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**“What Sort of Man Reads Playboy?”:  
Gender, Heterosexuality, and Reader Letters in *Playboy* Magazine, 1953-1963**

By

**Kessia Carpenter**

A Major Research Paper  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of History  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts  
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2021

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**“What Sort of Man Reads *Playboy*?”: An Analysis of Reader Letters in *Playboy*  
Magazine, 1953-1963**

by

**Kessia Carpenter**

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August 5, 2021.

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## ABSTRACT

Existing *Playboy* scholarship overlooks the significance of magazine's audience outside of the bachelor subculture it fathered in the 1950s. In fact, consumers fitting *Playboy*'s desired readership of white, financially affluent, single men formed only a small percentage of its actual subscribers. This study makes evident that students, soldiers, sailors, military servicemen, middle- and working- class men, both single and married, as well as women, made up most of its readership. To date, no historical study has been conducted of reader letters to *Playboy*, which reveal the magazine's significance to this audience.

This paper argues that postwar men used *Playboy* as a guide to inform their own gendered and sexual expectations of women, as well as their behaviours within courtship, sexual relationships, marriage, the workplace, and on college campuses. Specifically, it analyzes letters written by students, servicemen, working class and professional men, married readers, and women, to demonstrate how the magazine impacted its broader audience's perceptions and behaviours of gender and sexuality in 1950s America. Consequently, men who applied *Playboy*'s hedonistic beliefs in their professional, romantic, or sexual relationships, facilitated women's subordination in these contexts. Letters published by the magazine in its monthly "Dear Playboy" and "The Playboy Advisor" features are essential in understanding *Playboy*'s actual readership, the significance of the magazine in their daily lives, and culture's broader impact on American behaviour in the postwar period.

DEDICATION

For Clementine

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would firstly like to thank Dr. Peter Way for guiding and pushing my understanding of history beyond what I ever perceived it could be. He has challenged me in the most rewarding way possible. Thank you for the illuminating conversations about the more interesting facets of life: culture, the creativity to be found in the art of history, cinema, and dogs. His constant support and reassurance will always be appreciated.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

I certainly do get a big kick out of your mag. I never fail to read it from cover to cover, but I think you guys are living in a dream world. Very few have the good fortune to financially afford the type of life that you at *Playboy* set up as the ideal one. I feel that if the truth were known, you guys are living the same life as thousands of others all over the country. Please don't let this discourage you, however...because it does a guy like me some good to sit down and dream with you once every month.<sup>1</sup>

Letter to *Playboy* from H.R. Keim of the U.S.S Basielone, August 1956.

Since its first issue in December 1953, *Playboy* magazine explicitly denounced a comfortable brand of white, hegemonic American masculinity championed by conservative culture, politicians, and religious leaders that placed fatherhood, male breadwinning, and family at its centre. Along with feminist readings of *Playboy* that acknowledge its objectification of women for the benefit of male sexual pleasure, recent scholarship typically focuses on the magazine's backlash to conservative mores of gender and heterosexuality prior to a defined sexual revolution in the 1960s. Alongside viewing *Playboy* as a cultural rejection of traditional models of American manhood, scholars also define the magazine as Hugh Hefner's podium for his own ideologies on gender and sexuality, mirroring postwar concerns of a "crisis of masculinity".<sup>2</sup>

In the face of gender upheaval instigated by women's mass exodus into the workforce following World War II, *Playboy* emerged alongside critics like Arthur M.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from H.R. Keim, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (August 1956), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise: The Playboy Vision of America* (New York, NY: Times Books, 1978); Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1983); James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Elizabeth Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Schlesinger and David Reisman as a voice that attempted to reinforce the patriarchal order of pre-war society. Scholars note that as a response to this “crisis”, *Playboy* presented a new version of masculinity that championed male individuality over fatherhood and family breadwinning. Largely a media invention to appease anxieties about women’s equity in the home and workplace, this “crisis” would not be in the mind of everyone that read *Playboy* as James Gilbert notes.<sup>3</sup>

Much like scholarship written about print culture in the 1950s, most studies of *Playboy* take a discursive approach in discussing its constructions of gender and heterosexuality. Studies tend to focus on the gendered and sexual messages *Playboy* sent to its audience, namely its objectification of women via pornography, its privileging of male sexuality over female, rejection of monogamy, and a new form of postwar masculinity. Little consideration has been given to the impact of these ideologies on those who consumed the magazine. Furthermore, social and gender historians writing about print culture tend to present a myopic gaze on the intended white, middle- or upper-class audience of readers. A fault in this approach is that a substantial portion of *Playboy*’s audience is ignored.

Scholars typically focus their studies on the bachelor subculture created by the magazine, and in turn, *Playboy*’s own target readership: affluent, white, sexually autonomous, upper-class men.<sup>4</sup> *Playboy*’s consumer base, and the impact it had on lived behaviours of men in the postwar period, cannot be collapsed into a singular narrative

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<sup>3</sup> James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> “Playboy Joins the Battle of the Sexes,” in Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 42-51; Howard P. Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Fratterigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America*, 48-79.

highlighting a new postwar model of white, upper class, masculinity. Reader letters published in *Playboy* written by students, servicemen, married, working class men, and women, reveal that the magazine played a significant role in the shaping of Americans' gendered and sexual experiences in the postwar period. Missing from the scholarship is an investigation of this consumer group, and how they thought about, interacted with, or emulated the magazine's ideologies on gender and heterosexuality. To analyze *Playboy* without the voice of the reader is only telling a fraction of the magazine's story and significance in the 1950s.

To date, no historical studies of *Playboy* have been conducted with reader letters at its centre.<sup>5</sup> This paper argues that postwar men used *Playboy* as a guide to inform their own gendered and sexual expectations of women, as well as their behaviours within courtship, sexual relationships, marriage, the workplace, and on college campuses. Specifically, it analyzes letters written by students, servicemen, working class and professional men, married readers, and women, to demonstrate how the magazine impacted its broader audience's perceptions and behaviours of gender and sexuality in

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<sup>5</sup> Although letters offer keys to understanding the significance of *Playboy* in the lives of its readers, it must be noted that without access to *Playboy*'s physical archives, one cannot be for certain if letters cited in this study were edited prior to publication. However, Meyerowitz, Pitzulo, and Fratterigo, cite published letters from the 1950s-1970s in their studies. Meyerowitz does not comment on the validity of letters she uses from *Playboy*, or from *Esquire* and *Ebony*. Pitzulo includes a footnote stating letters were occasionally fabricated by editors. She vouches that this was usually done to raise an issue to which Hefner wanted to respond. However, she contends that through personal correspondence with Hefner, editors, and access to company archives, that most letters were legitimate. The only admission to *Playboy* fabricating a letter was in 1955, when a character named "Armin" took issue with the magazine's portrayals of extramarital sex and nudity. After readers responded in disgust to Armin's "letter", *Playboy* admitted he was their own creation. It should also be noted that letters to the "Playboy Advisor" were published with initials only, while "Dear Playboy" used full names of those who sent letters. Joanne Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth Century," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 9-35; Erin Lee Mock, "Getting Comfortable: Sex, Reader, and Postwar Adjustment in 1950s *Playboy*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 50, no. 2 (2017): 363-388; Carrie Pitzulo, "The Battle in Everyman's Bed: "Playboy" and the Fiery Feminists," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17 no. 2 (May 2008): 259-89.

1950s America. Consequently, men who applied *Playboy*'s hedonistic beliefs in their professional, romantic, or sexual relationships, facilitated women's subordination in these contexts. It also continued to enable and validate misogyny that had been ingrained in men's relationships with women, long before the 1950s.

Although *Playboy* published thousands of reader letters in its first decade, with some praising the magazine and others critiquing it, it is impossible to consider all reader discourse in one study. This paper uses a sample of one hundred and eighteen reader letters, from a larger source base of seven hundred and fifty reader letters sent to *Playboy* by men and women pertaining specifically to the topics of courtship, marriage, sex, and the workplace. Letters published by the magazine in its monthly "Dear Playboy" and "The Playboy Advisor" features between 1953 and 1963, which have not been extensively examined by historians, are essential in understanding *Playboy*'s actual readership, the significance of the magazine in their daily lives, and culture's broader impact on American behaviour in the postwar period.

This paper builds upon existing scholarship, acknowledging that *Playboy* cultivated an alternative form of masculinity in the postwar period while simultaneously objectifying women through its hypersexualized images. However, in the wake of the magazine's rebellion to dominant norms of gender and sexuality in the 1950s, *Playboy* scholars overlook how the magazine mirrored many of the conservative norms of gender and sexuality that it sought to reject. Through its vilification of wives, objectification of women in the workplace, and its expectations of submissive feminine behaviour in sex and courtship, *Playboy* continued to subordinate women. It also jumped on the bandwagon of the increasing sexualization of women in postwar culture for hedonistic

reasons. Rather than presenting a true sexual rebellion for all within its pages, *Playboy* exclusively associated white female sexual and professional autonomy with male pleasure.

*Playboy* was conscious of its target consumer, articulated most notably in its “What Sort of Man Reads *Playboy*?” campaign. Through these advertisements the magazine projected its ideal reader as an upper class “Playboy” employed in a white-collar profession. He partook in leisurely activities such as travel, driving expensive cars, drinking, or socializing out on the town, and was always accompanied by a young, female companion.<sup>6</sup> Wives, children, or the family home, the so-called pinnacles of postwar American way of life, were nowhere in sight. Alongside these advertisements, *Playboy* consistently claimed that its magazine was a guide for men interested in living Hefner’s new version of masculinity, available through what he deemed to be “the good life”. Within its pictorials and literature, *Playboy* spoke to its readers as if they all belonged to this coveted bachelor sub-group of American men, which Erin Lee Mock defines as *Playboy*’s “imagined reader”.<sup>7</sup> However, *Playboy* had an array of consumers outside of this imagined readership in its first decade.

As made evident through reader letters, advice columns, and surveys, working class and professional men, students, military servicemen, and married men, made up the majority of *Playboy*’s actual consumer base. Reader surveys indicate that approximately 68 percent of surveyed male readers were under the age of 30, and over 50 percent were

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<sup>6</sup> These advertisements began running in each issue from March 1958 up until May 2014. They highlighted how *Playboy*’s prescribed bachelor lifestyle intersected with American values of consumerism, hard-work ethic, and leisure. The model featured in these ads was Mary Ann LaJoi, who originally worked as a secretary for the magazine before becoming a staple in ads up until the mid-1960s.

<sup>7</sup> Mock, “Getting Comfortable,” 384.

either students, in the military service, or earned an average income of five thousand dollars or less annually. *Playboy's* 1954 survey stated that over 13 percent of men worked as “professionals” in white collar jobs yet provided no indication of what jobs the other 87 percent of readers held, suggesting that the magazine sought not to disclose the statistics of men who did not match its idealized imaged readership.<sup>8</sup>

Letters also demonstrate that male consumers came from a multifold of working-class professions, with men identifying themselves as sailors, mechanics, teachers, accountants, students at trade schools or technical colleges, members of the armed services, clerical or office workers, salesmen, and tradesmen.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, an average of 66 percent of readers surveyed did not complete university degrees, with 25 percent of that group not completing high school, suggesting that much of its readership was composed of working class men with limited educations.<sup>10</sup> Reader letters and surveys also indicate that a large portion of the magazine's consumers were married. In 1958, *Playboy* reported on the marital status of its readers. “Approximately half of *Playboy's* readers (46.8 percent) are free men, and the other half are free in spirit only (51.4 percent).”<sup>11</sup> It must be noted that the racial or ethnic backgrounds of readers were not disclosed or surveyed until the late 1960s. Furthermore, women also regularly consumed and wrote to *Playboy*, although never being surveyed by the magazine in its first decade.

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<sup>8</sup> “Playbill,” *Playboy* (November 1954), 2; “The *Playboy* Reader: About the Man who Reads the Magazine,” *Playboy* (September 1955), 37; “Meet the *Playboy* Reader: A Survey of the Man who Reads the Magazine,” *Playboy* (April 1958), 63.

