*, Donna is the main voice of authority in the Stone house. “The Report Card” which aired during the first season, illustrates this, as Donna is the one upset by Jeff’s grades, the one who talks about it with him, and the one who helps resolve it when her husband Alex seems detached. While Donna is disheartened by her son’s grades, Alex tells Donna that at least Jeff’s straight C’s show he is an average and consistent scholar. Offended, Donna remarks that Jeff is not average: “he’s a sensitive, imaginative, perceptive child, but not average.”²³ At first, Donna blames his teacher, saying that she must not be able to “appreciate an unusual child” and talks with Jeff. He complains, “you want me to be normal, don’t you?”²⁴ Donna explains that there is a “difference between average and normal; average means being ordinary, like a lump with no outstanding characteristics.”²⁵ Later that evening at an art display at Jeff’s school, Donna and Alex notice that none of Jeff’s work is displayed. Approaching the teacher with their concerns, Alex wonders if “Jeff has the mental capacity to do better?”²⁶ However, at this point, Donna has concluded that Jeff is not trying his hardest.

Her interpretation prevails, as does her solution. At breakfast the next morning, Donna tells Alex, “maybe we’re responsible, maybe he’s not being intellectually stimulated at home... how can we expect an intellect to blossom in an arid desert? What do we talk about at dinner, household problems, clothes, gossip, can’t we talk about something enlightening?”²⁷ When Jeff finally joins

²³ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Report Card” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 25, 1959.

²⁴ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Report Card” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 25, 1959.

²⁵ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Report Card” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 25, 1959.

²⁶ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Report Card” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 25, 1959.

²⁷ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Report Card” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 25, 1959.

the table, Donna brings up current events, including a conference in the Middle East and the government being able to send a man to the moon, unusual topics for the series.²⁸ Donna's comments about current events undermine the notions that the average mother, as Philip Wylie put it, "made up for the unhappiness of compulsory education by sloughing all that she learned so completely that she could not pass the final examinations of a fifth grader."²⁹ The episode ends with Donna going to talk to Jeff in his room, telling him, "the difference between a B and a C is sometimes just numerical, but it's a waste not to get it if you're capable."³⁰ Jeff resolves to work harder, telling his mother, "Well, if it means that much to ya, I'll study a little harder."³¹

Related to fears about "momism" were also new concerns about so-called permissive parenting trends. Perhaps due to the tumultuousness of the previous decades, parents, in particular on television, took a more permissive and liberal approach with disciplining their children. As Morreale states,

by the 1950s, permissiveness, although not without its detractors, had become the dominant discourse about childhood within postwar American society, promoted by a seemingly endless flood and advertisements; its implications were explored by learned sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists but also pervaded popular culture, shaping the comic books, television, films, records, and children's books of the period.³²

To Friedan, permissive parenting was another result of women's lack of individuality. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan cites one mother's lament, "I couldn't bear to make them do what they didn't want to do, even take medicine when they were sick," she explained, "I couldn't bear

²⁸ The only other significant time that current events are mentioned in the series, is in the eighth season in episode, "Pop Goes Theresa." Jeff's friend Theresa goes out for the afternoon against the wishes of her overprotective father, shouting, "I've broken through the iron curtain. I'm liberated! I'm free! I got out!"; as described by Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, 108; Andrew McCullough, dir., "Pop Goes Theresa" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, September 16, 1965.

²⁹ Philip Wylie on "Momism" (1955), Accessed March 09, 2018, <https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/history/files/lavender/momism.html>.

³⁰ Oscar Rudolph, dir., "The Report Card" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 25, 1959.

³¹ Oscar Rudolph, dir., "The Report Card" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 25, 1959.

³² Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, 96.

for them to be unhappy, or fight, or be angry at me. I couldn't separate them from myself somehow. I was always understanding, patient. I felt guilty leaving them even for an afternoon."³³ As far as Friedan was concerned, such women could not even distinguish themselves from their children.

Donna, on the other hand, is involved in social and volunteer activities, is firm but loving with her children, and is able to seek relationships outside of the home, proving that women can be both homemakers and individuals. Admittedly, both Donna and Alex were guilty of permissive parenting at various times throughout the series, but Donna put her foot down with her children the most. Most family-oriented shows of the era portrayed the father as being in control when it came to disciplining the children; but throughout the series, Donna usually has the final say in the Stone household.

In fact in one episode, Donna even gets fed up with being the sole disciplinarian in the house. Entitled "The Punishment" and airing in 1959, the episode opens with Donna grounding the kids for the weekend, telling Alex that he can be the parent who disciplines, and she can be "the parent who is loved."³⁴ The next day when Alex gets home from work, Donna hands him a note with a list of things for which he needs to scold Jeff and Mary. In other words, while Alex is the one doing the disciplining, Donna is still the authority behind him.

In the episode, "The Gentle Dew," which aired in 1960, Alex actually reminds Donna not to be too tough on her children.³⁵ Upset that Jeff and Mary had not done their chores, Alex tells his wife to not let them get her "goat."³⁶ In a related episode entitled "Character Building," Donna writes a letter to the editor about parenting tips that explains her disciplining philosophy.³⁷ Donna

³³ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 344.

³⁴ Oscar Rudolph, dir., "The Punishment" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, December 3, 1959.

³⁵ Norman Tokar, dir., "The Gentle Dew" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, March 10, 1960.

³⁶ Norman Tokar, dir., "The Gentle Dew" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, March 10, 1960.

³⁷ Jeffrey Hayden, dir., "Character Building" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 5, 1961.

states that too often parents do not follow through on what they tell their children, saying that it was “important to follow a firm and consistent line with children.”³⁸ Vowing to be firm in her own home, Donna tells Mary she cannot do anything with friends until she finds her coat and picks up her missing book from her friend’s house. Upset that Alex is not disciplining Jeff and Mary enough, Donna remarks, “Why do I have to be the only villain in this house?”³⁹ The episode concludes with Donna realizing that she is the one who misplaced Mary’s jacket, after fussing at her daughter all week. Alex tells a disheartened Donna, “Mary won’t love you any less to know you’re less than perfect.”⁴⁰ The theme throughout the series is that Donna is the one who questions if she is being too tough on her children, at the same time vocalizing her frustration that her husband is not tough enough.

In addition to being the disciplinarian, Donna was also the moral authority within her home. In the 1959 episode “Nothing Like a Good Book,” Donna and Alex attend a dinner party in which the topic of conversation is the impact of television on the family and society.⁴¹ Throughout the episode Donna attempts to encourage her family to read instead of watching television. At one of the book clubs that Donna joins, a family friend states that “attacking TV is like attacking Gutenberg.”⁴² The comment, while said in passing, shows just how much television had become a mainstay in people’s lives, by comparing the importance of the TV to one of the most important inventions in history, the Gutenberg printing press. Donna comes home to her family watching a Western show on television and the episode ends with the family gathered around the TV. By the end of the episode, watchers are reassured that television does not harm the family after all and it

³⁸ Jeffrey Hayden, dir., “Character Building” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 5, 1961.

³⁹ Jeffrey Hayden, dir., “Character Building” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 5, 1961.

⁴⁰ Jeffrey Hayden, dir., “Character Building” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 5, 1961.

⁴¹ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “Nothing Like a Good Book,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, November 5, 1959.

⁴² Oscar Rudolph, dir., “Nothing Like a Good Book,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, November 5, 1959.

could actually bring the family together. In an era in which television sets were in the majority of homes, Donna vocalizing her concerns about its impact on the home and the family is rare. Donna is also likely voicing concerns that others had, but she resolves it by coming to the conclusion that families can both read and watch television. As the series continues, the television becomes an important part of the home, eventually becoming a prominent part of the Stones' living room. Nevertheless, Jeff and Mary are rarely shown watching television throughout the series. Donna continues her love of reading, and is shown reading in bed or in the living room in many episodes.

