

Portrait of the All-American Girl in Time: The Contradictions Between 1950s Gender Ideology and Style in Seventeen Magazine

TADEUSZ LEWANDOWSKI
(Opole)

Seventeen magazine was the first and most successful periodical crafted for teenage girls during America's immediate postwar era. When it began publication in 1944, the editors sought to exploit the buying power of such teenage consumers in what could be considered the most responsible of ways. They rejected the popular teenage stereotype of swing-crazed juvenile delinquents and created a magazine that addressed adolescent girls as conscientious adults-in-training, who would someday be the women of America. The premiere issue noted: "You're going to run this show, so the sooner you start thinking about it, the better" (*Seventeen* October 1944). In *Seventeen* young readers were thus encouraged to learn about America's political system, combat bigotry, and in articles such as "Jobs Have No Gender" even question the traditional division of household labor – proposing that mothers and fathers should share in the preparing and serving of food and the washing of dishes (*Seventeen* April 1945). During the mid-forties, *Seventeen* also counseled young girls on the importance of getting a high school diploma and making plans for the future, warning that a marriage license is no longer a stay-at-home guarantee: "Your only real security is what you go out and get for yourself" (*Seventeen* December 1944). This attitude was reflective of the cultural shift that occurred briefly during the Second World War. The prevailing state of emergency opened the way for the emancipation of women on an unprecedented scale. In response to the rapidly expanding wartime economy public policy shifted completely, from barring women from the workplace to recruiting them. Women were encouraged to

take "men's jobs" à la Rosie the Riveter as a patriotic duty as men went off to war. Yet within society and the pages of *Seventeen* magazine, this was a phenomenon that was not to last. By the 1950s *Seventeen* would be transformed from an organ that endorsed the release of women from traditional gender roles to one that fully promoted the role of housewife as the single legitimate goal for young women. Along with this there came a consciously constructed ideal of adolescent femininity that *Seventeen's* readers were expected to conform to, which existed within the confines of a larger gender ideology that placed boys in a dominant position. This paper explores this adolescent feminine ideal and its roots, and also examines the contradictions between its emphasis on chastity and innocence, and the sexually charged clothing and make up styles that *Seventeen* urged young women to adopt.

During the 1940s, American psychologists and advice givers were very concerned about the dislocation many veterans would be facing on their return home. This meant the war crisis ultimately encouraged women to keep their sights on the home so that men could reclaim breadwinner status upon their return. The end of the war would signal the commencement of a fierce commitment to domesticity within the media and popular culture, and women were now expected to give up their jobs to returning soldiers. Women were also encouraged to build up the male ego, an endeavor launched to help reintegrate veterans into society in the wake of the psychological trauma caused by war service. This imperative was also embraced as a way to help minister to the supposed psychological needs of men, who were now faced with a rapidly changing and increasingly bureaucratic and impersonal America. By this time fear of the independent women who had proliferated in the '40s with society's blessing had been widely articulated in popular discourse. One government study explained: "The greater social freedom of women has more or less inevitably led to a greater degree of sexual laxity, a freedom which strikes at the heart of family stability... When women work, earn, and spend as much as men do, they are going to ask for equal rights with men. But the right to behave like a man [means] also the right to misbehave as he does. The decay of established moralities [comes] out as a by-product" (quoted in May 1988: 69). This assumption, that the emancipation of women would cause moral decay, sexual licentiousness, and the destruction of the American family, joined with the emphasis on the coddling of the male ego by women, would come to form the basis of postwar advice literature, and form a new Cold War domestic ideology. As a result, the brief flirtation with emancipatory themes in *Seventeen* during the 1940s soon disappeared, and the strong message that women should cater to men's needs and desires and

commit themselves to a life of motherhood would resonate loudly in the magazine's pages.