<sup>9</sup> “The *Playboy* Reader,” *Playboy* (September 1958), 36-7. “Playboy at College” and “Playboy Overseas” sub-sections appeared regularly in “Dear Playboy”. Published reader letters also provide valuable clues into the magazine's actual readership, as some of *Playboy's* surveys note that only a small portion of readers were surveyed (ranging from one in three copies of the magazine or subscriber-only surveys).

<sup>10</sup> “Playbill,” *Playboy* (November 1954), 2; “The *Playboy* Reader,” *Playboy* (September 1955), 36; “Meet the *Playboy* Reader,” *Playboy* (April 1958), 63.

<sup>11</sup> “Meet the *Playboy* Reader,” *Playboy* April 1958, 87.

From reader letters and surveys alone, it is evident that “the sort of man” who read *Playboy* extended far beyond Hefner’s imagined bachelor readership.

To understand the significance of *Playboy* to readers in the 1950s, it is thus crucial to consider the broader cycle in which culture reflects and informs the behaviours of gender and sexuality in society. Therefore, this paper analyzes *Playboy* through Pierre Bourdieu’s models of “cultural production” and “cultural reproduction”, which considers how and by whom cultural norms are made, the relationship between the target and actual audience, and how the public receive and act upon said norms. Within the context of *Playboy*, this model is broken down into five stages: the historical context in which *Playboy* was created; Hefner’s backlash to a conservative upbringing, his psychosexual development, and their impact on *Playboy*’s ideologies; its stance on gender, heterosexuality, marriage, and courtship; how consumers perceived these ideals; and finally, how consumers reproduced or modified *Playboy* philosophy in their daily lives, as made evident through reader letters.

The paper is divided into four sections. First, it is essential to explore how historians have examined popular print culture within the historical context of gender and sexuality in the postwar period. A review of trends in the historiography reveals that the 1950s were neither stagnant nor dominated by conservatism, but instead a complex era where conservative and liberal ideologies of gender and sexuality intersected in popular culture. It also illuminates that social, gender, and *Playboy* historians have taken discursive approaches to studying the impact of culture in the postwar period. As this section demonstrates, looking beyond the cultural discourse to its effect on the consumer base, is integral to understanding the impact of *Playboy* on the lives of its readers.

This is followed by a section tracing the shift from conservative print culture's dominance in the mid-1940s, to a gradual liberalization of sexual mores leading to the culture wars of the early 1960s. Understanding *Playboy* requires contextualizing the magazine within the evolution of print pornography in the mid-twentieth century. It reveals that long before *Playboy*, postwar men were already being trained to sexually objectify women via pin-ups, pulp novels, and eroticized imagery in advertisements. This is followed by an analysis of how *Playboy* emerged as one of the most popular men's magazines within the milieu of print culture created for and by men during the era. An examination into the psycho-sexual experiences of Hugh Hefner further illuminates the reasoning behind the models of gender and sexuality that *Playboy* disseminated throughout its first decade. Like men who consumed his magazine, Hefner's own sexual desires and behaviours were shaped by the culture he consumed, further exhibiting that the impact of men's magazines on male behaviour was not a new phenomenon in the postwar period.

The third chapter examines how Hefner's own beliefs on gender and sexuality played out on the pages of *Playboy*, amplified by an all-male writing staff that shared his rejection of conservative mores of sexuality, family, and marriage. This section examines ideologies from visual and literary elements of the magazine that would later re-emerge in reader's own words via their letters. Playmate of the Month features, pictorials, editorials, and articles are analyzed to construct an understanding of *Playboy*'s hedonistic positions on wives, monogamy, women in the workplace, polygamy, and courtship. These same topics would have then been viewed through readers' eyes, and as the final section reveals, informed their behaviours. This section also considers the contradictory

nature of *Playboy*, as the magazine presented a narrative that simultaneously challenged and emulated postwar values of gender and sexuality. Hefner and his staff, as a group of white heterosexual men, utilized the magazine as a medium to express their own desires on courtship, sex, women, and marriage. It sought to promote the liberal sexuality of men for hedonistic reasons but repressed women in the gender order as it only promoted female sexuality as subservient to male pleasure.

A consequence of these ideologies is evident within the male reader letters printed in *Playboy* between 1953-1963, as analyzed within this paper's final section. Many readers agreed with the ideologies presented within *Playboy*. Most notably, men supported the magazine's vilification of wives, women who sought career mobility, or those who threatened the patriarchal gender hierarchy. Reader letters also cited specific articles, either supporting or disagreeing with the magazine's dismissal of wives and the championing of young, white, single women as the ideal sexual companion. Men's enthusiastic responses to erotic Playmate and pictorial features exhibit how *Playboy's* archetype of hypersexualized, non-threatening women, became the benchmark of desirable femininity to much of its consumer base. The magazine played an important part in forming cultural ideals of beauty and femininity in the postwar period. Reader letters in *Playboy's* advice columns also exhibit how men applied its ideologies and advice on courtship, sex, and marriage into their daily lives. Significantly, this demonstrates how American men engaged with their sexualities and exhibits ways in which their behaviours went against the conservative grain of heterosexuality during the postwar period, while simultaneously upholding pre-war, traditional values of femininity in their expectations of the women in their lives.

The final section also examines female reader's responses to *Playboy's* ideologies, demonstrating that women viewed men using the magazine as a guide in a negative light. Letters from women reinforce the consequences of *Playboy's* hedonistic ideologies. They illuminate their recognition of men in their lives who subscribed to *Playboy's* patriarchal ideologies, despite the magazine framing itself as a part of a broader rebellion to traditional norms of gender and sexuality in postwar culture.

Women's letters within this study are only a small part of a much larger sample of letters sent in by female readers, as some claimed they enjoyed *Playboy*, while others spoke out against the magazine's exploitation of women through its pin-ups. However, this study seeks to demonstrate women's subordination within the context of their personal and professional relationships with men. Specific letters from working women, wives, girlfriends, and female students further exhibit how men's expectations of femininity and feminine sexuality were informed by the content they consumed in *Playboy*. In doing so, this study seeks to shift the focus in scholarship that concentrates on the messages of gender and sexuality that *Playboy* presented in its first decade, towards those who consumed it. Looking beyond the discourses of postwar culture into the impact this culture had on the lived behaviours and expectations of its audience, extends the historical understanding of culture, gender, and sexuality in the 1950s.

### ***The Historiography of Gender, Sexuality, and Culture in the Postwar Period***

Scholars writing about the postwar period from the 1980s onwards have characterized the 1950s as an era where culture was utilized to control gender and sexual norms. Elaine

Tyler May argues many Americans turned to the family as a bastion of security, to appease gendered and sexual anxieties associated with the social upheaval of class, racial, and gender norms. Historians like May have defined the postwar period as a time where conservative politicians, religious leaders, social commentators, and the media attempted to appease gendered and sexual anxieties. At the helm of these anxieties, scholars noted, was a perceived “crisis of masculinity” brought on by fears that women’s exodus from the domestic into the professional sphere, homosexuality, divorce, and pre-marital sex, would upset the patriarchal gender hierarchy of the postwar period. Specifically, this culture attempted to soothe the fear of deviation from dominant norms of American sexuality through its depiction of stable, monogamous, white, heterosexual married couples.<sup>12</sup> However, as social and gender historians have contested from the 1990s onwards, the lived realities of American sexual and gendered behaviour deviated from a homogenized experience that postwar politics and culture attempted to contain.

Rather than overtly conservative as previously argued, scholars maintain that the 1950s cannot be depicted as an era that exclusively nurtured gender and sexual conformity. Instead, they perceive a complex era of transformative norms of gender and sexuality prior to the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Women’s historians like Joanne Meyerowitz, Beth Bailey, and Jessica Weiss, initiated this wave of revision in the 1990s and 2000s. They challenge the pre-existing literature’s singular focus on the historical experience of American women as a group victimized by enforced domesticity during the

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<sup>12</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). See also Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Charlotte, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Dennis Lee Frobish, *The Family and Ideology: Cultural Constraints on Women, 1940-1960* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

postwar period. They each examine that rather than being cemented in conservative pre-war values, representations of femininity in print culture within the contexts of courtship, marriages, and the workplace, transformed before the sexual revolution of the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> However, their source material-sociological studies conducted on white, upper-class individuals, and high-brow women's magazines- produces a myopic gaze on the upper class that distorts the historical experience of different groups in the era. Save for Meyerowitz, these studies do not focus on women of colour, or those in the working class.<sup>14</sup>

Although the study of women is essential to widening the understanding of sexual experiences in the postwar period, these studies leave a gap between how American behaviour reflected culture and vice versa. To understand gender and sexuality in the postwar period more broadly, it is essential to consider the relationship between gender ideals in culture and their effect on male experience and performance of sexuality. Moreover, one should consider the impact these had on men's expectations of submissive feminine sexuality, as well as its consequences on women as they sought their own sexual and financial agencies.

Historians such as Jürgen Martschulkat, Michael Kimmel, K.A. Courdileone, and David M. Earle, have examined representations of masculinity in postwar culture. However, they tend to do so through a model of reading masculinity as being in a state of crisis. As a result, they utilize this model to broadly characterize the experiences of all

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<sup>13</sup> Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia, PA.: Temple University Press, 1994); Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000); Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> "Beyond the Feminine Mystique," in Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 229-261.

men. They note that debates over the state of gender and the place of women in society lead postwar culture to perceive a crisis of American manhood. Social experts' lamentations reverberated within popular literature of the period, portraying mass consumption, the feminization of the workforce, and homosexuality as threats to traditional ideals of masculinity. Cultural representations of strong individualistic men, in the form of popular media characters (cowboys, war heroes, and superheroes) and celebrities, were used to assuage these anxieties by reflecting physical and behavioural ideals of traditional American masculinity that formed during the late nineteenth-century.<sup>15</sup>

James Gilbert, however, notes an abundance of alternative forms of masculinity available to male consumers in addition to those attempting to assuage anxieties through consolidating and repairing an era of "troubled masculinities". The "crisis" of masculinity, Gilbert argues, was in fact a response to America's growing engagement with postwar mass culture and consumption, and an acknowledgement of the loss of American individualism, rather than a change in the performance of gender. He also posits that the late 1940s witnessed the first time in which a gender crisis was explicitly labeled. Historians and sociologists of the 1950s became preoccupied with anxieties around meanings of masculinity. Gilbert fills a gap that these studies of masculinity in the 1950s have overlooked: the relationship between men and constructions of gender. Gilbert argues that middle-class white men had access to a complex of models of

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<sup>15</sup> Jürgen Martschukat, "Men in Gray Flannel Suits: Troubled Masculinities in 1950s America," *Gender Forum* 32 (2011): 1-8; Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York, NY.: The Free Press, 1997), 223-58; K.A. Courdileone, *Manhood and Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-17; David M. Earle, *All Man! Hemmingway, 1950's Men's Magazines, and the Masculinity Persona* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2000), 61-74.

masculinity that contradicted a homogenized view of masculinity. He concentrates on white, middle-class men, as they were the main targets of a discourse that perpetuated a gender crisis.<sup>16</sup> His identification of multiple discourses of masculinity within print culture pushes the scholarship beyond a model assuming a singular gendered discourse from the era, but his approach overlooks the experiences of non-white or working-class men and their relationship to culture.

Three observations follow on from this synopsis of the literature. First, it remains focused on the white middle class, extrapolating from this a uniform experience where multiplicity existed. Second, existing scholarship on masculinity in the postwar period, save for Gilbert, predominantly espouses a crisis of masculinity model. Third, the literature adopts a discursive approach that engages the writing on and representations of gender in culture rather than the lived experience. The impact gender discourse had on the consumer's belief system is often overlooked. This is particularly the case with scholarship written about *Playboy*, despite the magazine's rich source base of reader correspondence.

### ***The Historiography of Playboy***

Scholarship on *Playboy* has been traditionally dominated by feminists, who argue the magazine degrades women as sexual objects and purveys sexism through pin-ups of its models and Playmates.<sup>17</sup> However, as social and cultural historians have noted, *Playboy*

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<sup>16</sup> Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 1-47.