While Donna is close to both of her children, she clearly has a special relationship with her daughter, Mary. True to a 1950s mentality of mothers and daughters vs husbands and sons, *The Donna Reed Show* frequently showed Donna and Mary siding together against Alex and Jeff. Donna teaches Mary, but she guides her son Jeff. Donna takes great care in giving her daughter advice, such as navigating the dating world, but also about being a woman. As stated in chapter two, even though marriage rates were at an all time high in the 1950s, Donna often encourages her daughter to wait until after college for marriage, advising her to find her independence before she finds a husband. In a time period that encouraged women to find themselves through their husbands, Donna voicing her opinion on wanting women to find their own strength through education and work is remarkable.

Donna strongly encourages her daughter to get an education, something that Friedan also recommended. In season four, the episode "Donna's Prima Donna," which aired in 1962, Mary decides that she is going to forgo college and become a singer instead.⁴³ Donna is furious, but admits to Alex that she has raised her children to make their own decisions and she trusts them to choose wisely. In spite of this, Donna decides to help change Mary's mind, by taking Mary to her

⁴³ Barry Shear, dir., "Donna's Prima Donna" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 1, 1962.

own Alma Mater, a fictional university called Fairburn. Donna expresses her hesitation about trying to change her daughter's mind, asking her friend at one point if she's doing the right thing. Her friend responds, "of course you are, you're a mother."⁴⁴ Interestingly, Donna replies, "that doesn't make us always right, all I really want is Mary to be happy."⁴⁵ Donna's feelings on letting Mary make her own decisions about college fit in with permissive parenting that was so popular at the time; both Donna and Alex are upset about Mary's decision. Alex tells Donna, "what we need around here is a good foot putter-downer" and that "we're just going to have to lay the law down."⁴⁶ However, Alex defers to Donna to decide how to handle Mary's decision, and she is the one who schemes to help their daughter decide that college is the best choice. By the end of the episode, Donna has succeeded. Mary announces that she has decided to attend college in the fall. Throughout the series Donna makes it clear that education is important to women's empowerment both at home and in the public sphere.

In addition to social concerns about the impact of television on families, as well as the importance of education, juvenile delinquency was also a fear in the Cold War era, and Jeff's character played into those concerns. Throughout the series, Jeff always borders on being a "delinquent," by sneaking out of the house, not always doing his chores and even cheating on his homework, but it is through Donna's parental guidance and love that keeps Jeff from venturing into true delinquent territory. In the episode, "Jeff's Double Life," Jeff goes for a ride in a car that his friend stole from his parents.⁴⁷ While Jeff does not know that the car was stolen, they get into a car accident while running away from the police, causing Jeff to be injured. Jeff attempts to hide his injury from his parents, but Donna senses something is wrong, and she is the one who

⁴⁴ Barry Shear, dir., "Donna's Prima Donna" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 1, 1962.

⁴⁵ Barry Shear, dir., "Donna's Prima Donna" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 1, 1962.

⁴⁶ Barry Shear, dir., "Donna's Prima Donna" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 1, 1962.

⁴⁷ Oscar Rudolph, dir., "Jeff's Double Life," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 7, 1959.

eventually gets Jeff to confess. Incidentally, neither Donna or Alex are upset with Jeff; they just tell him that they are glad he finally told them the truth.

Jeff continually goes to Donna for help throughout the series. In the second episode of the first season, Jeff comes home with a black eye after getting into a fight in the episode, “Pardon My Gloves.”⁴⁸ Upset that her son is fighting, Donna threatens to punish him the next time it happens. After finding out that Jeff was fighting to protect his mother’s honor, Donna teaches Jeff how to protect himself and fight back, complete with a boxing lesson in the backyard. The episode contradicts itself: Jeff reasserts his masculinity through fighting; yet, his mother is the one who shows him how. As the show goes on, the storylines start revolving primarily around Jeff by season seven, instead of both Jeff and Mary, with most of the episodes revolving around Jeff’s life by season eight. For instance, viewers get to watch Jeff’s prom date mix-ups, his running for school student council and several girlfriends during the eighth season. Donna does not necessarily teach Jeff life lessons, like she does with Mary, but their positive relationship ensures Jeff usually makes the right decisions, or at least comes to Donna and tells her when he needs help.

By the fifth season, Mary has gone off to college (the actress left the show, but came back for guest appearances) and the Stones adopt Trisha, an orphan, in “A Way of Her Own,” which aired in 1963.⁴⁹ The adoption storyline is awkward. Trisha lived with her uncle, because her parents are deceased, but her uncle says he does not have time to take care of a little girl, so the Stones adopt her. Trisha plays a small role on the show, and the adoption is not fully addressed. The show seems somewhat tentative about the adoption topic, and it consistently features Alex telling Trisha to not call him and Donna mom and dad, he prefers she call them by their first names. Trisha is a character throughout the rest of the series, but she does not have many storylines and is a secondary

⁴⁸ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “Pardon My Gloves,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, October 1, 1958.

⁴⁹ Andrew McCullough, dir., “A Way of Her Own,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, January 31, 1963.

character to Jeff and Mary. While it certainly adds to the differences between *The Donna Reed Show* and other family sitcoms of the era, it was also an awkward storyline that could be considered an early example of a television series “jumping the shark.”⁵⁰

Donna embraces her role as mother on her show, but she also enables women to challenge their roles within the home. Many television mothers let their husbands be the disciplinarians, and took little part in making the rules within the home. Donna proves that women can push these boundaries and take more of an equal control with their husbands. Morreale argues, “the feminine excesses of [Donna’s] behavior – her physical appearance, her devotion to family meals and housework, and her overall complicity with the social codes and narrative constraints that demand that she accept her assigned role – often disguise the masculine position of authority that she occupies throughout much of the narrative.”⁵¹ When Donna fills the role reserved for the father, it is often disguised by her femininity in order to keep her from openly pushing gender role boundaries too far.

Donna’s position as the moral authority and disciplinarian in the home differed from prevailing social and cultural norms. In a Gallup poll taken in 1952, most couples agreed that the man should be the leader at work and at home. By the time *The Donna Reed Show* aired, a little more than fifty-percent of people polled felt that married women belonged in the home.⁵² So entrenched were the ideas that women should defer to a man that, “Gallup even noted that the task of interviewing so many women had been challenging because some husbands wouldn’t allow

⁵⁰ The term “jumping the shark” originated with an episode on *Happy Days* that aired in 1977. The term refers to a popular, long-running television show that has begun to run out of fresh ideas. “Jumping the Shark,” TV Tropes, Accessed March 08, 2018, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/JumpingTheShark>.

⁵¹ Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, 77.

