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The Stepford Wives As A Product of Second-Wave Feminism

Directed by Bryan Forbes, *The Stepford Wives* is a 1975 science fiction film that follows the life of a young woman Joanna, as she moves from the city to the affluent suburban town of Stepford, Connecticut. In Stepford, Joanna encounters a strange phenomenon—the wives of all the men in the community are models of the traditional, hyper-submissive wife of a patriarchal society. Unable to understand her surroundings, Joanna begins to investigate this trend, and ultimately discovers that the women are replaced with identical cyborgs that are designed to play the role of a wife. The premise of the film therefore serves to exaggerate and highlight the traditional role of a woman as housewife, mother, servile to the husband, and indistinguishable in identity from her purpose to the man. Throughout the film, these tropes are viewed as consequences of the antagonist, which in this case is the Gentleman's Club of the town. However, it is evident in *The Stepford Wives* that the real villain is a patriarchal, misogynistic society—specifically the one that a generation of second wave feminism fought to defeat.

A chilling work of science fiction, *The Stepford Wives* was produced at a time of great importance to the feminist movement-- the 2nd wave of feminism, when one of the central goals of the movement was to break the traditional roles of women in the family and household. As a product of its time therefore, the film provides us with an

interesting predicament regarding how accurate and powerful its reflections of feminism are. One school of thought believes that the 1970s centric model of feminism that the film subscribes to differs from the activist feminism that dominated much of the second-wave era. Jane Elliot describes this difference, writing that “The Stepford metaphor thus exemplifies the two most salient and troublesome aspects of 1970s popular U.S. feminism: its difference from activist feminism and its remarkable ability to define feminist politics in the national imagination for decades despite (and because of) that difference” (Elliot 33). She ultimately argues that while second-wave feminism focused on issues such as rape, pornography and violence against women, the film presents us with a far milder form of feminism—one that serves primarily to provide excitement to the “dreary life of the white suburban housewife” (Elliot 33). Therefore, instead of providing a more accurate controversial radical picture of second-wave feminism, it can be argued that the version presented by the film is designed to be palatable to society, which led it to be a popular response to feminism while also playing to the very forces its parent wave sought to oppose. Additionally, many believed the film to be completely in opposition to the aims of the feminist movement. A New York Times article covering a 1975 screening of the film to an audience of feminist women describes the negative reception the film had with its conscious viewers: “‘I think it’s completely ridiculous,’ said Linda Arkin, a writer, who was the first to speak up in the ‘awareness session.’ ‘I couldn’t believe the film. It dumps on everyone—women, men, suburbia. It confirms every fear we’ve ever had about the battle of the sexes, and it says there is no way for people to get together and lead human lives’” (Klemesrud). Thus, while *The Stepford Wives* did

reflect heavily on the nature of women and their roles in the dominant male society of 1970s USA, it was not unanimously received as a film with outright feminist values.

An interesting aspect of *The Stepford Wives*' reflections on society is the discourse it provides on issues of domesticity and housewifery. By juxtaposing robots and housewives, the film portrays how much of the traditional domestic role of women in the household is composed of drudgery, robotic tasks performed at the behest of a hegemonic patriarchal system. Elliot argues that the film serves to highlight how time and domestic labor are intrinsically linked, writing that "While the consciousness-raising session does finally take place in the film, it only serves to underscore this fixation on the link between time and housework that structures the lives of the women of Stepford" (Elliot 44). This fixation is most evident in the line "if time is your enemy, get Easy-On!", that one Stepford wife says to another, referencing a household product she uses. Citing the scene this conversation takes place in, Elliot argues that the ideological control of the patriarchal society over women utilizes domesticity in relation to time, preventing women from engaging in any liberating discourse (Elliot 44). This use of domestic time as a tool of control is what Elliot calls "Sisyphian time" (Elliot 44). In fact, this idea was a product of many feminist theories of the 1970s which stated that in society, women's lives only progressed until they married and were forced to give up most things meaningful to them in order to serve a role as a servant of the patriarchal household. Once entrenched in the system, women were treated much as the Stepford wives are—as machines or robots. Therefore, *The Stepford Wives* presents as dark satire the harmful effects of the 'ideal' domestic function women were forced to play in 1970s suburban American society.