<sup>17</sup> Gloria Steinem, "What Playboy Doesn't Know About Women Could Fill a Book," *McCall's*, October 1970; Bill Osgerby, *Playmates in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth and Leisure Style in Modern America*

can be read beyond the sole narrative of the pornographic objectification and subordination of women. Scholars of the 1980s, notably Barbara Ehrenreich, Elaine Tyler May, Thomas Weyr, and Beth Bailey, view *Playboy* as a mechanism for creating a new version of masculinity as a response to the perceived crisis of masculinity within culture. They also demonstrate how *Playboy* rejected conservative ideologies that championed confining sex within marriage and men acting as primary breadwinners for the family home. Each determine that *Playboy* acted as a tool for men to find sexual and financial individuality outside the traditional masculine roles of fathers and family breadwinners.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, Ehrenreich views *Playboy* and its ideologies on women and masculinity encouraged men to dismiss wives, and instead seek out an alternative bachelor lifestyle free from the commitments of family.<sup>19</sup>

Scholars of the early 2000s continued to push this narrative within the context of changing gender roles in the 1950s, affirming that *Playboy* challenged traditional mores of masculinity for the sake of financial gain and individuality. Gilbert demonstrates that, in opposition to purveyors of a male crisis, *Playboy* offered white American middle-class men an outlet for an alternative form of masculinity and heterosexuality via its written content. He notes that *Playboy* published high-brow stories to help retain a “sophisticated” image for the magazine, despite its sexual content. However, Gilbert’s analysis of *Playboy*’s limits the magazine’s actual significance to its readers, as he frames the magazine beyond its sexual content, and as an example of alternative versions of

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(Oxford: Berg, 2001); Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise*, 1-12; Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 42-51; May, *Homeward Bound*, 92-114; Beth Bailey, *From Front Porth to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth Century America* (Baltimore, MA: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), 69-107.

<sup>19</sup> “Playboy Joins the Battle of the Sexes,” in Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 42-51.

masculinity found in “high culture” during the postwar period.<sup>20</sup> This only extracts one discourse from the magazine, further pushing an analysis of *Playboy* away from one that considers the significance it had on its actual readership.

Elizabeth Fratterigo follows a similar trajectory in her study of *Playboy*. She examines how *Playboy* was linked closely to postwar ideals of financial affluence and leisure. She examines how the magazine used advertisements, images of bachelor pads, and its new version of masculinity centered around sex, leisure, and consumption, to support American capitalism in the early Cold War. In doing so, she extracts narratives from the magazine that centre around its significance as a purveyor of postwar ideals of male, individualism and capitalistic striving in the face of a crisis of masculinity. Like previous studies of *Playboy*, Fratterigo only focuses on *Playboy*’s upper-class male readership. She examines the bachelor audience that *Playboy* intends to represent through her analysis of consumption, white-collar workplaces, and bachelor pads. While she does use a handful of reader letters in her study, they are utilized within the context of men discussing consumption, living spaces, or leisure, reinforcing the white, upper-class, bachelor subculture the magazine promoted.<sup>21</sup>

The work of Meyerowitz, Erin Lee Mock, and Carrie Pitzulo, however, reinforces that *Playboy* readership transcended the bachelor demographic. In her article about women’s responses to pornographic magazines in the twentieth century, Meyerowitz analyses reader letters written by women to *Playboy*, *Ebony*, and *Esquire*, demonstrating that readership transcended men’s magazine’s intended audience. She concludes that

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<sup>20</sup> “The Gender of High Culture,” in Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 189-214.

<sup>21</sup> Fratterigo, “Work Hard and Play Hard, Too: Modern Living and the Morality of *Playboy* Life,” in *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America*, 48-134.

during the late 1960s and early 1970s, men's magazines were consumed and discussed by women to debate the place of pornography within the context of the second wave feminist movement.<sup>22</sup> Pitzulo furthers the scholarship by analyzing reader letters sent to *Playboy* by feminists in the 1970s as one of her primary sources. She argues that the magazine supported issues of the women's liberation movement, such as abortion, sexual autonomy, for hedonistic reasons in support of its ideal bachelor lifestyle centred around sexual pleasure.<sup>23</sup> Mock continues this trend of reading *Playboy* beyond a bachelor readership in her study of soldiers who read men's magazines during and post-WWII.<sup>24</sup> However, she relies on *Playboy*'s editorials and images rather than writings from soldiers themselves. Meyerowitz, Pitzulo, and Mock, each offer a glimpse into the diverse groups that consumed *Playboy*. However, this still leaves a gap in the scholarship between those who read the magazine and how readers perceived or applied the magazine's alternative ideologies of gender and sexuality in their daily lives. A thorough investigation of *Playboy*'s actual readership and their relationship to the magazine, has not yet been investigated by historians.

Three trends emerge from existing *Playboy* scholarship. First, much like studies of popular culture and its consumers during the 1950s, few scholarly investigations of *Playboy* push beyond the narrative of analyzing the magazine's discourse, ideologies, or messages to readers. Within the case of *Playboy*, this offers a limited view into examining the magazine beyond its imagined bachelor readership. Secondly, scholars view *Playboy*'s rebellion to traditional models of manhood as a by-product of a crisis of

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<sup>22</sup> Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material," 9-35.

<sup>23</sup> Pitzulo, "The Battle in Everyman's Bed," 259-89.

<sup>24</sup> Mock, "Getting Comfortable," 363-388.

masculinity. However, much like Gilbert argues, this crisis was a cultural invention to soothe gender anxieties, rather than a real threat. As reader letters demonstrate, this crisis was not something *Playboy's* readers subscribed to. Instead, as scholars overlook, *Playboy* was concerned with the increasing threat of women towards male sexual autonomy and workplaces, rather than actual manhood being threatened. Third, scholars overlook that despite the sexually rebellious nature of *Playboy*, it still emulated core pre-war values of gender. *Playboy's* alternative form of masculinity was a contradictory rebellion. Despite its promotion of a lifestyle based on sexual rebellion and freedom, it still endorsed versions of masculinity and femininity that were parallel to conservative ones, chiefly the continued subordination of women in the workforce and sexual relationships.

To understand the social impact of *Playboy*, different groups of readers must be considered. Scholars have overlooked the significance of reader letters as a primary source, as it provides important clues towards the perceptions and behaviours of gender and sexuality held by individuals within the public. Reader letters voice enthusiasm for the magazine's ideologies, and its function as a field guide to relationships with women. Furthermore, letters from women exhibit the consequences of these ideologies, as men who subscribed *Playboy's* ideologies subordinated women in their expectations sexual and romantic relationships, marriages, and the workplace. The study of *Playboy* requires scrutiny not only of how created meanings of gender and sexuality for its audience, but how these played out in the daily lives of readers. This can be explored via a close reading of their letters to *Playboy*.

To grasp the significance of *Playboy* to men's understanding and practising of gender and sexuality, it is first essential to understand the historical context in which it was created: the cultural wars of the postwar period. Amid a struggle between conservative and liberal ideologies shaping music, films, television, and magazines, *Playboy* emerged as a guide for men wishing to navigate transitioning norms and expectations of gender and sexuality in the 1950s. Furthermore, analyzing the growth of erotic imagery in print culture reveals that men were exposed to images of submissive femininity and feminine sexuality long before *Playboy*. Like men who read *Playboy*, Hefner's own ideals and expectations of femininity would have been formed by the culture he consumed as an adolescent in interwar America.

## CHAPTER 2

### A Prelude to *Playboy*: Gender and Sexuality in American Postwar Culture

This section seeks to demonstrate the historical context in which *Playboy* emerged. Situating the magazine in the context of gender and sexuality in the postwar period enables a better understanding of its significance in the shifting tides of postwar print culture. Furthermore, it illuminates the loosening of social, gendered, and sexual mores in popular culture that Hefner, and many of *Playboy*'s readers, experienced. It also explains the pre-war and postwar expectations of gender and sexuality that informed Hefner's own ideologies of masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality that found their footing in *Playboy*. An analysis of *Playboy* cannot be conducted without a discussion of the conservative mores of gender and sexuality that Hefner rejected. Contradictorily, Hefner's views on women mirrored many of those touted by conservatives in the early years of the Cold War.

Although historians demonstrate that the 1950s cannot be defined by conservatism, it remains true that traditionalism dominated American cultural discourse in the era. Specifically, anxieties surrounding gender, sexuality, and race infiltrated print culture curated by affluent white, American male politicians, government officials, religious leaders, and social experts. Conservative voices such as televangelist Billy Graham or National Republican Party Chairman Guy Gabrielson and television programs like *Leave it to Beaver* captured a puritan strain in American culture. Advocations to contain sex to marriage, preserve gender hierarchy within the workplace and the home, and to place the family at the centre of society dominated political and cultural discourse

in the postwar period. As James Gilbert notes, popular culture reproduced and simplified such assumptions about the behaviour of American men and women.<sup>25</sup>

In the midst of the Cold War, Republicans placed freedom to pursue work, leisure, home ownership, and financial gain at the centre of America's capitalist success. Although foreign policy experts expressed fears of communist infiltration, many religious and political leaders avowed that most dangers to American society were internal, fueling anxious rhetoric. Conservative voices labeled the emancipation of women, racial integration, and the loosening of sexual mores, as threats to a society that was still finding its footing after WWII. To assuage these fears, postwar conservative culture encouraged Americans to turn to the family as the bastion of American security. Conservative leaders agreed that re-stabilizing the American family was key to preventing upheaval to gendered, sexual, and racial norms.<sup>26</sup>

Anxieties surrounding the American institution of family had roots before the postwar period. Women's entrance into the workforce during World War II, to help substitute a labour force traditionally composed of men, disrupted a pre-war family life that held breadwinning husbands and subordinate wives at its centre. Following the war, many social experts feared that women who returned to the home would begin to resent the restrictions of family life and childrearing. Social commentators noted that women entering the workforce posed a threat to traditional models of gender at both home and work, which *Playboy* later labeled the "Womanization" of America. No longer

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<sup>25</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 3-11; Courdileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 1-15; Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 1-67; Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 223-31.

<sup>26</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, xviii; Courdileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 5-9; Reumann, *American Sexual Character*, 2-8.

exclusively viewed as homemakers, women's growing public presence signified a shift in postwar gender roles, causing some conservatives to sound the alarm.<sup>27</sup>

In the face of this social change, conservative postwar leaders continuously promulgated pre-war traditions of gender and heterosexuality. Within this model, Americans were to abstain from sex until marriage, men were to take on the role of primary wage-earner and make decisions on behalf of the family, while wives were responsible for managing the home and raising their children into law-abiding citizens. Conservative print literature also vehemently echoed political anxieties surrounding sex.<sup>28</sup> Concerns about sexual behaviour became a cultural obsession after WWII, prompting social scientists and self-proclaimed 'social experts' to propose marriage as the most judicious method to channel sex in a way that did not disrupt American society. Marriage, and more specifically the containment of sex to marriage, precluded by monogamous, non-sexual courtship, became the dominant prescription for Americans who wished to engage in sexual activity.

Many young white Americans explored their sexualities under the terms of a conservative lifecycle to appease hegemonic puritan codes of sex and gender. School, marriage, sex, homeownership, and childrearing composed the traditional cycle of a so called "acceptable" way of American life. Even Hefner proclaimed that he married his first wife, Mildred Williams, for two purposes: to appease his Methodist parents and to

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<sup>27</sup> Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 5; Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 35-7; Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 77-84; Phillip Wylie, "The Womanization of America," *Playboy* (September 1958), 48-9.

<sup>28</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York, NY.: Penguin, 2005), 229-244; May, *Homeward Bound*, 92-100; Reumann, *American Sexual Character*, 38-50.

engage in his sexuality without moral consequences.<sup>29</sup> Unlike married couples at the turn of the twentieth century, however, those of the 1950s were encouraged to have sex not just for procreation but also fulfillment.