⁵² Gallup, Inc, “Gallup Vault: A Sea Change in Support for Working Women,” *Gallup.com*, July 20, 2017, Accessed February 26, 2018, http://news.gallup.com/vault/214328/gallup-vault-sea-change-support-working-women.aspx?g_source=link_NEWSV9&g_medium=TOPIC&g_campaign=item_&g_content=Gallup%2520Vault%25203A%2520A%2520Sea%2520Change%2520in%2520Support%2520for%2520Working%2520Women.

their wives to participate.”⁵³ In fact, the poll reported that, one husband “was so angry that his wife had ‘talked to strangers’ that he refused to speak to her for three days after her interview. Another remarked to the interviewers, ‘You talk to my wife as if you thought she knew what she was talking about.’”⁵⁴

In *The Donna Reed Show* husband and wife seem to be on more equal footing than other housewives in television. Alex is the economic supporter of the Stone family, but Donna clearly was able to spend freely, in one episode buying an antique statue and in others buying new clothes without her husband’s questions or approval, which was uncommon at a time in which women frequently were portrayed asking for permission or being chastised by their husbands over their spending habits. In *I Love Lucy*, Lucy was often shown hiding her purchases before Desi came home. In the episode, “The Beaded Bag,” a shopgirl convinces Alex into buying a bag for Donna’s birthday.⁵⁵ Upset, Donna returns the bag, telling Mary that she did not want Alex thinking she had used a feminine trick to get what she wanted. The episode closes with Donna telling Alex that she did not “want it on those terms,” to which Alex replies, “though you’re a woman, you’re not that kind of woman,” as he hands her the repurchased present.⁵⁶ Although Donna frequently schemes to get what she wants throughout the series, she consistently vocalizes her contempt at manipulating Alex to give her material things. Alex and Donna tell their friends that they would not stoop to “bribing” the other with gifts to get what they want or manipulate one another into buying a present.

Donna and Alex’s on-screen relationship was rare for a family-oriented sitcom. Many family-oriented shows, like *Leave it to Beaver*, portrayed the relationship between the parents as

⁵³ Coontz, *Strange Stirring*, 3.

⁵⁴ Coontz, *Strange Stirring*, 3.

⁵⁵ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Beaded Bag,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, December 10, 1958.

⁵⁶ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Beaded Bag,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, December 10, 1958.

a secondary storyline, in particular, a storyline that always revolved around the father's point of view. During an era that focused on the father's impact on the home, *The Donna Reed Show* portrayed the mother's impact. Instead of a male dominated family, the Stones presented a well-adjusted female dominated one. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan also mentions what she refers to as a suburban phenomenon, the idea that "young fathers feel trapped" due to the demands placed upon them by their wives, and the wife's inability to have her own individuality.⁵⁷ By being independent of her husband, Donna shows that men do not need to feel trapped in their marriages.

Portrayed by actor Carl Betz, Alex played a secondary role to Donna. Determined to showcase a different marriage than one typically seen on television, Reed often fought with her screenwriters when they portrayed "Alex as threatened by his wife's domestic authority."⁵⁸ Reed wanted their relationship depicted on a more equal footing, and not in the typical man vs. woman format that was becoming popular on television. Alex represents the attitudes shown towards women in other sit-coms. But while Alex sometimes makes disparaging comments about marriage or women throughout the series, he usually makes these comments to other men. When he does put women down when talking to his wife, Donna always has a response as to why he is wrong. Alex also never acts on what he says. He is usually stating what most men thought at the time, while Donna is actively trying to redefine women's roles in society. Alex's statements about women serve to make Donna's actions stand out even more. Donna has control in their home, and problem-solves on her own. Donna overrides Alex in several episodes regarding their children, like in the episode, "Do You Trust Your Child?" which aired in April of 1959, shows Donna overruling Alex and giving Jeff an advance of his allowance.⁵⁹ Only a fifteen second scene, the

⁵⁷ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 323.

⁵⁸ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 128.

⁵⁹ Oscar Rudolph, dir., "Do You Trust Your Child?" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, April 22, 1959.

fact that Donna both overrode her husband and that Alex did not chastise her for doing so, is a telling moment on the series. Whenever Donna does something he does not agree with, like volunteer to work in his office or cut her own hair, Alex does not try to interfere.

Donna enjoys her agency within her home and in her marriage; however, she goes out of her way to make sure that her husband does not feel threatened. In the episode “The Male Ego” in season one, Donna is touched that Mary reads an essay about mothers she wrote at school.⁶⁰ Mary’s essay compares mothers to guardian angels, saying that mothers make blind sacrifices that people do not know about and refers to mothers as the ‘strength of our nation.’⁶¹ Mary ends the essay stating, “mother is the most beautiful word in the English language.”⁶² The next day, one of Alex’s patients’ mother asks Alex, “Do men appreciate having a precious jewel around the house? When a man is married to a saint, he should get down on his knees and thank heavens.”⁶³ Annoyed and jealous by the attention on Donna, Alex simply responds that he is indeed happy with Donna. Throughout the day, Alex is bombarded by neighbors, friends and patients, having been at the recital the night before, commenting on how precious Donna is; even the dry cleaner tells Alex that he hopes Donna is appreciated at home. Jealous, Alex condescendingly tells Donna that he is going to build her a shrine.

To offset her husband’s jealousy, Donna assures Alex that she is not as great as everyone thinks, claiming and that she does not deserve all the attention. Feeling overlooked and overshadowed, Alex asks of Donna, “what happened to those dim days beyond recall, when a man made decisions? Women control the PTA, own 70% of nations wealth, dictate where we live, how

⁶⁰ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Male Ego,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, October 15, 1958

⁶¹ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Male Ego,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, October 15, 1958.

⁶² Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Male Ego,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, October 15, 1958.

⁶³ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Male Ego,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, October 15, 1958.

we live. There used to be two sexes, now there's female and him."⁶⁴ Donna does not respond to Alex's outburst, but takes him to buy a new suit, hoping to placate her jealous husband. Still smarting the next day, Alex tells a colleague, "I'm not against motherhood," but "wives are becoming too powerful. It's turning into a dictatorship."⁶⁵

Having heard the entire town of Hilldale talk about Mary's essay, a journalist from the Sentinel newspaper comes by the house to do a story on Donna. The journalist tells Donna that his story is about "the modern woman, no longer chained to the kitchen, but out there helping to run the community, a new strong role in the affairs of our nation."⁶⁶ When the journalist asks what to call the article, "wife, mother, community leader?," Donna responds, "why not call it, how to sabotage a happy marriage?"⁶⁷ At the end of the episode, Donna throws a surprise birthday party for her husband. Telling Alex that they are gathered to pay homage and love to him, each guest gives a small toast to the man of the house. Donna gives the last tribute, stating, "his quiet strength, knowledge that he's always there when I need him, to the knowledge that I need him."⁶⁸ Donna's attempts to placate her husband show her understanding of how much she is able to push gender boundaries in her role within her home. Although it is Donna who receives the accolades, she takes on the man's role in their relationship by buying her husband clothes and trying to refocus the discussion back onto Alex. It is not as if Donna feels undeserving of the attention, but she wants to make certain that her husband does not feel threatened.

The very next season saw a similar storyline but in reverse, and in a conclusion that was still more flattering to Donna. The episode, "The Lucky Girl," which aired in 1959, the

⁶⁴ Oscar Rudolph, dir., "The Male Ego," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, October 15, 1958.

⁶⁵ Oscar Rudolph, dir., "The Male Ego," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, October 15, 1958.

⁶⁶ Oscar Rudolph, dir., "The Male Ego," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, October 15, 1958.

⁶⁷ Oscar Rudolph, dir., "The Male Ego," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, October 15, 1958.

⁶⁸ Oscar Rudolph, dir., "The Male Ego," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, October 15, 1958.

neighborhood women are all talking about how wonderful Alex is, “not only as a doctor, but as a man.”⁶⁹ Annoyed by women fawning over how perfect her husband is, Donna tells her friend sarcastically, “I have to share my precious gift with the world.”⁷⁰ Teasing Donna for being oversensitive that the women in town find him so attractive, Alex tells her, “When they created women, they made them beautiful, gentle, warm hearted, but they overlooked one thing: logic.”⁷¹ Alex then goes on to tell Jeff, “Don’t try to figure it out Jeff. It all started thousands of years ago.”⁷² This condescending statement is undercut, however, in the next scene when he and Donna go to the theater. During intermission, a few of Donna’s friends ask Alex how he is enjoying the play, and he quotes Donna’s interpretation. Eventually he confesses that he did not understand a series of plays, all of which Donna had read and understood.