While Elliot's argument stresses the importance of time and labor to issues of domesticity, another striking aspect of *The Stepford Wives* is that its representation of the housewife as a cyborg leads us to reflect on the motivations of these robotic characters in the film. The robot's ultimate goal is to serve and please its master—as the film depicts the male head of the family. In an argument that highlights the lack of self-respect among the wife character that the film depicts, Catriona McKinnon writes that the traditional housewives' "desire to please their husbands is generated—at least initially—by a fear of the censure or criticisms which they will receive if they fail to keep house well. When the primary motivation for an action is fear of this sort, the fear that one will be in some way punished if one fails to meet standards set for one by others then, I submit, that action cannot serve as a basis for self-respect" (McKinnon 328). This motivation due to fear is a product of the familial structures' patriarchal hierarchy which places the male as superior to the female. While viewing the film, the absurdity of this power dynamic is made evident by Joanna's strong independent character in relation to the antagonistic Men's Club. Especially towards the end of the film, it is made certain that this male-dominant systematic oppression is completely in opposition to the benefits of an equal society. This critique of domestic subservience is also central to the message *The Stepford Wives* presents to its viewers.

The film goes a step further in discussing women's domestic roles by portraying the wife robots not only as household domestic machines, but also as objects intended to please their husbands. Human wives are viewed as expendable, and their sexual identities and bodies are reduced to nonhuman robotic representations. The replacement cyborg wives are unable to give birth and reproduce, but societally are

expected to play the role of the mother. Stripped of the reproductive abilities of the human females, these replicants are akin to machines. Describing these implications of the cyborg wife, Anna Krugovoy Silver writes that “in duties. Robots, separated from all human physiological processes, do not menstruate and cannot have children. When Joanna confronts Bobbie after her children have disappeared, she finally, in frustration, takes a kitchen knife and plunges it into Bobbie's belly. The symbolism here is overt: Joanna proves Bobbie's nonhumanness and nonfemaleness by striking her in the part of the body in which Bobbie would carry a child” (Silver 70). This is the manner in which the film portrays how a male dominant society prevents women from having control over their own bodies. *The Stepford Wives* undoubtedly provides an understanding of the Second-Wave of Feminism's goal to secure sexual freedom for women and ensure their autonomy over their own bodies.

Additionally, the film also explores the way in which women are expected to adhere to male-determined standards of beauty. In *The Stepford Wives*, the cyborg wives are shown to be extremely well dressed, meek, slender, large-breasted, covered in make-up with extravagant hairdos. “In addition to the submissiveness at the heart of the robot's attractiveness to the Stepford men, the robots enact, in grotesque exaggeration, the cultural desire to keep the body in perfect discipline. Machines, after all, are much more easily shaped and maintained than human bodies (..) Joanna's robot double has much larger breasts than Joanna does, and they stand straight up as if surgically altered - the robot will, apparently, never grow old, never suffer from ‘sagging flesh’” (Silver 72). This portrayal serves to highlight the ridiculous body and beauty standards that are expected of women, which are often unnaturally demanding.

In terms of sexual freedom, the cyborg wives are designed in order to please their husbands, and lose all sexual identity and personality. Silver writes that “Although the female robots claim to have good sex lives, the film makes it clear that their sexuality is thoroughly circumscribed by their programmed desire to serve their husbands. Female desire has been washed out of them. As Charmaine says, while her beloved tennis court is ripped up to make way for a heated swimming pool, ‘I want to please him now. . . . All I ever thought about before was just me’” (Silver 72). It is thoroughly evident that the cyborg women in the film are so lacking in sexual identity that they serve to critique the male perspective of reducing women to sexual objects. This ties into the feminist theory argument that women are stripped of not only their autonomy over their reproductive abilities and their bodies, but also their sexuality.

By portraying the absurdities of society with respect to women’s sexuality, gender roles, familial expectations, forcible suppression of career and identity in a misogynistic and dangerously male-dominant culture, *The Stepford Wives* provides a reflection on many of the goals of the Second-Wave of the Feminist Movement, albeit a far more watered-down version. However, the palatable version extolled by the film provides an important perspective on how feminism was perceived in popular culture. The juxtaposition of women and cyborgs was unarguably a relatable opinion on these issues of gender. Regardless of its shortcomings, *The Stepford Wives* is thus valuable as a product of Second-Wave Feminism.

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