The active sexualities of husbands and wives, social experts explained, were not to be suppressed, but rather confined to marriage. Maintaining appropriate constructions of gender and heterosexuality within marriage, many social scientists agreed, was also a key to maintaining a successful marriage and, in turn, a successful American society. However, this task was traditionally set upon the shoulders of women, rather than men, as they were encouraged to be the ‘controllers’ of sex before and after marriage. Tasked with the conflicting roles of presenting themselves as simultaneously alluring and chaste, single women had to maintain their virginity while promising sex to attract a husband. Women, and not their male counterparts, were warned not to overstep the fine line separating ‘heavy petting’ from sexual intercourse.<sup>30</sup>

Gender roles established within courtship were thus expected to be carried over into marriage. As subordinates to their husbands, advice literature encouraged wives to find fulfillment in devoting themselves to expert childrearing and homemaking. Simultaneously, they were to act as devoted, loving, and erotic mates to prevent their husbands from straying to find more adequate sexual fulfillment outside of marriage. Social experts encouraged women to initiate sex with their husbands while remaining subordinate in marriage, which proved to be challenging for postwar women and couples

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<sup>29</sup> Guy Talese, *Thy Neighbor's Wife* (New York, NY.: Harper Collins, 1980), 33; Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 84-8.

<sup>30</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 90-101; Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 229-244 ; “Sex Control,” in Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 77-96.

to navigate.<sup>31</sup> Debates about American sexuality in popular literature continued to present such competing claims to knowledge and authority.

The qualifications of what it meant to be an expert also changed towards the middle of the 1950s, shifting the authoritative voices from clergymen, physicians, and biologists to social scientists, sexologists, pulp novelists, and so called “sexperts,” who became prominent voices in magazines and newspapers. Many of these commentators were concerned that young Americans passively followed advice to contain sex exclusively to marriage and without proper rules and regulations, sexual deviancy posed a threat to national morality and security. These same critics also opposed a developing youth culture that centered around the rejection of puritanism.<sup>32</sup>

To assuage anxieties brought on by changing gender norms, experts presented a system of beliefs through advice columns and articles that attempted to control young people’s sexual experiences. However, the growing volume of expert literature created a breeding ground for contradictory rhetoric surrounding sex in popular culture. The more social scientists and experts discussed and prescribed advice regarding sexual experiences of men and women, topics of sex and sexuality grew more prevalent within the minds of American readers.<sup>33</sup> As a result, a more liberalized culture, helmed by sociological studies, rock music, films, pornography, and men’s magazines, began to respond to conservative calls for conformity by exploring and publicly unveiling the true state of sexuality in America. *Playboy* would later emerge as a response to and inversion of these

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<sup>31</sup> Weiss, *To Have and to Hold*, 1-14.

<sup>32</sup> Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 96; Reumann, *American Sexual Character*, 11; Julie Solow Stein, “Early to Wed: Teenage Marriage in Postwar America,” *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 6, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 368.

<sup>33</sup> Littauer, *Bad Girls*: 81-111; Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 87-92.

conservative voices, prescribing its own behaviours for men via its proposal for a new form of American manhood.

### ***Real vs. Imagined Ideals: The Culture Wars of the 1950s***

The apex of open discussion of American sexuality arrived with the publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behaviour of the Human Male* (1948), and *Sexual Behaviour of the Human Female* (1953). Kinsey's studies shocked the American public. Most alarming to conservatives, the reports demonstrated that much of sexual activity occurred outside of marriage. Furthermore, the reports suggested that many had violated accepted moral standards, practises, and laws in their pursuit of sexual pleasure.<sup>34</sup>

The Kinsey Reports initiated a public debate on the private sex lives of Americans. They also provided tangible evidence that many Americans did not subscribe to traditional sexual mores endorsed by religious and political ideologues. Kinsey argued that many of the sexual regulations that Americans lived by were meaningless, and that sexual behaviour was not something that could be easily prescribed or willingly followed. The idea of 'sex' thus shifted from its static biological nature into a broader discussion encompassing its place in American life and culture.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the report's findings exposed the relationship between codes of masculinity and actual male sexual behaviour, revealing that a surprising number of American men had homosexual experiences, sex with multiple partners, or engaged in pre- or extramarital sex.<sup>36</sup> These findings became a

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<sup>34</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company, 1948), 7-14.

<sup>35</sup> Reumann, *American Sexual Character*, 2-16; Kinsey, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*, 199-203.

<sup>36</sup> Kinsey, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*, 25-7.

perceived threat to American society, which normally presented husbands and fathers ideally as white, financially successful, able-bodied, and family-orientated. Social commentators argued that male sexual immorality posed a “crisis” of American masculinity, and therefore threatened a man’s ability to function as successful breadwinner and husband.<sup>37</sup>

Commentators like Schlesinger and Riesman further argued that men needed to resist an increased feminization of the workforce. Experts contended that the effects of conformity, suburban life, and mass culture were depicted as feminizing, and thus a threat to traditional, rugged, pre-war masculine ideals.<sup>38</sup> They proposed a solution to this problem resting upon the renewal of individualism, masculine vigor, and the reduction of feminine power in public spaces. Against the backdrop of men returning to a “feminized” workforce after the war, films such as *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and books like *The Lonely Crowd* helped to promote the fear of rugged masculinity in crisis. The idea of a “troubled masculinity” at the hands of women in the workforce, calls for egalitarian childrearing, and the conformity of mass consumption assailed men during the postwar period.<sup>39</sup>

As Gilbert notes, however, the prescribed narratives of traditional postwar masculinity, epitomized in the form of rugged cowboys, outdoorsmen, and military heroes, were not under actual threat. A dominant patriarchal gender system was indeed

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<sup>37</sup> Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 34-8.

<sup>38</sup> Courdileone, *Manhood in American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 124-5; Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 223-6.

<sup>39</sup> Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 4-8; “Men in Gray Flannel Suits: Troubling Masculinities in 1950s America,” *Gender Forum* 33 (2011): 1-4; Stephen Patnode, “Classified Masculinity in 1950s and 1960s Corporate America,” *Journal of Popular Culture* vol. 53 no. 3 (June 2020): 698.

alive and well. Instead, a host of postwar social changes, namely the growing roles of women in public spheres, engendered panic in some men. Women who became their own financial and sexual agents, although perceived by conservatives as a threat to masculinity, reflected more complicated postwar social ideologies that had been brewing long before the 1950s. Rather than true lived experience, the ‘crisis of masculinity’ reflected a conservative discourse that struggled to understand and define profound gender changes in American society after WWII.<sup>40</sup>

The opening discussion of sexuality in culture, and changing postwar mores of gender and sexuality, prompted some young men like Hugh Hefner to strike back against a conservative culture that defined the only suitable form of male sexual expression as existing within marriage. Hefner described himself as a “pamphleteer” for Kinsey’s findings, underlining their fundamental role in making male sexuality a topic of public interest within mass media. Hefner also claimed that American men and women were a “nation of hypocrites”, because as the Kinsey reports illuminated, over half engaged in premarital sex.<sup>41</sup>

As Kinsey and later Hefner suggested, Americans had been living outside of traditional sexual mores long before the 1950s. However, *Sexuality of the Human Male* and *Playboy*, did not exist in a vacuum. Despite calls from conservatives to batten down the hatches and return to pre-war values of family, gender, and sexuality, a non-puritan culture began to reflect loosening mores of sexuality that conservatives warned readers about. The 1950s were ripe with alternative expressions of gender and sexuality, and an

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<sup>40</sup> Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 3-7; Reumann, *American Sexual Character*, 78.

<sup>41</sup> Hugh Hefner, “The Playboy Philosophy: Part 5,” *Playboy*, April 1963, 65.

emerging postwar culture reflected these loosening mores.<sup>42</sup> American consumers had access to a host of non-hegemonic depictions of gender, race, and sexuality in American culture.<sup>43</sup> Kinsey's exposure of deviant sexuality, the sexually charged songs of rock music, films, pulp novels, erotic literature, and nationally circulated pin-up calendars, to name a few, were all widely available to consumers. Just as Kinsey's reports had demonstrated, the behaviours of Americans transcended the bounds of traditionalism.<sup>44</sup>

Conservative voices grew exasperated in the face of this culture willing to confront extramarital sexual pleasure, children born out of wedlock, mixed-race couples, and eroticized depictions of women on screens and in the pages of men's magazines. 1950s culture thus presented a complicated space where conservative and loosening sexual and gendered mores battled for competing claims of influence. Conservative calls for traditional behaviours of masculinity and femininity clashed with lived behaviours that rejected pre-war values of gender, family, and sex. These calls came as a shift occurred in postwar period: representations of gender and sexuality in culture no longer mirrored the dominant puritan values of the era that conservatives sought to prescribe.

Hefner's rendering of gender and sexuality in *Playboy* graphically challenged dominant social norms. However, pornographic, erotic, or sexually explicit images of women were not a new phenomenon of the postwar period. Before being placed under a high-brow veneer in men's lifestyle magazines such as *Esquire* and *Playboy* in the 1950s, sexually explicit imagery was widely consumed by American men. Erotic images of women, despite anti-pornography campaigns and conservative denouncements of

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<sup>42</sup> Littauer, *Bad Girls*, 1-17.

<sup>43</sup> Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 1-9.

<sup>44</sup> Reumann, *American Sexual Character*, 1-4; Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 77-85.

obscenity, adorned print culture.<sup>45</sup> To understand the impact of *Playboy* in postwar culture, and how this culture affected men's perceptions of gender and sexuality, it is thus essential to historicize the growing significance of print pornography and men's magazines to men in twentieth century America. More importantly, it is essential to consider that *Playboy*'s readers, much like Hefner, were being trained to look at submissive and erotic representations of women in pornography, in the decades leading up to the magazine.

As Meyerowitz, Maria Elaena Buszek, and Kenon Breazeale note, eroticized images of nude and semi-nude women proliferated in print culture long before *Playboy*. By the 1930s, sexualized images of women became commonplace. For example, pulp magazines featured covers of scantily clad damsels in distress to attract male readers, setting the stage for the eroticization of submissive femininity. Print media began to push the boundaries of erotic imagery, as pin-ups shifted from underground into public spheres. Businessmen commodified illustrations of naked actresses and models for mass-produced 'pin-up girl' calendars that gained popularity towards the end of the 1930s. *Esquire* magazines began to place its Varga Girl pin-ups between articles about upper-class leisure, fashion, and consumption, broadening the pin-ups' audience wider still. Towards the early 1940s, news and entertainment magazines also began to publish black and white pin-ups of American and European actresses alongside interviews or features, setting the stage for some of *Playboy*'s most popular features.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Kenon Breazeale, "In Spite of Women: "Esquire" Magazine and the Construction of the Male Consumer," *Signs* 20, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): 2-3; Andrea Friedman, "Sadists and Sissies: Anti-pornography Campaigns in Cold War America," *Gender & History* 15, no. 2 (August 2003): 203.

<sup>46</sup> Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material," 11-17; Buszek, *Pin-Up-Grrrls*, 3-7; Breazeale, "In Spite of Women," 1-4; Erin Smith, "Dressed to Kill: Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction,

During World War II, heterosexual servicemen found sexual outlets via men's magazines and pin-ups as an alternative to prostitution. Cheap wartime magazines such as *YANK* and *Stag* were designed with morale boosting in mind, while The United Service Organization distributed prints of models and celebrities. Entertainment magazines also became a popular source for pin-ups during the war. Actresses posed seductively in images that accompanied articles about their latest films in *Life* magazine, setting the trend for images of popular starlets featured within entertainment magazines. Images of Chili Williams and Rita Hayworth in *Life* spawned over ten-thousand letters from soldiers, requesting the pin-ups be reprinted.<sup>47</sup> Even before *Playboy*, male readers were expressing sentiments about the importance of pin-ups to their own sexualities.

Beyond wartime pin-ups, the postwar period was privy to an explosion of magazines targeting male consumers. Between 1952 and 1961 alone, over one-hundred men's magazines were born in the US, with some only lasting a few issues while others lasted decades. Prior to *Playboy*'s first issue in 1953, nationally circulated men's magazines fit into several categories including adventure, sports, hunting and fishing, DIY, consumer, and "Cheesecake" magazines that featured pin-ups, cartoons, and sexual humour. During the 1950s, men had access to a 'newsstand striptease'. With their vibrant covers, depictions of heightened sexuality, men's magazines promised to provide escapism and entertainment at a reasonable cost.<sup>48</sup>

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Working Class Consumers, and Pulp Magazines," *Colby College Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (January 2006): 12-14; Bill Osgerby, "Giving 'Em Hell: Conflicted Masculinity in the American 'True Adventure' Pulps of the 1950s," *Media History* 23, no. 1 (2017): 28-38. Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material," 12; Buszek, 233-44.