The episode continues the implication that Donna is more intelligent and more well read than her husband, all hidden behind a storyline that is supposedly about Alex. Later that evening, Donna tells Alex that she does not like the implication of “you’re wonderful and I’m lucky.”⁷³ The episode concludes with Alex receiving a call to make a house call for a patient. While Alex is gone, Jeff gets sick, and it is Donna who has to make the decisions on how to treat her son. When Alex finally gets home later that evening, he tells Donna that all sorts of men consider him lucky to be married to her.

Despite the fact that they had been arguing, the episode closes by showing the strength of Donna and Alex’s relationship, that men and women can be equal within their marriage and have a strong, loving relationship. The scene also reveals something else; Donna sits on Alex’s lap when

⁶⁹ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Lucky Girl” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, December 31, 1959.

⁷⁰ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Lucky Girl” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, December 31, 1959.

⁷¹ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Lucky Girl” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, December 31, 1959.

⁷² Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Lucky Girl” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, December 31, 1959.

⁷³ Oscar Rudolph, dir., “The Lucky Girl” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, December 31, 1959.

he gets home, in a display of affection that was rarely shown on other television shows. Donna and Alex's physical relationship is unique in an era that emphasized women's lack of sexuality. Philip Wylie, in *Generation of Vipers*, condemns mothers for being "virginal;" however Donna clearly has a loving and sexual relationship with her husband.

As discussed in chapter two, throughout the series, Donna talks about her life before she got married, and the point bears repeating here because it is an important aspect to Donna being on equal footing with Alex. Interestingly, the show discusses Donna's life before marriage, but not Alex's. Donna went to college and worked as a nurse before she met Alex. Donna's pre-marital life is most discussed in season three in the episode, "Donna Goes to a Reunion," which aired in 1960, when Donna and Alex go to her college reunion.⁷⁴ Although in previous episodes both Donna and Alex had said that she married at age eighteen, this episode has Donna completing college before she married. While changing the story on the age in which she married, the series is consistent in the storyline that Donna was a nurse and Alex in medical school when they met. This point contradicts prevailing norms about marriage. One wife said in an undated interview in Harvey's book, *The Fifties*,

Marriage was going to be the beginning of my real life. It was all I thought about in college. I was so focused on finding this mate I wouldn't allow myself to get carried away by of my subjects. My feeling was, life was not concerned with work, but with men and dating. When Ted came along, I made him into the right person. He was going to be a doctor, someone who would help the world, and I would help him. He was an idealist and we were going to build a life together – *his* life, essentially, only that wasn't how I saw it at the time. In fact, as it turned out, we had no common interests except our mutual interest in his career.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Robert Ellis Miller, dir., "Donna Goes to a Reunion" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, December 15, 1960.

⁷⁵ Harvey, *The Fifties*, 71.

While many wives were being told to find themselves through their husbands' careers, Donna shows that women could embrace their husband's roles outside of the home, as well as find themselves independently of their husbands.

As the series continues, Donna plays more into stereotypes of the era: women are conniving and men are silly. Television in the 1960s took on an inherent man vs. woman slapstick tone, something that most programs in the 1950s did not have. Men on television, and specifically Alex and his colleagues on *The Donna Reed Show* were more open with putting women down, or as viewers might have interpreted it, putting women in their places. Increasingly condescending comments towards women are made, possibly in reaction to the rising feminist movement. However, even though the series takes on this tone, Donna becomes ever more confident in her role in the house. Her outspokenness could be in response to the increasingly negative comments about women on the show. Airing in 1961, the episode "For Better or For Worse" shows Donna standing up for herself in ways that previous episodes had not.⁷⁶ Alex and his colleagues want to go fishing for the weekend. Confident that he does not need to ask Donna, Alex is incredulous that they have to ask their wives for permission. "Imagine, grown men having to ask permission to go fishing! Pretty ridiculous," he exclaims.⁷⁷

When Alex gets home, he realizes that his own wife is upset that he did not ask, remarking that in not asking, he was paying her a compliment – he is married to an intelligent woman. Donna responds that Alex is acting like a male, boasting to the boys that he has his little wife wrapped around his little finger. Jeff retorts that women are taking over, and not just in the home, "that a girl was just elected class president at school."⁷⁸ All of the other wives say no as well, and the men

⁷⁶ Noran Tokar, dir., "For Better or Worse" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, April 27, 1961.

⁷⁷ Noran Tokar, dir., "For Better or Worse" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, April 27, 1961.

⁷⁸ Noran Tokar, dir., "For Better or Worse" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, April 27, 1961.

are unanimously upset that they have to ask permission and that they feel like they do not have a say. Alex even goes as far as to say that it is degrading. Remarkably, while the episode portrays women as controlling and petty, the men follow their wives' firm and authoritative no. They all stay home, although one colleague condescendingly says, "even the best of them can act up."⁷⁹

Even though the husbands spend the entire episode castigating their wives, the episode is framed in a way to make the viewer feel sorry for the men, not the women. In the study *Fatherhood: A Sociological Perspective* conducted in 1968, Leonard Benson found that, "our expectations for husbands and wives are still influenced by the traditional concepts of patriarchy: thus, for example, obstinate husbands are almost always more socially acceptable than stubborn wives. The father who fights for his dignity through the exercise of misguided authority is likely to receive our sympathy; in a comparable plight mother seems villainous."⁸⁰ Therefore, although the wives simply tell their husbands they cannot go fishing for the weekend, as they are needed at home, it is the women who are painted as irrational.

Throughout the episode both Donna and Alex's friends recommend that Alex buy a gift for Donna, saying that if the husband wants a favor, he should pay for it. Both Donna and Alex say they do not believe in bribery, reflecting the equality they both feel within their marriage. Desperately wanting to go fishing, and caving to his colleagues, Alex eventually comes home with a gift for Donna. Furious at her husband, and feeling like he does not respect her, she is relieved when she opens the gift and it is simply rubber gloves. Donna's annoyance that Alex assumed he did not have to check with her first before he made plans, as well as being upset that Alex felt he could simply bribe her with a gift in order to go fishing, speaks to Donna's understanding and

⁷⁹ Noran Tokar, dir., "For Better or Worse" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, April 27, 1961.

⁸⁰ Leibman, *Living Room Lectures*, 208.

assumptions about their marriage; it speaks to the equality and respect that they have for one another.

During the series, Alex and Donna offer commentary on marriage as a whole, not just about their relationship. In the episode, “Mrs. Stone and Dr. Hyde,” Donna, having had formal training as a nurse, fills in for Alex’s secretary in his medical practice.⁸¹ When Mary tells Alex that she hopes she has a husband that she can work with side by side, Alex responds, “I hope he loves you enough to tell you to stay home, where you belong.”⁸² Offended, Donna asks, “So a woman’s place is in the home?”⁸³ The discussion goes on, with Alex commenting, “Now don’t get huffy, darling, I just meant that an office is different from a home, it’s not run the same way.”⁸⁴ Despite Alex’s protests, Donna nevertheless works in his office. While Alex is annoyed that Donna is working for him, in the end they work together to save a sick child, showing that he was being irrational. The episode shows how well Donna and Alex work together, how much they depend on one another and how equal they both are within their relationship. Alex would not have been able to save the child without the presence and help of his wife. The episode also shows Donna’s capability and knowledge in her role as a nurse, another reminder to the viewer of her career before marriage.

In the episode “The Fatal Leap,” Alex is invited to the bachelor party of a former friend from college.⁸⁵ Worried about a wild night, Donna invites her friend Madeline over while their husbands are at the party. Madeline tells Donna, “I think it’s good for husbands to be away from their wives once in awhile... It might teach them a lesson. They get so used to taking everything for granted, like being waited on hand and foot all the time. Let them find out what it’s like.”⁸⁶ In

⁸¹ Alex’s practice was originally in the home at the beginning of the series, but moved out of the house in Season Five.