The end of World War II altered American society profoundly. The postwar economic boom put money in the hands of more Americans than ever before, creating the first mass-consumer society. Now more than ever it was possible for men to become the primary breadwinners of their families, meaning that women could remain in the home. The threat of the Cold War gave rise to a vision of America as a country of perfectly planned and secure homes, composed of skilled homemakers and successful male providers. The family was seen a bulwark to protect the nation by containing the frightening possibilities of postwar life, such as rampant individualism brought on by the independence of prosperity. By the 1950s this new domestic ideology had fully emerged, complete with a new vision of the American woman (May 1988: 90-1). This "new domesticity" had direct roots in the Victorian era, meaning that postwar modernism's feminine ideal had much in common with the ideal of "true womanhood" promoted during the 1800s, which rested on women's God-given, innate passivity and inclination to the domestic arts. In the context of the Cold War, these bygone assumptions about the intrinsic nature of femininity were reborn. "Gender experts", such as psychologist Dr. Helene Deutsch, set about warning women of the dangers of the "masculinity complex", while sociologist Talcott Parsons produced studies that insisted the role of housewife was the only natural choice for women in America, emphasizing the importance of "domesticity", "glamour", and "good companionship" (Friedan 1995: 121-30). What had been ordained by God a century earlier was now ordained by God's 1950s equivalent: "expertise". The ideology of separate spheres and traditional Victorian gender roles had made a full comeback. There were, however, two major changes: a subtle downplaying of morality in favor of psychologically-informed standards stressing "normality", and more exciting, a new emphasis on sexual activity within the confines of marriage. While women of the Victorian era were expected to be reluctant sexual partners, the women of 1950's America were encouraged to become sexual enthusiasts, totally committed to the joys of the bedroom. It was believed that sexual togetherness within the home would make for happier couples, which would in turn foster successful and effective childrearing—as the production of well-adjusted children was paramount to America's success in the Cold War.

As in the Victorian era, American women of the 1950s were expected to find fulfillment through complete devotion to domestic pursuits, such as cooking, sewing, serving, and other household chores. Thanks to the efforts of experts such as Par-

sons, women who voiced desires for careers, educations, and equality with men were quickly labeled "neurotic". Young girls were thus encouraged to dream only of marriage and children. The perfect housewife's role lay in revitalizing her husband for his everyday engagement in the stressful corporate world, providing an antiseptic and soothing living environment, and distributing regular and intense sexual favors. It was vital, however, that this newly sanctioned female sexuality be confined to marriage. Strict taboos were erected regarding premarital sex, particularly for young girls. Sexually emancipated females, as mentioned previously, could very well lead to the destruction of the one institution that could hold America in good stead during the Cold War: the family (May 1988: 102-3). It was in this new feminine ideal that *Seventeen* magazine found its niche for the 1950s: training the girls of America to embody what Betty Friedan would later refer to as the "feminine mystique".

The fortunes of teenagers of both sexes were boosted considerably by the postwar boom. These lucky teens would grow up in a much different world than their parents had. Economic prosperity had created a world of expanding opportunities and increased leisure time. Memories of wartime sacrifice gave way to an urge to spend, and thanks to full employment many families could now sate their teenagers' tastes for consumer goods. The teen market grew accordingly. Within the next decade a cornucopia of new products aimed directly at teens would emerge, such as clothes, shoes, cosmetics, skin care products, movies, and records. It was the combination of this new teenage prosperity and the emerging postwar feminine ideal that the editors of the *Seventeen*, and its advertisers, sought to harness and exploit. *Seventeen* was to function as a sort of consumer-oriented domestic training manual for young girls. While its copy stressed the importance of parent/teen harmony and the necessity of being a responsible teenager who did not smoke, drink, or fornicate, advertisers would be able to foster product loyalty among the future housewives in America. This was an equation few on Madison Avenue could resist, particularly when *Seventeen's* promoters boasted that 66 percent of their teenage readers expected to become full-time housewives (Palladino 1996: 101-8). Therefore, during the 1950s *Seventeen's* editors set out to carefully shape teenage tastes and behavior along conventional white middle-class lines, strictly adhering postwar attitudes towards gender roles and relations, as the editors and advertisers promoted an ideal of adolescent femininity that directly derived from the new domesticity. This ideal hinged on a number of key elements. *Seventeen's* editors and advertisers encouraged their readers to express themselves only through domestic pursuits, envision a glorified vision of marriage as the ultimate form of fulfillment and de-

fining goal of adulthood, subordinate and mold their personalities to satisfy the (non-sexual) desires and boost the egos of boys, and scrupulously follow the style of dress and physique presented in the magazine. This attempt to enforce an adult-constructed vision of female adolescence would characterize *Seventeen* with great consistency throughout the decade of the 1950s.