<sup>47</sup> Mock, "Getting Comfortable," 368; Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls*, 185-99.

<sup>48</sup> David M. Earle, *All Man! Hemmingway*, 2-14.

Hugh Hefner's views on gender and sexual behaviour, and by proxy, some of his reader's views, formed within the context of postwar print culture. He came of age alongside this changing landscape of men's magazines, ultimately leading to the formation of *Playboy*. Born in Chicago in 1926, Hefner spent much of his early life in Chicago's Northwest suburbs raised by his father, an accountant at an aluminium factory and his mother who worked as a primary school teacher prior to marriage.<sup>49</sup> His Methodist upbringing, paired with the cultural and social shifts of the 1930s-1950s, played a heavy hand in forming *Playboy*. His interest in a sexual rebellion, however, had roots long before he became the "Czar of the Bunny Empire".<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Gay Talese, *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> Bill Davidson, "Czar of the Bunny Empire," *Saturday Evening Post*, April 28, 1962, 24.

### CHAPTER 3

#### “A Nation of Hypocrites”: Hugh Hefner and *Playboy*’s Ideologies on Gender, Marriage, the Workplace, and Sexuality in Postwar Society

Hugh Hefner’s ideologies informed by postwar print culture and personal experiences, had deep roots that would later flower into reader letters to the magazine. Furthermore, many of *Playboy*’s readers would have had a similar upbringing to Hefner in the shifting cultural tides of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Hefner’s personal adolescent experiences and relationship with sex, women, and pornography, illustrate his own psychosexual formation and the impact it had on the culture he created. His strained parental relationship and conservative upbringing, a sexual awakening via men’s magazines, and his pre-and extramarital sexual experiences were all factors that led to the formation of the *Playboy philosophy* on gender and sexuality.

Hefner used *Playboy* to disseminate his musings on society, marriage, and sex. He initially created the ideal “Playboy” based on his own personal longings and aspirations outside of marriage and fatherhood.<sup>51</sup> He used his new magazine to craft the vision of an alternative breed of single, urban, sexually active men engaged closely with consumer society. He sought to project an alternative version of American masculinity that promoted financial affluence, sexual freedom, and leisure as its pinnacles of success. In no way an affluent bachelor himself before the publication of *Playboy*, Hefner used his magazine to craft a new version of American manhood with male sexual pleasure at its

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<sup>51</sup> *The Most*, directed by Richard Ballentine and Gordon Sheppard, featuring Hugh Hefner (Canadian Broadcasting Company, 1962); Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America*, 25; Mock, “Getting Comfortable,” 365.

core. Hefner's idealized form of postwar masculinity, however, had consequences on the way its readers perceived gender and sexuality.

As this chapter makes evident, *Playboy's* ideologies, much like the conservative culture that Hefner denounced, continued to subordinate women in the gendered order of the postwar period. The magazine idealized a version of subordinate femininity in four spheres: courtship, marriage, sex lives, and the workplace. By presenting women as submissive to men in these arenas, *Playboy* continued to subordinate women in a way that mirrored conservatism, despite scholars noting that the magazine represented liberal sexuality or sexual rebellion prior to the 1960s.<sup>52</sup> As an analysis of *Playboy's* ideologies on femininity illuminates, more so than producing a new form of postwar masculinity, the magazine continued to retain many pre-war expectations of femininity and female heterosexuality. As a result, *Playboy's* first decade did not encourage sexual autonomy for both men and women. It championed male sexuality above all else. These ideologies and expectations on gender, sex, and heterosexual relationships, however, had roots in Hefner's life before he became the model of manhood he sought to create amongst his consumer base: an affluent, sexually rebellious, independent bachelor.

### ***“Blessed be the rebel”: The Pre-Playboy Hefner***

Hefner avowed that his interests in sexual behaviour formed at an early age, claiming that his parent's lack of physical affection towards each other led to his own hyper-awareness of repression and censorship. He asserted that his father was a “remote, repressed man

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<sup>52</sup> Fratterigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America*, 1-15; Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise*, 22-53; Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 42-51.

who seldom revealed his feelings to his family” and spent most of his time at work. Hefner also characterized his mother as “sexually demure”, who, like his father, was “raised in an atmosphere of pious fundamentalism that she sought to preserve in twentieth-century Chicago.” Hefner noted that his formative years fostered a desire to reject conservative mores that oppressed sexuality and fostered the “unhappy” marriages of the 1940s and 1950s. Beyond his home life, Hefner’s introduction to men’s magazine fed his rejection of sexual puritanism.<sup>53</sup>

Hefner claimed he blossomed at school and social circles upon discovering men’s magazines and pin-ups. He first read *Esquire* at age thirteen when visiting a classmate’s house. The magazine mesmerized him with its full-colour fold-out illustrations of Varga Girl, leading him to decorate his room with pin-ups from men’s magazines. His own drawings, which once sprawled across his bedroom floor, eventually appeared in his high school’s newspaper. When he became the paper’s editor, Hefner meticulously chronicled and observed the social lives of his peers, a practise he continued in *Playboy*’s editorials and pictorials two decades later.<sup>54</sup>

Hefner’s personal experiences reflected the sexual landscape of America that Kinsey unveiled to the public in 1948. Hefner’s first sexual relationship occurred when he met his future wife, Mildred Williams, after graduating high school in 1944. While stationed in the U.S. Army, he wrote to Williams often, reflecting that even though he

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<sup>53</sup> Hugh Hefner, “The Last Word: Hugh Hefner,” interview by *New York Times*, November 27, 2008; Talese, “The Erotic History of Hugh Hefner Part 1: The Real-Life Fantasy and the Beginnings,” *Esquire* (November 1979), 1; Hugh Hefner, “The Playboy Philosophy Part 9: Sexual Behaviour,” *Playboy* (July 1963), 68; “Mike Wallace Interviews *Playboy*: Some Questions and Answers on Our Fourth Anniversary,” *Playboy* (December 1957), 87.

<sup>54</sup> Talese, “The Erotic History of Hugh Hefner Part 1,” 70; Steinmetz Academic Centre, *Steinmetz High School’s Silver Streak 1944 Yearbook* (Chicago, IL: Graduating Class of 1944, 1944), 34.

hardly knew her, she had become “intimately involved” in his fantasies and his “future expectations” of sex. Hefner noted that he repeatedly tried to seduce Williams, but she insisted that they wait until marriage, a reflection of her conservative Catholic upbringing. Along with worries about rebelling against her family’s puritan values, postwar adolescent women like Williams feared pregnancy, and faced the challenging role of being alluring to potential partners, while also upholding chastity. Hefner, on the other hand, felt anxious about being twenty-two years old and unlike many of his peers at the University of Illinois, still a virgin. Three months into their courtship, Hefner and Williams engaged in mutual masturbation and fellatio in a common place for American adolescents having their first foray into sex: in the back seat of a car. In the months leading up to their marriage, they regularly had intercourse during the day at Hefner’s home while his parents were at work.<sup>55</sup>

During their courtship, Williams and Hefner freely deviated from prevailing conservative sexual mores. Their actions allude to the broader sexual rebellion among conservatively raised Americans brewing long before the 1960s. Despite the puritanical posture of American culture and politics, many adolescent Americans like Hefner and Williams had sexual experiences before marriage. During their courtship, Williams admitted that she cheated on Hefner. She later reflected that, like other postwar period women who had premarital sex with partners other than their husbands, she perceived it poisoned her ability to appear attractive to her future husband, and that she would be

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<sup>55</sup> Talese, *Thy Neighbor’s Wife*, 37-40; Bailey, *From Front Porth to Back Seat*, 80-2.

unsuccessful in fulfilling his sexual desires. Despite the affair, Hefner and Williams married in 1949, and welcomed their first child in 1951.<sup>56</sup>

After university, Hefner worked in *Esquire's* circulation department. Unsatisfied with the standard of the magazines he worked at, he decided to take out loans and start his own publication in late 1953. Reflecting on the countless pin-up pictures he collected, Hefner recognized that most American men's magazines lacked the quality content, or the overt discourse on the state of sexuality in America, to match the tantalizing images inside. In *Playboy's* opening editorial in December 1953, he claimed his magazine was "filling a publishing need only slightly less important than the one just taken care of by the Kinsey Report."<sup>57</sup>

Hefner's dissatisfaction with his own personal life also led to mainstays of *Playboy's* ethos in its first decade. He became disappointed in his marriage to Williams, their diminishing sex life due to the responsibilities and pressures of shared parenthood, and the expectations of being a present father and primary family wage earner. His desire to flee from what he perceived as the "trap" of marriage and monotonous restrictions of family life made up the ideological pillars of *Playboy*. For Hefner, the magazine symbolized a "solution" to a substantial problem plaguing postwar men: the inhibiting social conventions of marriage and family on male sexual pleasure. Reflecting on early postwar society, he mused, "it became clear that our commonly accepted sexual mores were woefully unrealistic and our sex laws totally unrelated to the facts of human

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<sup>56</sup> Talese, "The Erotic History of Hugh Hefner Part 1," 71; May, *Homeward Bound*, 115; Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America*, 20.

<sup>57</sup> "Volume I, Number I," *Playboy* (December 1953), 3.

behaviour ... America is a nation of hypocrites.”<sup>58</sup> Following his own ethos, he continuously had extramarital affairs up until his divorce from Williams in 1959.<sup>59</sup>

Hefner’s own hedonistic desires, informed by the sexualized imagery in the culture he consumed, helped to cultivate *Playboy*’s ideologies on gender, family, women in the workplace, and sexual behaviour. For Hefner, *Playboy* served as a space to critique contemporary society, and much like social experts of the postwar period, a podium from which to prescribe sexual and gendered mores. Hefner’s pre- and extramarital sexual experiences, frustration with conservative expectations of hands-on childrearing, and his own misgivings towards the “shackles” of male breadwinning, all found expression in *Playboy*’s articles, pictorials, and editorials. “Blessed is the rebel,” Hefner noted in 1956, “without him there would be no progress.”<sup>60</sup>

### ***“We aren’t a family magazine”: Playboy on Marriage and Wives***

Hefner’s own frustrations, combined with content written by men on his writing staff, helped to inform the magazine’s ideologies on family and marriage. Despite mirroring conservative values that subordinated women in sex, courtship, and the workplace, *Playboy* did reject traditionalist ideologies that placed family at the centre of postwar society. The magazine vilified wives, sex confined to marriage, and fatherhood. It also pointed fingers at marriage as one of the primary obstacles standing between male

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<sup>58</sup> Hefner, “The Playboy Philosophy Part 5,” *Playboy* (April 1963), 68.

<sup>59</sup> L. Rust Hills, “Hugh M. Hefner: A Candid Conversation with *Playboy*’s Publisher, Philosopher, and Philanthropist,” *Esquire* (December 1970), 284; “Hefner Sued by Wife for Divorce,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 19, 1959, 11.

<sup>60</sup> Hefner, “The Playboy Philosophy,” *Playboy* (December 1962), 140; “Playbill,” *Playboy* (August 1956), 2.

readers and life's greatest pleasures: sex and money.<sup>61</sup> Those who read *Playboy's* inaugural issue received a message from Hefner on its first page: "We want to make clear from the very start, we aren't a 'family magazine.' If you're somebody's sister, wife or mother-in-law and picked us up by mistake, please pass us along to the man in your life and get back to your *Ladies Home Companion*."<sup>62</sup>

*Playboy's* blueprint for an "improved" masculinity started with a rejection of marriage and family. Hefner proposed to prolong the life stages of courtship and adolescent sexual promiscuity before marriage. The magazine also constructed wives as antagonists to the male pursuit of sexual pleasure and leisure, and often characterized them as "wenches" who put their own financial interests above their husband's individuality. Women, staff-writer William Iverson warned, only wanted to marry for financial gain. "Women only want one thing-and that's marriage. If she goes to college, it isn't for an education", a 1954 article stated. "She's interested in just one subject—animal husbandry. And you're the animal."<sup>63</sup>

Similar articles warned how millions of American bachelors became "employed" in the "soul-crushing" job of husband. Editorials expressed that many young men married for the promise of perpetual love and sex, which dwindled quickly once couples began having children.<sup>64</sup> According to Hefner, marriage was the "calculated exploitation of

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<sup>61</sup> Burt Zollo, "Open Season for Bachelors," *Playboy* (June 1954), 37; Charles Armstrong, "One Man's Meat," *Playboy* (June 1954), 11; Jay Smith, "A Vote for Polygamy: The One Wife System is for the Birds," *Playboy* (July 1955), 15; Shepard Mead, "The Dream House and How to Avoid it," *Playboy* (July 1956), 54; Hefner, "The Playboy Philosophy Part 2: The Invisible Man," *Playboy* (January 1963), 51.