⁸² Gene Nelson, dir., “Mrs. Stone and Dr. Hyde” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, September 27, 1962.

⁸³ Gene Nelson, dir., “Mrs. Stone and Dr. Hyde” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, September 27, 1962.

⁸⁴ Gene Nelson, dir., “Mrs. Stone and Dr. Hyde” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, September 27, 1962.

⁸⁵ Andrew McCullough, dir., “The Fatal Leap,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, March 17, 1960.

⁸⁶ Andrew McCullough, dir., “The Fatal Leap,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, March 17, 1960.

a conversation that speaks directly to women feeling undervalued, Madeline states, “It’s not fair, men have all the fun since the moment they’re born.”⁸⁷ The women then go on to discuss how girls have to keep their dresses clean, while boys always got to play. Unbeknownst to the women, the bachelor party is not what the men expected it to be and when Alex comes home, he tells Donna, “Darling, men don’t have that much fun together... this is the nicest moment I’ve had all evening. The most fun is girls and boys, isn’t it?”⁸⁸ The episode demonstrates the idea that women felt held back by their sex, along with pointing out the different expectations for men and women, which Alex tries to reconcile with his comments to his wife that men and women are better together.

Alex continues to make comments about husbands and wives in the episode, “Friends and Neighbors,” which aired in the fifth season in 1963.⁸⁹ The Stones’ neighbor and good friend, Dave, comes over because he is having marital problems. Alex tells his friend, “the man is the strong one, the one in charge, the decision maker,” that the husband “must be the senior partner” and that a “woman’s basic needs: love, protection, guiding hand.”⁹⁰ Alex convinces Dave to purchase a house next door without telling his wife. While Donna is aghast, comparing this act to treating his wife like a child, Midge is very excited at her husband’s thoughtfulness. The episode is one of the only to pit Donna against another woman; Donna is clearly exasperated at Midge’s blanket acceptance of Dave picking out a house without her input.

Donna’s reaction to Dave buying a house without his wife’s opinion, and Midge being unperturbed by it, shows how different Donna and Alex’s relationship is from others on the show. Weiss, argues that, “married women in the 1950s, may have been members of a team, but their

⁸⁷ Andrew McCullough, dir., “The Fatal Leap,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, March 17, 1960.

⁸⁸ Andrew McCullough, dir., “The Fatal Leap,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, March 17, 1960.

⁸⁹ Barry Shear, dir., “Friend’s and Neighbors,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, April 4, 1963.

⁹⁰ Barry Shear, dir., “Friend’s and Neighbors,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, April 4, 1963.

husbands called the play.”⁹¹ The episode also shows that Donna expects to be treated as an equal in making the decisions for her family, as well as in her marriage. Weiss goes on to state, “one way couples solved the marital authority problem was by ceding spheres of influence to one spouse or the other, meaning women took responsibility for daily decisions around the home and men took responsibility for larger family decisions.”⁹² Not only does Donna make the daily decisions in the home, but she also makes many of the decisions for the entire family. Donna puts her family’s vacation on hold so she can go to court to fight a parking ticket, in the episode, “Tony Martin Visits,” which aired in 1961.⁹³

When Donna feels Alex failed to treat her as an equal partner, she often used manipulation to get her way. Morreale states, “She [Donna] is shrewder than her husband, who is often outwitted by Donna’s ploys.” The pilot episode entitled “Weekend Trip,” which aired in 1958, sees Donna arranging to take a weekend away with the family.⁹⁴ Alex says that he cannot take the time off of work, so Donna slyly arranges for his friend to be on call for the practice that weekend so Alex can be free. Donna makes sure that the friend thinks that taking Alex’s on-call duties is the men’s idea. Donna is therefore portrayed as smart, yet scheming and able to manipulate men in an innocent manner. Alex tells Donna that he knew all along that she had manipulated the situation to be able to go on vacation, and he laughs off her deceit. Although Alex always says he knows about Donna’s manipulation of situations, it is unclear to the audience if he actually knows or is saving face. In addition, Alex seems to be proud of Donna’s manipulations behind the scenes and never scolds her for them, as opposed to other shows, like the Ricky and Lucy dynamic in *I Love Lucy*. While audiences, both then and today, might not agree with the way in which some of Alex

⁹¹ Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 41.

⁹² Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 42

⁹³ Robert Ellis Miller, dir., “Tony Martin Visits,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, March 2, 1961.

⁹⁴ Andrew McCullough, dir., “Weekend Trip,” in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, September 24, 1958.

and Donna's marital difficulties were resolved, Donna shows that she is always negotiating her role and not just passively accepting societal norms.

In "The First Time We Met," which aired in May of 1960, both Donna and Alex have different memories of how they met.⁹⁵ Donna's remembrances reveal that she helped manipulate the circumstances in which she and Alex met, in order to make the meeting seem accidental. Morreale, states that the female manipulation on the show "may not be an entirely flattering representation of feminine wiles, they also portray a strong female who can outsmart the unwitting men (and women) around her."⁹⁶ While Donna does admit to scheming in order to meet Alex, she does make it clear that women are just fine without men, at one point telling Alex, "What is it about a man's ego that makes him think that all women live to trap him in marriage?"⁹⁷ Throughout the entire show, women are portrayed as smart, witty and cunning.

Throughout the series Donna continues to scheme to manipulate situations, especially with her friends' relationships, often getting her way. In "All is Forgiven" in season four, which aired in 1961, Donna schemes to ease the tensions between their married neighbors who are fighting.⁹⁸ Donna and Alex are worried that their friends might get a divorce, a word they will not say in front of their own children, and Donna tries to resolve the conflict by enticing her friends into adopting a baby. Convinced that children bind couples together; Donna gets Alex to help her with her plan. They invite the couple over to meet the baby that is up for adoption. In the end, the plan of adoption fails; nonetheless, the couple realizes that they are meant to be together when they see each other interact with the baby. This episode has two messages: that children are important to a marriage and that couples can work out their differences. While this episode shows Donna scheming to keep

⁹⁵ Robert Ellis Miller, dir., "The First Time We Met," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, May 19, 1960.

⁹⁶ Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, 85.

⁹⁷ Robert Ellis Miller, dir., "The First Time We Met" in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, May 19, 1960.

⁹⁸ Andrew McCullough, dir., "All is Forgiven", in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, November 2, 1961.

a couple together, it is because she knows how rewarding her own marriage is. Throughout the series, Donna is often seen giving advice to the younger wives of Alex's colleagues about the importance of spending time apart and putting their foot down in an argument. In the episode, "The First Quarrel," Donna tells a young wife who is arguing with her husband, "You can't keep score in a marriage. The defeats and victories even themselves out over the years."⁹⁹

While *The Donna Reed Show* portrays a happy marriage in which both husband and wife can be equal partners, unlike other family shows, it also discusses marital strife. In 1960, about nine in one thousand marriages ended in divorce.¹⁰⁰ *The Donna Reed Show* refers to divorce in another episode, "Parting of the Ways," which aired in season one. The parents of Mary's friends are discussing getting a divorce and are overheard by their daughter. Donna and Alex are shocked, with Donna telling Alex that "one of the main reasons of discord in family life is a lack of doing things together," and that "families drift apart because they lose contact with each other without even realizing it."¹⁰¹ While the couple does not get divorced - it was a misunderstanding by their daughter - the episode touches on a theme that was relevant in American life. Although the episode refers to divorce as "a parting of the ways," Donna's comments about a family being kept together by spending time with one another, speaks to the taboo surrounding marital discord in American society.