Many advertisers quickly came to realize the value of *Seventeen*, and were more than willing to aid its editors in their quest to mold the future housewives of America. Those advertisers successful in wooing teenager consumers who in a few short years would be doing the nation's shopping as housewives stood to garner a healthy profit. Also, according to *Seventeen's* promoters, a simple article on how to make double-decker sandwiches could net \$17 dollars in purchases, "based on a minimum of quantity a girl would buy when she decides to tackle one of these magazine-suggested recipes" (Palladino 1996: 107). And given the fact that *Seventeen* published several large "Food" sections every month, which were all peppered with recipes, advertisers had good reason to appeal to teenage girls. By 1950 A&P and Grand Union Supermarkets had begun to run ads in *Seventeen*; meanwhile, Sure Jell was promoting homemade jelly as the way to boy's heart, and Pillsbury had launched the first Junior Grand National Recipe and Baking Contest (*Seventeen* September 1950). *Seventeen's* editors also had ideas they wanted to advertise. "A Girl and Her Hands" by Francis Pellegrini (January 1950) provides an excellent example of *Seventeen's* endorsement of domesticity. "A Girl and Her Hands", also titled "How you are reclaiming the rewarding arts of the home," boldly blames the women of the early 1900s for stripping household duties of their dignity and asserts that the fight for women's rights, universal suffrage, and strict labor laws in the early part of the century was merely a ruse to avoid doing housework. Pellegrini gives her assessment of women's liberation efforts and female participation in the public sphere with a D. H. Lawrence quotation: "Most revolutions go too far, farther than their creators ever planned". The main purpose of the article is to encourage girls to take up the "arts and crafts that have rewarded women for so many centuries", while noting how happy one's boyfriend would be as "he dons the argyles you knit for him". Pellegrini states the day of the "handless woman (who made a "veritable profession of cooking indifferently" and took to "sewing only when inescapable") is over, suggesting that girls who do not become capable seamstresses or devoted homemakers are incomplete. She concludes with these words of advice: "Only constant use of the hands, head and heart can create a woman's particular work of art – a home".

Seventeen's editors also worked hard to make their readers obedient to their future husbands. The most prominent manifestation of this imperative was a monthly column written by Peter Leavy, which gave advice to girls on how to most correctly embody the feminine characteristics boys admired. "Dates on the Sunny Side" (January 1952) provides a representative sample of the column's gist. It begins: "The sunny side of your personality is most attractive to boys, especially in January, when it's cold and bleak". The installment goes on to advise girls on how to behave on dates by making sure that the boy they are with will have the best possible time. The text is pregnant with postwar themes of ego-boosting. Leavy writes:

I dance. Not like mad, but I dance. Every time I step out onto the dance floor, though, I start to fret over what a smooth stepper I'm not. Result? I become as self-conscious as all get out and about as relaxed as a statue. Until you come along, and make everything right again. 'Who ever told you' you ask sweetly, 'you were a hopeless case on the dance floor? You dance like a streak!' January or not, I can almost see the trees start to bud... It isn't as if you'd merely pumped up my ego. You also did a serious job of helping us get along with each other."

According to Leavy, when girls behave nicely towards boys on dates "We can carefully fold up all our worries about solid geometry, Russia, and college entrance requirements and leave them at home". But for this to be accomplished, and if a girl wants to be "sure that the fellow who calls eagerly for a date doesn't feel a cold winter chill in his bones when he takes you out... if you feel the urge to gripe, just don't. It's as simple as that". Leavy goes on to explain that the best way for a girl to ensure a boy has a good time on a date is to: "Make up your mind that you're going to have a good time... When you're tempted to say that a picture is fair, why not talk up how much you enjoyed it? Even if your date thought it middling-good himself, he'll be so happy you are having a fine time, he'll get a bigger kick than ever out of the date; you'll be doing the boy on your arm a big favor". These quotes amply demonstrate how *Seventeen* endorsed an adolescent feminine ideal that was profoundly male-directed. Leavy clearly articulates the postwar theme of the importance of male ego boosting, along with encouraging girls subordinate their feelings, interests, and personalities order to please boys. Such advice was also a regular feature of "Dating Do's and Don'ts", which appeared every month. "Do be fascinated by the same subjects he is. Say things like, 'I've seen your football letter. It looks wonderful! Don't keep him waiting. Be ready when he arrives and introduce him to your parents'" (*Seventeen* November 1957). *Seventeen* also stressed the importance of maintaining one's chastity, featuring educational montages with young teenage boys ostensibly declaring "I couldn't marry if I knew she had been promiscuous"

(*Seventeen* November 1957). Indeed, while marriage was heavily promoted for young girls, the possibility of teenage sex was not even acknowledged within *Seventeen's* copy.