<sup>62</sup> "Volume I, Number I," *Playboy* (December 1953), 3.

<sup>63</sup> William Iverson, "Love, Death, and the Hubby Image," *Playboy* (December 1960), 91; Bob Norma, "Miss Gold Digger 1953," *Playboy* (December 1953), 6-8; Zollo, "Open Season for Bachelors," *Playboy* (June 1954), 32.

<sup>64</sup> Mead, "Selecting Your First Wife," *Playboy*, April 1956, 30.

men's dreams" by wives who drained their husbands financially and emotionally. *Playboy* also warned readers to be wary of "those girls who regard pregnancy as a convenient lasso with which to drag men to the altar."<sup>65</sup> Unlike other lifestyle magazines of the era, advice on fatherhood and being a model husband was nowhere to be found.

Hefner claimed that confining sex to marriage and only one partner was "closing oneself off from experience and sensation and knowledge" and thus made men only "half alive". He also believed that wives who limited marital sex for the strict purpose of procreation were denying men "one of the most profound and rewarding elements in the adventure of living."<sup>66</sup> The magazine presented wives as frigid sexually, especially after becoming mothers. Sex outside of the marital bed was also a popular topic. *Playboy* demeaned monogamy while championing polygamy and divorce. Just as Hefner pursued extramarital sexual affairs, he and his writing staff encouraged readers to do the same. Articles often cited sociological and scientific studies to back up claims that men should be guilt-free when they felt sexual desire for more than one woman. It was only "natural", *Playboy* claimed, for a man to pursue and achieve sexual pleasure throughout his life, especially before and during the family lifecycle.<sup>67</sup>

A 1956 article, "Choosing Your First Wife," preached that "the man who marries for sex alone will truly regret it ... you will find far more sex outside of wedlock than

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<sup>65</sup> Iverson, "Love, Death, and the Hubby Image", *Playboy* (December 1960), 91-4; Jules Archer, "Don't Hate Yourself in the Morning: You Weren't the Only One Having Fun," *Playboy* (August 1955), 50.

<sup>66</sup> Hefner, "The Playboy Philosophy Part 5: Yet to Come," 65-6.

<sup>67</sup> Archer, "Don't Hate Yourself in the Morning," *Playboy* (August 1955), 48; Armstrong, "One Man's Meat," *Playboy* (June 1954), 10; Smith, "Virginity: An Important Treatise on a Very Important Subject," *Playboy* (September 1954), 11; Archer, "Will She or Won't She? A New Way to Answer the Age-Old Question," *Playboy* (January 1956), 13; T.K. Brown III, "Oh Mistress His: The Guide to Getting the Other Guy's Girl," *Playboy* (April 1960), 77-8.

within it.”<sup>68</sup> According to *Playboy*, however, the best remedy for men to counter societal expectations of family and masculinity, was to refrain from marriage altogether and explore their sexualities as individuals. “What do we get out of Monogamy?” *Playboy* asked readers in 1955. “Nerves, anxiety, manic-depression, premature impotence ... and more than two million frigid, frustrated female shrews.”<sup>69</sup>

Although *Playboy* placed marriage as an obstacle to male sexual fulfillment, if men were to marry, it encouraged them to retain pre-war ideals of gender in marriage. *Playboy*'s stance on wives echoed a Victorian double-standard of assuming they were less sexually autonomous than men, stressing that polygamy was a natural desire for men, and that women were more attached to the idea of monogamy.<sup>70</sup> Wives that desired polygamy, *Playboy* warned, could also lead to trouble. A husband that failed to keep his wife's attention alongside that of his mistress, could “backfire and make a woman feel she is too good for you.”<sup>71</sup> *Playboy*'s editorials stressed that a key to its alternative form of masculinity was found within a man's ability to freely explore his sexuality without the shackles of marriage, wives, and domesticity. “What we believe in, first and foremost,” Hefner stated, “is the individual-and in his right to be an individual.”<sup>72</sup>

*Playboy* made its consensus overtly clear: individualism and male dominance over women within the contexts of marriage, courtship, and sex were essential to its alternative form of postwar masculinity. Seeking male dominance over women, however,

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<sup>68</sup> Mead, “Selecting Your Second Wife,” *Playboy* (November 1956), 68-9.

<sup>69</sup> Smith, “A Vote for Polygamy: The One Wife System is for the Birds,” *Playboy* (July 1955), 16.

<sup>70</sup> Christina Simmons, “Introduction,” in *A Cultural History of Marriage in the Modern Age* ed. Christina Simmons, vol. 6 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 6-8.

<sup>71</sup> Mead, “How to Keep Your Wife in Love with You,” *Playboy* (June 1956), 45.

<sup>72</sup> Hefner, “The Playboy Philosophy Part 8: Stimulation and Sublimation,” *Playboy* (July 1963), 65.

was nothing new. Despite its “rebellious” veneer, *Playboy* emulated a conservative ethos that placed men at the head of the postwar home, the workplace, family finances, and female sexuality. Hefner was just repackaging traditional ideals of masculinity in the *Playboy philosophy*. Furthermore, the magazine promised the reward of sexual pleasure, as well as personal and financial freedom, to men who followed its new formula of modern manhood. Outside of its articles critiquing marriage and family, *Playboy* also used its erotic images of women to solidify its own brand of postwar femininity and heterosexuality that would later reaffirm themselves in reader letters. This is most evident in *Playboy*'s construction of its two most popular Playmates: the single working girl and the Girl Next Door.

***Playmates and Perception: 'The Single Working Girl' and 'Girl Next Door'***

*Playboy* subordinated women to male desire by presenting them as sexual objects.

Despite Hefner vouching for all Americans to “thaw” their puritanical views on sex, his magazine presented an extremely myopic version of sexuality that hindered the social progression of women. It did this by denouncing women who did not possess conventional beauty, women who pursued careers or marriage, working class women who were not promiscuous, and women of colour, in favour of women who upheld pre-war traditional femininity save chaste sexuality. Even so, female promiscuity was to benefit men. This hedonism is exemplified via *Playboy*'s two most popular Playmate archetypes among male readers in its first decade: the single working girl and the ‘Girl Next Door’. Furthermore, written content accompanying working girl and Girl Next Door Playmates reinforced *Playboy*'s function as a guide to male behaviour. By teaching men how to spot the ideal form of submissive, sexually willing women in its two most popular

Playmates, *Playboy* was training men to expect or seek out these incarnations of femininity in their daily lives.

The single working girl Playmate represented sexually liberal women that readers could find in their own daily lives. She was constructed as a young, unmarried woman, who sought sexually to please men, rather than gain financial security through marriage, thus making her the ideal temporary sexual companion. She was often envisioned as a secretary, retail worker, or office worker in a menial job, rather than being in a position of authority, as to not upset the gendered order of the workplace.<sup>73</sup> *Playboy* clarified that working girls had no affiliation with “Career Women” who sought career mobility or pursued careers traditionally held by men. The magazine perceived these women as threats in postwar workspaces, exhibiting that *Playboy* was part of a postwar discourse that warned against a “Womanized” society. As one article in January 1957 noted: “A woman executive is any woman who can wear her hat in the office. This is a symbol that she has broken out of her place in the system so wisely drawn up to protect you.”<sup>74</sup>

The working girl was expected to bring a comforting aspect of domesticity to professional sphere. In this sense, she resembled a pre-war version of femininity that expected women to be caretakers exclusively. Firstly, she was expected to care for men as a wife would, whilst presenting herself as simultaneously alluring and chaste.<sup>75</sup> Secondly, she existed outside of the world of housework and childcare, bringing an acceptable amount of sexuality to the workplace. “A woman's place is in her place, and

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<sup>73</sup> “Janet’s Date at Dartmouth: An Ivy Weekend with *Playboy*’s Office Playmate,” *Playboy* (October 1956), 41; “Miss April 1957,” *Playboy* (April 1957), 40-1.

<sup>74</sup> Mead, “The Handling of Women in Business,” *Playboy* (January 1957), 53.

<sup>75</sup> Berebitsky, *Sex and the Office*, 141-53; Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 10.

this is true both at home (as we have seen) and in the office,” *Playboy* noted, “Once you have [eliminated] the women executives, you will be left comfortably with the bare-headed women of the office force, women trained to be the handmaidens of the modern businessman.”<sup>76</sup> Within the world of *Playboy*, the working girl also embodied an ornamental advantage of male career mobility. By following the magazine’s advice on women, the reader could attract the single working girl and the promised sexual pleasure.<sup>77</sup>

*Playboy* eroticized the workplace, and more specifically, the office. Furthermore, it perpetuated sexual harassment in the workplace, which as Julie Berebitsky concludes, was prevalent since women began to work in American offices from the 1890s onward.<sup>78</sup> Janet Pilgrim, who worked at *Playboy* while dating still-married Hefner, was featured as July 1955’s Playmate of the Month to remind readers just how “easy” working girl Playmates were to spot in their own workplaces. The caption revealed that she worked in the magazine’s subscription department and suggested that potential Playmates were all around the reader’s world as “the new secretary” or “the girl who sells you shirts and ties at your favourite store”. Hefner later explained that when Pilgrim asked him for a new addressograph machine, he promised to get her one if she posed for the magazine.<sup>79</sup> The narrative of the ‘Office Playmate’ presented Pilgrim as the definitive representation of the sexually alluring yet devoted single working girl who was willing to shed her clothing for

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<sup>76</sup> Mead, “The Handling of Women in Business,” *Playboy* (January 1957), 54.

<sup>77</sup> “Miss December Ellen Stratton: Competent, Relevant, and Material,” *Playboy* (December 1959), 52-3; “Playmate of the Year: Legal Secretary Ellen Stratton Reviews her Case,” *Playboy* (June 1960), 69-71; Harlan Draper, “Some Guys Get it, Some Guys Don’t and Here’s Why,” *Playboy* (July 1956), 27.

<sup>78</sup> Julie Berebitsky, *Sex in the Office: A History of Gender, Power, and Desire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 1-5.

<sup>79</sup> “*Playboy*’s Office Playmate,” *Playboy* (July 1955), 29-30; “Playbill,” *Playboy* (September 1955), 1; “A Holiday Evening with Janet Pilgrim,” *Playboy* (December 1955), 29-33.

her boss and the company she worked for when asked. *Playboy* thus made it permissive for men to request sexual or personal favours from women in the workplace, fostering an environment where sexual harassment was accepted and encouraged.

The June 1958 “Photograph Your Own Playmate” feature also demonstrated to readers just how easy it was to spot their own workplace Playmate. The article offered readers instructions on the process of photographing their own pinup, while stating that “we find our Playmates in lingerie shops, airplanes, country clubs -- and in our own offices.” The article featured Judy Lee Tomerlin, an 18-year-old receptionist who worked in *Playboy*’s offices. The article detailed the process of Tomerlin agreeing to the photoshoot. “Modeling experience, professional or amateur: none. Perfect for our purpose...[she] did the proper amount of hemming and hawing for a couple of days; then, finally, she said ‘Yes’”.<sup>80</sup> According to *Playboy*, women need not be professional models to exude sex appeal and inspire sexual fantasy. It also stressed that sexually active women could be found in different incarnations outside of the reader’s own workplace, even if they needed encouragement stepping out of their “puritanical” shells.<sup>81</sup> The most popular archetype of this chaste, yet sexually aware women, was found in the form of the ‘Girl Next Door’ Playmate.