The Donna Reed Show aired at a time when motherhood was viewed with some scorn, and with American women questioning their roles as women, mothers and wives. As Plant explains, "The 'the problem with no name' was really twofold, for women not only felt oppressed by a feminine mystique that hindered their ability to define themselves as individuals, they also felt

⁹⁹ Robert Ellis Miller, dir., "The First Quarrel," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, February 11, 1960.

¹⁰⁰ "The Evolution of Divorce," *National Affairs*, Accessed March 09, 2018, <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-evolution-of-divorce>.

¹⁰¹ Oscar Rudolph, dir., "Parting of the Ways," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, April 8, 1959.

devalued within their traditional, gender specific roles.”¹⁰² Friedan argues that as a result of the feminine mystique, that housewives too often were living through their children and husbands.

Quoting an article from the March 1962 issue of *Redbook* magazine, Friedan states,

Many husbands feel that their wives, firmly quoting authorities on home management, child rearing and married love, have set up a tightly scheduled, narrowly conceived scheme of family living that leaves little room for a husband’s authority or point of view. (A husband said “Since I’ve been married, I feel I’ve lost all my guts. I don’t feel like a man anymore. I’m still young, yet I don’t get much out of life. I don’t want advice, but I sometimes feel like something is bursting loose inside.”) The husbands named their wives as their chief source of frustration, superseding children, employers, finances, relatives, community and friends... The young father is no longer free to make his own mistakes or to swing his own weight in a family crisis.¹⁰³

While Friedan was not as vicious as Philip Wylie, their arguments were similar in that a housewife at loose ends resulted in misery for everyone. Her solution is for women to get out of the home, in order to liberate themselves through education or career.

Donna echoes the idea that women should not be too dependent on their husbands or children, but she portrays what maternal feminists would later embrace, the idea that women do not have to abandon the housewife role in order to set boundaries and have healthy relationships. At a time when many women did not want to leave the home, Donna’s example is a valuable one. She showed ways – as the moral authority and as an equal partner - women could avoid feeling “trapped” by the feminine mystique, while still spending time with their families.

¹⁰² Plant, *Mom*, 16.

¹⁰³ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 324.

Conclusion

As a producer for her eponymous show, Donna Reed created a complex and independent character in Donna Stone that stood out at a time when many television women were relegated to the background. She consistently sought to embolden women within their homes, in society and within their relationships; pushed back against the term housewife and encouraged women to pursue careers; and developed a complex mother character in which she has the authority with her children, as well as the moral voice in her home. As a wife, Donna consistently negotiated to be an equal partner within her marriage. Scholar Jo Plant argues that, “critics have often condemned second wave feminism for being ‘antimotherhood’ or ‘antifamily,’ an accusation that denies the complexity of the movement’s multiple competing strains.”¹ Feminist scholar Christina Hoff Sommers argues that women who “do not want to be ‘liberated’ from their roles of wife and mother” can still be associated with the movement as maternal feminists.² Appreciating this strain of feminism can broaden the parameters of the movement, Sommers says, making it more relevant and attractive once again to the majority of American women who cherish their rights but do not wish to be liberated from their femininity.³ This thesis positions Donna Reed and her character Donna Stone as a forerunner to modern maternal feminism.

The Donna Reed Show aired for eight seasons over 275 episodes. Throughout the series, viewers saw the Stone household change and modernize along with the rest of American society, which would shift from the paranoid 1950s to the turbulent 1960s. The Stones’ kitchen receives an update, with double wall ovens and a new refrigerator. Surprisingly, the house has no visible

¹ Plant, *Mom*, 149.

² Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 35.

³ Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 101.

microwave, even though the appliance gained in popularity during the era. The furniture and décor within the house also changes throughout the series. Keeping up with the trends of the time, the furniture becomes more modern and streamlined, and with a Japanese influence. Donna also trades her waist-defined dresses and heels of the 1950s, for the looser dresses and pants of the 1960s. Instead of peignoir sets and heeled slippers, by the end of the series, Donna is wearing Japanese influenced pajama sets. Her hair also gets shorter, sleeker, and blonder. These changes parallel Donna's evolution, especially her interest in becoming a writer.

Although the show was extremely popular, most of the principle actors were exhausted from the rigorous filming schedule. Carl Betz originally planned to leave the show after season four, and even Reed was reluctant to re-sign her contract from year to year due to the intense schedule.⁴ By the eighth season, the show had slipped in the ratings and competed with CBS' *Gilligan's Island* which also aired on Thursdays at 8pm.⁵ Additionally, due to the high costs of converting to color broadcasting, several black-and-white sit-coms stopped production.⁶ The last episode, called "By Line – Jeffrey Stone," aired in the spring of 1966. Besides the popular singer Lesley Gore making an appearance on the show, not much distinguishes this episode from any other.⁷ Owen and Reed brought back Andrew McCullough, who had directed episodes in the earlier seasons, to direct the last few episodes. By the time the show wrapped, Donna Reed had received a Golden Globe (1963) and four Emmy nominations (1959 – 1962 consecutively) for her role as Donna Stone.⁸ Due to the show's popularity, Columbia and ABC made a deal in July of

⁴ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 153 and Royce, *Donna Reed*, 121.

⁵ Tucker, *The Women Who Made Television Funny*, 120.

⁶ *Ozzie and Harriet* was one black-and-white sit-com that left the air at the same time as *The Donna Reed Show*. Tucker, *The Women Who Made Television Funny*, 120.

⁷ Andrew McCullough, dir., "By Line – Jeffrey Stone," in *The Donna Reed Show*, ABC, March 19, 1966.

⁸ "Awards," *IMDb*, Accessed March 24, 2018, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0051267/awards>.

1977 to film a drama involving the entire *The Donna Reed Show* cast, going so far as picking a theme and hiring a writer, but Carl Betz was diagnosed with lung cancer shortly after.⁹ When Betz died in 1978, the cast decided not to film the show without him.

When *The Donna Reed Show* ended in 1966, many of the 1950s family-oriented sit-coms had gone off the air. *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* also ended in 1966, whereas *Leave it to Beaver* stopped production in 1963 and *Father Knows Best* ended in 1960. *The Dick Van Dyke Show* also ended the same year as *The Donna Reed Show*. While these early family-oriented shows had gone off the air, family sit-coms were still a big hit. Shows like *Bewitched*, *The Munsters* and *Beverly Hillbillies* were extremely popular family sit-coms, only with a twist. *Bewitched* and *The Munsters* included unusual characters, like a witch and monsters, but who were trying to live like typical suburban families. Another favorite, *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968), revolved around a widower who worked as a sheriff in a small town in North Carolina and was raising his son.¹⁰ A sole male caregiver was a first for television. Family-oriented sitcoms were still in demand, but in reflection of the ongoing Cold War and the escalating conflict in Vietnam, other genres that focused on spies, superheroes and war were popular, such as *Get Smart* (1965 –1970), *Batman* (1966 -1968), and *Hogan's Heroes* (1965-1971). The western *Bonanza* (1959-1973), a favorite genre from the 1950s, was still at the top of the Nielsen ratings when *The Donna Reed Show* was cancelled.¹¹

Reed was one of the only female television producers when her show began, and by the time her show went off the air, the only woman producing her own show was once again Lucille

⁹ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 175.

¹⁰ "The Andy Griffith Show (TV Series 1960–1968)," *IMDb*, Accessed March 19, 2018, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0053479/>.

¹¹ "Bonanza (TV Series 1959–1973)," *IMDb*, Accessed March 18, 2018, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052451/>; and ClassicTVHits.com: TV Ratings > 1960's, Accessed March 18, 2018, <http://www.classictvhits.com/tvratings/1965.htm>.