Many advertisers were happy to willingly confine themselves to *Seventeen's* notions of the correct path a young girl should follow to domestic bliss. An advertisement for Camay brand face soap, which was featured in every issue of *Seventeen* from early 1950s to the early 1960s, presents a duly wholesome picture. The illustrated ad depicted a young woman in a college dormitory receiving her "first locket" from her "ser-ee-ous" boyfriend, Roger. The next picture depicts the same girl basking in the glow of her "first cake of Camay: The soap for beautiful women" (*Seventeen* January 1951). The final illustration is of the young woman sporting an ecstatic smile and a wedding veil. Apparently her newly cleaned face has garnered her every normal girl's greatest dream: a proposal of marriage. But advertisers also had their own input as to what the average female adolescent should consist of, and began to promote a sexually charged vision of the "perfect" adolescent physique and look. This meant that although *Seventeen's* writers labored under the notion that teenagers never thought about sex, certain advertisers were hard at work trying to sell Flame-glo Lipstick, which promised to keep lips "kissable", and Beaux Catcher perfume, which billed itself as "the saucy scent that won't take no for an answer" (*Seventeen* September 1950). In contrast, the magazine's editors were giving advice on "How to Say No to a Kiss" (*Seventeen* January 1952). In "Let's Get Pretty", obviously a joint effort between *Seventeen* and Max Factor cosmetics, young teens were also encouraged to use make up for the purposes of attracting boys. This monthly beauty advice column, written by Barbara Factor, had a clear agenda to sell as many Max Factor products as possible. It is open to debate as to whether any of the letters in "Let's Get Pretty" were really written by *Seventeen's* consumers. "Readers" asked questions such as the following and received appropriate answers: "Q. I'm going to a Valentine evening dance. Do you have any tips on how I can look especially pretty? A. Tip No.1: For a really romantic touch try Max Factor's Sun Pastel Lipstick in Golden Strawberry – adorable for a Valentine evening". (Three more tips are given, all involving a body part that desperately needs a Max Factor product applied to it.) "Q. I would like to have truly pretty eyebrows. Is there any special trick to help me? A. No trick... Max Factor's automatic eye pencil... makes a beautiful point of beautiful brows without a sharpening fuss. A. My boyfriend's birthday is next month. What are the proper gifts to give a boy you like very much? Q. If you want to give him something very masculine and very special, a wonderful set of after shave lotion, talc and cologne... the Deluxe Signa-

ture Set from Max Factor" (*Seventeen* January 1962). This promotion of a sexy physical ideal, however, had relatively minor significance in comparison to the way advertisers vigorously endorsed an overtly sexual stylized physical ideal of the adolescent female. It seems that while *Seventeen's* readers were to behave like proper girls, they were to look like women in full bloom.

Ultimately, what is striking about the emphasis on premarital chastity found in *Seventeen* is how it contrasted sharply with the over-the-top sexually-charged styles of the time, which were regularly depicted in the magazine. The 1950s found quasi-Victorian long wide skirts back in style, leading to a rebirth for the girdle industry. The ideal female body type demanded a skinny waist and bulging cone-shaped breasts, attributes that *Seventeen's* advertisers were quick to feature and promote. A significant portion of space was given over to ads for padded bras and girdles. It was not merely the fact that these sexually-stylized products were advertised, but how they were advertised, that seemed to implicitly undermined the magazines feminine ideal of innocence and chastity. The host of lingerie ads run in *Seventeen* positively glorified the sexy nature of their products, and presented an array of sexually provocative images to the young girls of America. Advertisements for Stardust bras featured a sexy vixen thrusting out her breasts, and billed itself as "The bra with ooh! la! la!", promising that "There's sure allure in silky satin". These ads, however, were rather tame compared to Maidenform's, which encouraged girls to "stop traffic" in their Maidenform bras. The ad, which appeared regularly during the '50s and '60s, featured a woman wearing only a Maidenform bra on her torso, strolling outdoors on a public street while waving to clearly delighted male motorists. The copy reads:

I stop traffic in my Maidenform bra. Talk about dangerous curves! But oh, how smooth and sleek my Maidenform makes them! You'll pardon it if I toot my own horn, but aren't I the loveliest view that ever jammed traffic! No lift for me thanks, I've got mine in my Maidenform! (*Seventeen* January 1952)

"Lift" was a vital commodity for girls to have during the '50s. Without it, conforming to the clothing styles and physical ideals of the day was simply impossible. Naturally, *Seventeen* magazine was peppered with advertisements for a great variety of padded bras and waist-cinchers, demonstrating a willingness to profit from the insecurities fostered by the prevailing styles. Advertisements for Exquisite Form's "Equalizer Bra" were common, while "Up-And-Out" bra ran quite a revealing ad that had "Small Bust Girls" written in bold above an illustration of the bra in action. The copy read: "Up-And-Out bra gives you a fuller bustline, instan-

tly". The bra contained no pads, but employed a "special Patent-Pend bust molding feature inside of the bra [that] lifts, supports and cups small, flat busts into Fuller, Well-Rounded Up-And-Out curves". The same company ran an ad adjacent to this one that implored thin legged girls "Stop being self-conscious about your scrawny, bony legs...Try this new scientific home method to add shapely curves to skinny legs!" (*Seventeen* January 1951). Ads for countless girdles also appeared in *Seventeen*. "Hide-A-Waist" appealed to girls to "Say goodbye to that unbecoming tummy bulge and clumsy waistline. Instead enjoy what your figure needs most - Hide-A-Waist. Presto-o-chango. Like magic, you have graceful, alluring curves". "Tiny waists are all the rage", declared French Form's Waist-Nipper, as it offered an outrageous caricature of a small-waisted woman. "Tiny, Tiny, Oh, so Tiny" read the caption (*Seventeen* June 1959).

Herein lies *Seventeen's* major contradiction of the 1950s: young girls were expected to be chaste, innocent, and subservient, yet conform in appearance to the overtly aggressive sexual styles of the era. These conflicting messages young women received gave the impression that one was supposed to be a girl on the inside, and a fully blossomed woman on the outside. A good girl was supposed to please boys in every way possible, yet maintain her virginity till marriage. Ultimately, this was part of the larger equation of 1950s gender relations that could not be sustained. The reality of the situation, unsurprisingly, converged from this hypothetical model. As style and fashion subverted the squeaky clean adolescent feminine ideal constructed by *Seventeen's* editors, eventually so too did the young women who consumed both. The very next decade would see the rise of an organized feminist movement that questioned the core beliefs such gender ideology rested upon. In 1963 Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a revolutionary book that urged women to break out of the ideological confines set by 1950s experts. It immediately became a best-seller, and Friedan was inundated by letters from women across America who had struggled to meet the expectations of the postwar feminine ideal, and had only found misery and dissatisfaction. With this began the decline of the new domesticity, and along with it the adolescent feminine ideal *Seventeen* had so painstakingly constructed.

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Portrait of the All-American Girl in Time: The Contradictions Between 1950s Gender Ideology and Style in "Seventeen" Magazine

"Portrait of the All-American Girl in Time: The Contradictions Between 1950s Gender Ideology and Style in *Seventeen* Magazine, by Tadeusz Lewandowski, examines the ideal of adolescent femininity constructed by *Seventeen* magazine in the decade of the 1950s. *Seventeen*, first published in 1944, was the first periodical directed at teenage girls during the postwar era, and has until today remained the most popular. From its immediate inception during World War II it promoted a vision of the American girl as independent, and spoke out against gender inequality, much in keeping with the war emergency government propaganda of the time. However, by the 1950s *Seventeen* had been transformed from an organ that endorsed the emancipation of women from traditional gender roles to one that fully promoted the role of housewife as the single legitimate goal for young women. This was in accordance with the prevailing theories that emerged after the war as to women's natural inclination to domesticity and motherhood, and the feminine ideal that appeared with it. To this, *Seventeen* added a consciously constructed ideal of adolescent femininity that its readers were expected to conform to, existing within the confines of a larger gender ideology that placed boys in a dominant position and encouraged physical beautification and allure. This paper explores *Seventeen's* adolescent feminine ideal and its roots, and also examines the contradictions between its emphasis on chastity and innocence, and the sexually charged clothing and make up styles that young women were urged to adopt within *Seventeen's* pages.

Keywords: "*Seventeen*" magazine, style, fashion, gender, postwar feminine ideal, new domesticity, 1950s.