‘Girl Next Door’ Playmates, the magazine remarked, could be found anywhere by readers if they looked hard enough. Unlike the single working girl or foreign film starlets, she was not initially open about her own sexuality or sexual desires as other Playmates. Often painted as demure, shy, or she might need extra reassurance that her morals would

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<sup>80</sup> “Photographing Your Own Playmate: One of Our Office Girls Hells Us Show You How to Take a Prize Pin-up Photo,” *Playboy* (June 1958), 38-43.

<sup>81</sup> Smith, “A Vote for Polygamy,” *Playboy* (July 1955), 17.

not be compromised by posing for photographs.<sup>82</sup> One of the key attributes of the ‘Girl Next Door’ was that she was unaware of her own sexual allure. However, once encouraged by the reader, and cognizant of her own sexual autonomy, she became the ideal erotic and daring sexual companion. *Playboy* stressed that it was up to its readers to make The Girl Next door aware and assured of her un-tapped sexual potential.<sup>83</sup>

Towards the end of the 1950s, *Playboy* served as a guide to navigating through the companionship stage of dating into sex, offering readers a glimpse of what attaining sexual pleasure may look like. Centrefold spreads showcased narratives of how Playmates got from being fully clothed going about her hobbies, work, or domestic chores, to the ultimate image: a full-colour nude or semi-nude pin-up. Captions frequently described in detail how *Playboy* staff “encouraged” Playmates to remove their clothes and pose more explicitly for the camera. A popular trope featured *Playboy* “catching” a Playmate in the act of getting dressed for an evening out with a suitor or friends, but thanks to the magazine’s “charm”, deciding to stay in and un-dress or “play” with them instead.<sup>84</sup> Pictorials also used the camera as a lens into the private and professional lives of women, eroticizing images of actresses changing into costumes behind the curtain, women at the beach, pool, or trying on clothes in the changeroom with their friends. At times, the magazine encouraged men to look beyond its pin-ups to find

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<sup>82</sup> “Miss December Spends a Balmy Yule Poolside,” *Playboy* (December 1956), 42; “Miss August Imparts New Meaning to the Love Thy Neighbor Bit: The Girl Next Door,” *Playboy* (August 1957), 33; “Miss May,” *Playboy* (May 1957), 38-9; “Small Town Playmate,” *Playboy* (November 1957), 43; “Schoolmate Playmate: Miss January is a Bouncy Teenager,” *Playboy* (January 1958), 35.

<sup>83</sup> “Playmate of the Year 1957: A Shy, Shapely Lisa Tops the Popular Playmate Bill,” *Playboy* (December 1957), 20-1; “Miss May 1958,” *Playboy* (May 1958), 40-3.

<sup>84</sup> “Photographing Your Own Playmate,” *Playboy* (June 1958), 38-43; “Alone with Lisa,” *Playboy* (December 1957), 54; “Miss October: College Playmate,” *Playboy* (October 1955), 33; “Miss February 1957,” *Playboy* (February 1957), 32.

their own opportunities-sometimes via voyeurism-to eroticize women in the world around them.<sup>85</sup>

*Playboy's* pin-ups created a window into the private lives of women, making them sexualized objects. Despite the magazine's pretense of a "high class" approach to sex, and the recognition postwar women enjoyed sex just as much as men, *Playboy's* eroticizing of conventionally attractive women to be looked at made its sexual politics singularly male fantasy. In doing so, *Playboy* embraced the flux of women entering the workforce, their growing sexual autonomy, and growing postwar trends of divorce, pre-marital sex, and contraceptive methods, so long as it benefited male sexuality and *Playboy's* own alternative model of postwar masculinity.

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<sup>85</sup> "A Playmate Holliday House Party," *Playboy* (December 1961), 100-5; "A Stripper Goes to College: Bumps and Grinds in the World of Academia," *Playboy* (October 1955), 11; "Playboy's Yacht Party: A Carefree Crew of Beauties," *Playboy* (July 1957), 52-9; "View from a Penthouse," *Playboy* (August 1957), 53-5; "The Bosom in Hollywood," *Playboy* (August 1959), 70-4; "The Playboy Club: Its Members Hold the Key to Sophisticated Pleasure," *Playboy* (August 1960), 23-5.

## CHAPTER 4

### “If Only We had More Girls Like the Playmates”: Reader Responses to *Playboy*

This chapter primarily considers male reactions to *Playboy*'s ideologies and images via reader letters written to “Dear Playboy” and the “Playboy Advisor.” Letters from men are analyzed to paint a portrait of how students and servicemen, single and married male readers reacted to the magazine's depictions of gender and sexuality, and how these ideologies informed behaviours in their lives. An analysis of letters from female readers follows, as this discourse illuminates the consequences of male behaviour learned from *Playboy*. Working women, girlfriends, female students, and wives' reactions to *Playboy* exhibit how *Playboy* helped to preserve pre-war expectations of femininity and feminine sexuality through the words of women who were most effected by them. Letters from female readers are particularly significant in that they reveal how women perceived the effects of *Playboy*'s ideologies in their lives and that of the men around them. Female correspondence also offers a glimpse into how *Playboy*'s expectations of femininity manifested in that of their male peers, colleagues, boyfriends, or husbands.

Reader letters are examined within four different contexts: university campuses and the military, the workplace, marriage, and courtship. The discussion of each utilizes published letters to construct an understanding of how readers digested, understood, or reproduced the magazine's editorials and images. First, it considers how ideals of femininity were constructed in the traditionally all-male spaces of dormitories, ships, or military camps. Specifically, it examines how *Playboy* created a space for men to discuss ideals of femininity and sexuality. As letters from female students note, the learned behaviours from *Playboy* had a significant impact on how their boyfriends or male peers

constructed their expectations in courtship, which reinforce pre-war ideals of submissive femininity. Second, it illuminates *Playboy's* impact on the hyper-sexualization of women in the workplace, and how the magazine perpetrated the male fear of the "Womanization" of the American workforce, mirroring concerns from conservatives in the 1950s that painted this development as disrupting gender roles in the home and domestic sphere. Letters from blue and white-collar working men demonstrate that readers cultivated their attitude towards women in the workplace via the magazine's hyper-sexualization and vilification of working women. Correspondence from working women, who recognized they were being sexually harassed, or themselves sexually objectified, confirms that *Playboy's* ideologies transcended its pages.

The third section examines the purported antagonization of wives and marriage towards male sexual pleasure and financial independence. This illuminates how *Playboy*, while still mirroring pre-war ideologies that sought to preserve male dominance over men in sex and marriage, rebelled against conservative ideals that placed family at the centre of American society. Reader discourse illuminates that many postwar men shared *Playboy's* negative sentiments on marriage and monogamy. Letters from wives also illuminate how *Playboy* informed their husband's expectations of ideal femininity and feminine sexuality, exhibiting how despite shifting roles of sex and gender in marriage, the magazine sought to preserve traditional ideals that placed male sexual fulfillment in marriage above female.

The final section investigates how *Playboy* acted as a guide to male behaviour, informing their expectations of women within the context of courtship and sex. Men mirroring *Playboy's* ideologies within their letters also underscore the magazine's

broader significance to postwar society. Not only did the magazine *proselytize* men to practise its signature brand of masculinity, but it also consequently impacted the way men thought about and performed gender and sexuality. As reader letters reveal, a significant number of postwar men expected women to behave submissively within the spaces of college campuses, workplaces, marriages, courtship, or sexual relationships. Each of the following sections demonstrates that through a celebration of male sexuality and the dismissal of female individuality, equity, and sexual autonomy, *Playboy* informed male behaviour while facilitating women's subordination in the 1950s via its broad readership. This makes evident that despite being a self-proclaimed rebellion, *Playboy* still reinforced pre-war codes of gender and sexuality.

#### ***All I Do is Dream of You: Student and Servicemen's Responses to Playmates***

Letters from students and servicemen offer an insight as to how specific attributes of Playmates, both physical and behavioural, informed adolescent men's own expectations of women. Even though many soldiers and servicemen wrote from all male spaces and had access to prostitutes to satiate their sexual appetites, many of their ideals of femininity were still rooted in the fantasy of Playmates. It is important to consider how these ideologies, cultivated in sexual fantasy, would later manifest in the expectations they had towards girlfriends and wives. These letters also reveal that *Playboy* contributed to comradery and male-bonding. In discussing the magazine's Playmates, students and servicemen were able to create spaces where *Playboy's* ideas of femininity could overflow into broader male discourse when they returned home from service.

It is evident that *Playboy's* construction of gender and heterosexuality, along with its erotic images of women, were deeply engrained in the lives of students and servicemen. Men were vocal about the importance of *Playboy* and its Playmates in their lives. Much like a young Hefner, they too decorated the walls of their dormitories, sleeping quarters, or lockers, with pin-ups.<sup>86</sup> *Playboy's* presence was felt on campuses across the United States, leading one student to comment, "*Playboy* has hit the University of Oklahoma campus like nothing before. It is in the process of replacing women in the men's dorms."<sup>87</sup> The magazine was also an integral sexual outlet for servicemen abroad, as First Lieutenant William Rishel noted in a 1954 letter. "Your magazine was great in the states, but here in Guam it will have to take the place of sex!"<sup>88</sup>

Students and servicemen frequently requested reprints of their favourite models (along with their measurements, more details about their personal lives, and mailing addresses) or suggested women they wanted to see pose for future issues.<sup>89</sup> Officers expressed how *Playboy* boosted the morale of their crews and elaborated on how the magazine was seemingly found in all nooks and crannies of military bases and ships. "At present nearly every man in my section has *Playboy* Playmates on the inside of his wall locker door. It sure has been a pleasure to make my inspections since Miss December was

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<sup>86</sup> Letter from Rodger Egelhoff, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (November 1954), 4; Letter from Pat MacAnally, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (March 1955), 3; Letter from Marvin D. Wellner, for the boys from the Snake Pit, U.S.S. Northampton, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (May 1955), 6.

<sup>87</sup> Letter from Jack Welsh, "Dear Playboy," (April 1954), 3.

<sup>88</sup> Letter from First Lieutenant William L. Rishel, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (September 1954), 3.

<sup>89</sup> Letter from R.C. Wilson, "Dear Playboy," (April 1956), 2; Letter from Bob Lingle, "Dear Playboy," (July 1955), 2; Letter from Doyle Vergon, "Dear Playboy," (May 1954), 4; Letter from Duane E. Stordahl, "Dear Playboy," (May 1954), 3; Letter from Second Lieutenant Thomas A. Olsen, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (March 1958), 7.

published,” Captain R.L. Collins wrote enthusiastically from Fort Bragg, North Carolina.<sup>90</sup>

Reader letters suggest however, that not only did Playmates help satiate men’s sexual appetites in the absence of women, but they also fostered comradery. Letters signed by groups of men expressing their enthusiasm for the magazine and its Playmates were common. “We look forward to *Playboy* like letters from home,” a letter signed by twenty-one students from the Missouri School of Mines expressed.<sup>91</sup> Students and servicemen articulated that they bonded with other young men via debates about their favourite types of Playmates, shared their own copies of the magazine to gain popularity amongst their peers, or rented out their personal issue of *Playboy* due to the high demand of specific issues and pin-ups. Readers also shared their own ranking systems of pin-ups, or the results of which Playmates were voted “most desirable” via make-shift elections. Some students went so far as to create their own clubs dedicated to the magazine, where they discussed its ideologies and tips on the trials and tribulations of dating. Others enthusiastically shared that they created campus clubs dedicated to specific Playmates.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Letter from Captain R.L. Collins, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (May 1955), 4.

<sup>91</sup> Letter from Twenty-One Students, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (June 1955), 2; Letter from Aviation Engine Repair Shop Gang, U.S.S Currituck, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (June 1956), 5; Letter from The Boys of The U.S. Atlantic Fleet and Amphibious Force Orchestra, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (July 1955), 3; Letter from The Hungry Four, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (January 1958), 3; Letter from 74<sup>th</sup> Fighter Interceptor Squadron, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (July 1956), 3.