Ball. *The Lucy Show* (1962-1968) was a continuation of *I Love Lucy*, this time showing Lucy as a widow trying to navigate raising her children on her own.¹² By the 1960s, several women hosted their own shows, including Julia Child. Her cookbook *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, originally published in 1961, introduced French cooking to American housewives.¹³ Her cookbook was so popular, that Child created and hosted her own television show, *The French Chef*, which aired in 1963 and saw Child teach women how to cook her French recipes on air.¹⁴ The show, produced by Russell Morash, won countless awards, including an Emmy in 1966.¹⁵

Sit-coms with female leads shifted to feature more independent, professional women. *The Donna Reed Show*, with its emphasis on a strong female character, helped pave the way for shows like *That Girl* (1966 – 1971), co-produced by Marlo Thomas, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970 – 1977). Both shows revolved around single women navigating their careers and dating life. While these shows have been praised for their focus on independent women that worked and called the shots, many have overlooked the fact that both women had careers that television mother Donna Stone advocated for on her own show.

At the beginning of *The Donna Reed Show*, men and women had distinct separate spheres, an illusion that the men on *The Donna Reed Show* helped promote.¹⁶ In the beginning of the series, Donna subtly pushed back against these stereotypes. However, as the feminist movement gained momentum in the 1960s, a movement which would become much more radical by the end of the decade, the show began to more openly show Donna's progressiveness. In the beginning of the

¹² "The Lucy Show (TV Series 1962–1968)," *IMDb*, Accessed March 18, 2018, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0055686/>.

¹³ The Legacy of Julia Child | StarChefs.com, Accessed March 25, 2018, <http://www.starchefs.com/cook/features/julia-child-legacy>.

¹⁴ "The French Chef (TV Series 1962–1973)," *IMDb*, Accessed March 18, 2018, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0163936/>.

¹⁵ "Awards & Honors," Julia Child Foundation, Accessed March 25, 2018, <https://juliachildfoundation.org/awards/>.

¹⁶ Kaledin, *American Women in the 1950s: Mothers and More*, 75.

series, Donna kisses her children and husband as they left in the morning and shut the door behind her. By the end of the series, Donna still kisses her husband and children goodbye; but she runs out the door behind them, inevitably going off to do something on her own. This shift in the opening credits demonstrated how much agency Donna had always had within her home, as well as the fact that she was independent from her family and had a life of her own, something that Betty Friedan supported in *The Feminine Mystique*.

Morreale states, “*The Donna Reed Show* is an important television milestone that exemplifies the cultural tensions that marked the shift from the conservative postwar Eisenhower era to the more liberal social context of the 1960s and 1970s.”¹⁷ Painting the decade as a “time of political conformity, cultural conservatism, social repressiveness and female passivity,” Friedan argued that a woman’s place did not have to always be in the home.¹⁸ Several feminists have credited Friedan with awakening “women to their oppression.”¹⁹ Although she is attributed with voicing what women had been feeling for over a decade, Friedan’s work was highly controversial. Plant argues that, “to Friedan, mothers who identified with her work saw themselves as outside of identifying with other women.”²⁰ Plant goes on to argue that in the beginning of the second women’s movement, even though Friedan wanted both groups to be united, there was a “crucial question: was it inevitable that feminists who hoped to transcend the roles of wife and mother should find themselves at odds with women who continued to construct their identities primarily in these terms?”²¹

¹⁷ Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show*, 117.

¹⁸ Coontz, *Strange Stirring*, 59.

¹⁹ Coontz, *Strange Stirring*, xv.

²⁰ Plant, *Mom*, 161.

²¹ Plant, *Mom*, 176.

Inspired by the Civil Rights movement, protests against Vietnam and general discontent, the feminist movement continued to evolve, radicalize, and gain momentum. When the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964, women fought to be included in the new laws that dealt with discrimination in the workforce, such as Title VII, and its enforcing agency the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.²² Evans notes that as more women entered the work force, “NOW articulated the clear dilemmas of professional women for whom continuing discrimination violated deeply held convictions about their rights to equal treatment and for whom traditional attitudes about family roles were obsolete.”²³ This dilemma led NOW to state that, “it is no longer either necessary or possible for women to devote the greater part of their lives to childrearing.”²⁴

Statements such as these often isolated maternal feminists, and in the meantime women also started to splinter over how to handle the proposed Equal Rights Amendment. According to Evans, the ERA debate caused:

the defensiveness of not only traditional women, especially housewives whose role was rapidly losing status, but also many working-class women who would have chosen that role if given a chance, revealed a deep sense of vulnerability rooted in precisely the same cultural and economic changes that motivated feminist activism. Where one side sought political equality with which to defend their own interests better, the other feared an almost total loss of self and female identity.²⁵

As the various feminist groups diverged, maternal feminism became more marginalized and overshadowed. Congress passed the ERA in 1972; however, only thirty of the needed thirty-eight states ratified it, and the amendment never became law.²⁶ According to Sommers, “few ERA refugees bothered to reengage with maternal feminists or to address the actual, practical issues of

²² Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 276.

²³ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 277.

²⁴ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 277.

²⁵ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 304 and 305.

²⁶ "The Equal Rights Amendment," *Ushistory.org*, Accessed March 19, 2018, <http://www.ushistory.org/us/57c.asp>.

post-liberation womanhood.”²⁷ In addition to the ERA, abortion rights, an issue that became a hot button topic with the 1973 Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, could also divide egalitarian and maternal feminists.²⁸ In the meantime, activists on the right who had never identified with the women’s rights movement, like anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly, labeled feminists as “marginal and dangerous,” stating that they “rejected womanhood - the God-given roles of wife – and motherhood.”²⁹ Leaders on the left returned the vitriol, with Ti-Grace Atkinson likening “marriage to slavery and predicting that once women were really liberated, ‘people would be tied together by love, not legal contraptions,’” and stating that, “children would be raised communally.”³⁰

While Atkinson’s comments did not represent the majority of feminists’ viewpoints, her comments further isolated women who embraced marriage and motherhood. Due to the divergence between egalitarian and maternal feminism, as well as the rise of outright anti-feminism, early contributors to maternal feminism, like Reed, have been unfairly overlooked. According to scholar David Tucker, “by the 1970s, with the Women’s Liberation Movement in full swing, ‘Donna Reed’ became shorthand for the cliché of the impossibly perfect TV mother, an icon to which no human could possibly compare. Unlike her contemporary Barbara Billingsley, who played another idealized TV mother, June Cleaver of *Leave it to Beaver*, Reed’s own name was usually invoked, rather than that of her character, Donna Stone.”³¹ It is ironic that Reed is often remembered as being the perfect mother, since a good portion of her show portrays her trying to navigate her roles and not being perfect: Donna gets mad, overreacts, struggles with the right way to steer her children

²⁷ Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 63.

²⁸ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 305.

²⁹ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 304.

³⁰ Collins, *The Amazing Journey of American Women*, 191.

³¹ Tucker, *The Women Who Made Television Funny*, 118.

and argues with her husband. Critics remember Reed because of her strong personality and role within her show, unlike other mother roles in other family-oriented sit-coms.

After *The Donna Reed Show* wrapped, Reed took time off from acting. Now that she was no longer producing her own show, the old problem of appropriate roles once again reared its head, “I just wouldn’t do the junk I was offered. I didn’t like the way films were treating women. Most of the roles were extremely passive – women in jeopardy, poor stupid souls who couldn’t help themselves,” she explained.³² Reed became a vocal critic of Hollywood in the 1970s for its portrayal of women and for the dominance of men in the industry, saying that there was an “overabundance of ‘neurotic, sick amoral’ female characters in films and television, and the scarcity of secure, strong-willed career women.”³³ She would become politically active with the group Another Mother for Peace, as well as stump for candidates who were against the United States’ role in Vietnam.³⁴ Given her reputation as a “good-girl” in Hollywood, Reed’s political activism surprised many. However, based on her character Donna Stone’s strong personality and encouragement of women to get involved, Reed’s activism is fitting.

Reed’s personal life changed after *The Donna Reed Show* as well. She divorced Owen in 1971, and married Colonel Grover Asmus in 1974.³⁵ Reed apparently had misgivings about marrying again, writing to her friend, “I didn’t realize, until I got out, how *deeply* submissive I was expected to be in my long marriage – and really, my opinions were ‘worthless’ – so were my desires, ideas. We all really had a big snow job done on us about cooking and housekeeping – began learning at seven years of age, as though one needed to be a genius to manage, when any

³² Tucker, *Women Who Made Television Funny*, 121.

³³ Brenda Scott Royce, *Donna Reed: A Bio-Bibliography*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 11.

³⁴ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 158 and 160.

³⁵ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 171.

idiot who is willing *can*.”³⁶ Despite the themes of her show, and despite the fact that she was one of the first few women who co-produced her own television show, Reed apparently still felt like she was subservient to men. Since Reed did remarry, her comments likely reflected her resentment toward her second husband, rather than commentary on subservience in marriage as a whole. According to those who knew them, Reed and Owen had a tempestuous relationship, with one reporter remarking about the two, “They can be turtle-dovey one moment and fiercely argumentative the next.”³⁷ Director Andrew McCullough said in an interview, “If I needed him [Owen] for anything, he was out playing golf, betting at the races, or getting laid.”³⁸ Because Reed held so much authority on their show, her feelings about marriage may be more about their personal relationship, or expectations placed on her within their home, rather than their relationship on set. Whatever the case, Reed’s remarks about marriage are reflective of Betty Friedan’s argument in *The Feminine Mystique*.

After more than a decade off screen, Reed starred in the television movie, *The Best Place to Be* in 1979.³⁹ Although it received poor reviews, she appeared in another television movie again in 1983 and accepted a role on *Dallas* in 1984.⁴⁰ Her stint on *Dallas* was short lived, as Reed was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 1985 and died several months later in January of 1986.⁴¹ Reed’s death at the age of sixty four led to an outpouring of grief for the star. Shelley Fabares, who would find success on the television sit-com *Coach* in the early 1990s, said of Reed in an interview in 1993, “Donna Reed was simply an extraordinary woman, a woman of great strength,

³⁶ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 171.

³⁷ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 140.

³⁸ Fultz, *In Search of Donna Reed*, 134.

³⁹ Royce, *Donna Reed: A Bio-Bibliography*, 11.

⁴⁰ Royce, *Donna Reed: A Bio-Bibliography*, 11.

⁴¹ Royce, *Donna Reed: A Bio-Bibliography*, 12.

kindness, integrity and compassion. I am not trying to make her sound like a saint, but she had the most profound influence on me. I carry her with me today.”⁴²

Although much has been written about family-oriented television sitcoms in the 1950s, there is still much research left to be done. Women’s roles and contributions on television have often been overlooked by scholars. If I had more time to expand my paper, I would like to do more in depth comparisons between *The Donna Reed Show* and other family-oriented sitcoms of the era, as well as compare how women were portrayed in other television genres, such as dramas or westerns. Because television material is owned by studios, I was not able to look at production materials, or personal correspondence from Reed, both of which would have been helpful to understanding her influence as a producer. Additionally, only seasons one through five have been syndicated. While many of the episodes from season six through eight can be found online, and there are episode write-ups from every episode, being able to watch all of the episodes produced would have been tremendously helpful. More research can be done by looking at other actresses and television stars who also contributed to the maternal feminist movement during Reed’s era.

Similar to the 1950s, family-oriented sitcoms are still popular on television today, including shows like *Modern Family*, *Blackish*, *Roseanne*, and *American Housewife*. These shows portray a more accurate makeup of the average American family of today, including families with two working parents, homosexual family members, and those on their second marriages. Although television women deal with the same issues of balancing family life and work and sharing household responsibilities that Donna Stone did (and often disproportionately so), they frequently show men contributing more to the household. *Man with a Plan* starring Matt LeBlanc features a

⁴² Susan King, "WITH AN EYE ON . . . : From Mary Stone to Christine on 'Coach,' Fabares Knows the Ropes," *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1993, Accessed March 24, 2018, http://articles.latimes.com/print/1993-05-16/news/tv-35827_1_mary-stone.

male as the primary caregiver when his wife goes back to work. Even though women have made great strides in Hollywood since *The Donna Reed Show* aired, there is still much to be done. As of 2015, only twenty-seven percent of producers, writers, directors, editors and creators on television are women.⁴³ While only four percent of network shows employ fewer than four men, forty-five percent of shows employ four or fewer women.⁴⁴ Several women have seen widespread success as creators and producers, like Tina Fey, who created and produced shows *30 Rock*, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and *Great News*.⁴⁵ Producer Shonda Rhimes is known for her highly successful shows, like *Scandal*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, and *Private Practice*.⁴⁶ In 2017, women in Hollywood started the Time's Up movement to address sexual assault and harassment in the workplace.⁴⁷ The movement has gained widespread momentum, stemming from the #metoo movement, which gives a voice to survivors of sexual violence.⁴⁸ Both movements have brought awareness to the widespread inequity in career opportunities and pay for women, as well as to the prevalence of sexual abuse and harassment, particularly in Hollywood.

Unfortunately, like in Reed's era, few women today have leadership roles in Hollywood. Perhaps if more women were directors, writers, and producers, it would balance the power of men in the workplace and lessen sexual harassment. While women have become more vocal about women's rights, the feminist movement is still fractured. Maternal feminists are still largely overlooked for their contributions and role within the feminist movement. As more women in

⁴³ Eliana Dockterman, "Emmys Need More Female Creators Like Tina Fey, Study Says," *Time*, September 15, 2015, Accessed March 19, 2018, <http://time.com/4034566/emmys-tina-fey-tv-shows/>.

⁴⁴ Eliana Dockterman, "Emmys Need More Female Creators Like Tina Fey, Study Says," *Time*, September 15, 2015, Accessed March 19, 2018, <http://time.com/4034566/emmys-tina-fey-tv-shows/>.

⁴⁵ "Tina Fey," *IMDb*, Accessed March 19, 2018, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0275486/#producer>.

⁴⁶ "Shonda Rhimes," *Biography.com*, January 23, 2018, Accessed March 18, 2018, <https://www.biography.com/people/shonda-rhimes-21292767>.

⁴⁷ Jennifer Calfas, "Time's Up: What to Know About Movement to End Harassment," *Time*, January 02, 2018, Accessed March 23, 2018, <http://time.com/5083809/times-up-hollywood-sexual-harassment/>.

⁴⁸ Alix Langone, "What Is the Time's Up Movement and the #MeToo Movement?" *Time*, March 08, 2018, Accessed March 23, 2018, <http://time.com/5189945/whats-the-difference-between-the-metoo-and-times-up-movements/>.

Hollywood empower one another through the Times Up and #metoo movements, hopefully more credit will be given to the women who helped pave the way before them, including Reed. Tucker states of Reed, “few other women have lasted for eight years on network television in a show that bears their name. Even fewer owned the production company that gave them that exposure.”⁴⁹ *The Donna Reed Show* not only gave the actress exposure, but allowed Reed to control her image in a way in which she felt proud. The popularity of the show indicated that Reed struck a chord with audiences who could relate to modern maternal feminism.

⁴⁹ Tucker, *The Women Who Made Television Funny*, 124.

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