<sup>92</sup> Letter from Bruce McIlwain, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (January 1955), 2; Letter from Major Ray Shaefer, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (April 1955), 3; Letter from Lieutenant W.C. Amick, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (March 1956), 4; Letter from R. C. Wilson, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (March 1956), 3; Letter from First Lieutenant L.T. Sampson, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (April 1956), 3; Letter from First Sergeant W.B. Hayden, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (January 1958), 2; Letter from Michael L. Coquat, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (August 1956), 2; Letter from Dave Preiss, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (December 1957), 4; Letter from Danny March, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (February 1961), 6.

Male-bonding over *Playboy* is significant in that by sharing the magazine among their peers, students and servicemen created an additional space beyond the magazine's pages where its contents could be discussed. Letters also reveal that *Playboy* had significant influence on how these men thought about gender and sex, and how men exchanged their ideas with one another. Some students purchased subscriptions for their friends or brothers, so they had others with whom to discuss the magazine's articles and pictures.<sup>93</sup>

Most readers reveal how *Playboy*'s ideals of gender and sexuality shaped the sexual preferences and gender ideologies among the group. This is especially clear within their responses towards specific Playmates. Models such as Janet Pilgrim were so popular among students that *Playboy* brought her along to several stops on their cross-America campus tour, where she was met with great enthusiasm. Students responded to Pilgrim's college tour with pleas for her to visit their own schools or to go on dates with them, while others bragged to the magazine about their own "Janet Pilgrim for President Fan Club."<sup>94</sup> Most notable, however, are the letters where students articulate desire for the women in their lives to emulate Playmates' appearance and behaviours. "If only we had more girls who looked like the Playmates," Bennet Woll, a student at the University of Vermont, wished in a 1957 letter.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Letter from Myron J. Basso, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (January 1955), 3; Letter from Jack Welsh, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (April 1955), 2; Letter from Clarence W. Cox Jr., "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (May 1954), 3; Letter from Alan R. Sundeen, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (December 1954), 3.

<sup>94</sup> "Janet's Date at Dartmouth: An Ivy Weekend with Playboy's Office Playmate," *Playboy* (October 1956), 41-7; Letter from Crower, Simons, and Pomeroy, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (March 1956), 4; Letter from Michael L. Coquat, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (August 1956), 3.

<sup>95</sup> Letter from Bennet J. Woll, "Dear Playboy," (June 1957), 7.

Students and soldiers expressed gender expectations wrapped within sexual desire in their hopes to find a “girl as playful” or “obedient” as Playmates. Servicemen remarked that they yearned to find women that resembled Playmates-in both appearance and personality-when they returned home from long voyages or enlistments.<sup>96</sup> “Where can I find something like Miss Roberts back in my hometown?” a letter inquired in 1958.<sup>97</sup> Men also commented excitedly on Playmates’ physical attributes, such as breast size, hair colour, and body shapes, and often demanded to see more “skin” on models when they felt not enough was shown. “If you’re going to have breakfast in bed, let’s have the main dish uncovered!” one student declared in 1956.<sup>98</sup> Significantly, students and servicemen often linked their own preferences to the physical or personality traits of their favourite Playmates.

A large portion of letters from students and servicemen detailed how specific attributes of Playmates impacted the “type” of women they were attracted to, wanted to date, or with whom they wanted to have sex. Calls for more images of bare breasts, more Girl Next Door, and shy yet playful student Playmates were also common.<sup>99</sup> As First-Class Private Edward Lerner articulated from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, some men enjoyed *Playboy* because the magazine featured women in real-world scenarios. “Any properly appreciative reader of *Playboy* should have a good deal of voyeur to him” he noted, observing that *Playboy*’s readers, having familiarized themselves with the Girl

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<sup>96</sup> Letter from Lieutenant Mickey Kappes, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy*, (September 1956), 4.

<sup>97</sup> Letter from Peter G. Ball, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (April 1957), 5; Letter from John A. Mullis, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (April 1958), 8.

<sup>98</sup> Letter from Leonard Olive, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (May 1956), 4.

<sup>99</sup> Letter from First Sergeant W.B. Hayden, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (February 1958), 6.

Next Door type found in the magazine, should be able to “spot a Playmate in a hi-fi shop” rather than relying on pin-ups alone.<sup>100</sup>

This echoes one of *Playboy*'s core messages to its readers: Playmates existed in the real world beyond the magazine's pages. Furthermore, men could learn to spot them by following the magazine's advice. Servicemen and students expressed that they hoped to find women in real life with attributes of femininity and feminine sexuality that matched what they saw in *Playboy*. In reference to a woman he met on leave, Second Lieutenant Thomas Olsen from Fort Benning, Georgia noted that, “It is certainly nice to find a woman as beautiful as Lisa [Winters] who has managed to retain a little sweetness as the ‘shy type’.”<sup>101</sup> Student readers also echoed this sentiment, as they often made connections between the shy, Girl Next Door types they encountered on campus to images of women in the magazine.<sup>102</sup>

Students who followed *Playboy*'s tips on dating or how to “get a girl in bed” also shared their successes and failures. These letters indicate not only how *Playboy* influenced male behaviour, but also how its ideologies on sex and femininity transferred into the lives of its student readership. Students who applied tactics from the magazine's article on reading a woman's body language to sense her eagerness to have sex, wrote to the magazine that they were unsuccessful, despite applying its techniques. “We need more advice on understanding and handling the female,” Charlie Williams from North Texas State College wrote in response to an editorial titled “The Great Guessing Game”.

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<sup>100</sup> Letter from First Class Private Edward Lerner, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (November 1959), 8.

<sup>101</sup> Letter from Second Lieutenant Thomas A. Olsen, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (March 1958), 8.

<sup>102</sup> Letter from PFC Edward Lerner, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy*, (April 1956), 4; Letter from Lieutenant Colonel Well, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (July 1956), 4.

The article implied that if a woman appeared to show interest but was still coy, was dressed in a way to attract her suitor, or went along with what her date suggested, then she must be eager to take their relationship to the next physical step.<sup>103</sup> Such a message highlights how *Playboy* affirmed to many of its youngest readers that if women were to show submission, the same demure uncertainty of its Playmates, or dress in a way that attracted suitors, then sex was guaranteed if the reader followed its guidelines.

Letters from students and servicemen suggest that their ideal version of femininity-submissive, sexually willing yet shy, and easy to control- were informed by *Playboy's* editorials and images. Because most of these men were writing from all male spaces, it is evident that *Playboy* created a breeding ground for men to discuss its ideologies, which would later be absorbed into male behaviour. Beyond its creation of male comradery and community, *Playboy* fostered a generation of young men's expectations of women. And readers heard *Playboy's* message loud and clear. The desire of sailors and soldiers for submissive femininity in their future girlfriends or wives reveals that Playmates played a significant role in crafting their sexual fantasies.

Student's expectations of their female peers also make themselves evident in reader letters that echo *Playboy's* sentiments on the ideal girlfriend or submissive college co-ed. In applying *Playboy's* techniques or informing male students on how to spot the ideal college Playmate on their own campuses, the magazine assured male students that their own Playmates were out there waiting for them. *Playboy's* message to students and servicemen was clear: all they need do is look and sexual pleasure would follow if they

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<sup>103</sup> Letter from Charlie Williams, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (June 1956), 2; Archer, Jules. "The Great Guessing Game: Some Tips on Understanding the Female Language," *Playboy* (March 1956), 18.

adhered to the magazine's steps on spotting the ideal version of femininity in the wild. This, however, created a dangerous slope for female students and adolescent women, as students' responses to *Playboy* reveal that the magazine's ideologies made their way into the sexual and romantic expectations of some of its youngest readers. As men graduated from university, returned from military service, or entered the professional sphere, their expectations of women generated by *Playboy* were not left behind. Instead, they manifested themselves in many post-war working men's expectations of gender in the workplace.

### ***9 to 5: Gender Roles, Sexism, and Playmates in the Postwar Workplace***

Reader letters reveal how *Playboy* helped facilitate constructions of femininity in the workplace. They affirm that *Playboy*, and its working girl Playmates specifically, played an important role in postwar American men's idealization of femininity and gender roles at work. Letters reflect *Playboy*'s belief that a women's sexuality was just as, if not more, important than her productivity in the professional sphere. Like the magazine, men hypersexualized working women. Some readers also mirrored *Playboy*'s concerns with the "Womanization" of the workforce, viewing career women as a threat to male dominance and upward career mobility, as some readers subscribed to the belief that America was indeed facing a "crisis of masculinity". Reader correspondence notes that *Playboy* helped to reinforce sexism and the objectification of women in the workplace, despite women seeking equity and equality in the workplace on the eve of second-wave feminism. This objectification had its roots in the way men talked about women in the workforce.

Men emulated the language *Playboy* used to describe women in professional roles. The magazine's subordination of working women, such as using "girl" rather than

“woman”, seeped into the male office vernacular. Male readers frequently made distinctions between “career women” and working “girls”, often vilifying the former and praising the latter.<sup>104</sup> Letters also exhibit the same hyper-sexualization of women. Men often characterized working women in a similar fashion to pin-ups, using phrases such as “the most perfect female specimen”, “a delectable creature”, or even expressing an explicit desire for their female colleagues to be their own work Playmates.<sup>105</sup> Letters make evident, however, that this objectification transcended language.

Much like *Playboy*, its readers eroticized working girls that they encountered in workplaces. In one letter, a married legal clerk from Ohio confessed that if a woman like Miss November 1957 (Marlene Callahan) worked in his office, her only purpose would be to appease him and his coworkers via her looks. “For our office she wouldn’t have to take shorthand or bruise a delicate finger on a typewriter,” he noted.<sup>106</sup> This example mirrors how *Playboy* often portrayed women in workplaces within its images, editorials, and cartoons: as sexual ornaments to be looked at, ideally touched, rather than as a part of workplace productivity.

Other letters indicate that *Playboy* set the standard for the “ideal” type of woman that should be employed. Bennet Cerf, who worked in the offices of Random House Books’ New York Division, wrote a letter stating him and his colleagues used *Playboy* “professionally in [his] office in the selection of feminine office personnel.”<sup>107</sup> Readers

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<sup>104</sup> Letter from Charles O’Connell, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (October 1955), 6

<sup>105</sup> Letter from P.Y., “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (March 1963), 34; Letter from Al Metz, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (March 1956), 5; Letter from Bob Maliesh, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (May 1958), 8; Letter from T.M. “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (August 1962), 31.

<sup>106</sup> Letter from Ki PUNCHES, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy*, (February 1957), 5.

<sup>107</sup> Letter from Bennett Cerf, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (November 1958), 6.

also begged *Playboy* for jobs, so that they could work alongside their ideal office Playmates. “In response to your advertisement [images of Janet Pilgrim] on pages 28-29 of the July issue, I should like to apply for employment in the circulation department of your publication,” a reader from New Hampshire pleaded in 1955. “Although my experience is severely limited, I am quite willing (omygawd, am I!) to work at a reduced salary (shall we say, nothing? Or less?) Until I am able to satisfy your requirements.”<sup>108</sup> Others asked for personal contact information, in hopes that Playmates like Pilgrim or Tomerlin would consider coming to work for them.<sup>109</sup>

Reader letters also reveal that some men perceived career women as a threat to male dominance in professional spheres.<sup>110</sup> Several men sent enthusiastic responses in support of Phillip Wylie’s “The Womanization of America” 1959 article. “Mr. Wylie’s article is the hardest-hitting treatment I have read to date of a really serious, but too often hidden problem,” one reader noted when referring to career women. The letter praised Wylie for “bravely lashing out” against women seeking equity in the workplace or seeking employment in male-dominant professions, assailing “the social sickness that was all too prevalent” in postwar society.<sup>111</sup>

Other letters indicate that men sympathized with the portion of Wylie’s article that addressed career women as the real “instigator” of the “crisis” of masculinity, and

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<sup>108</sup> Letter from Frank Shackford, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (October 1955), 5.

<sup>109</sup> Letter from Bob Mahakian, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (August 1955), 4.

<sup>110</sup> Letter from Chuck Francis, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (January 1959), 8; Letter from James H. Jensen, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (January 1959), 8; Letter from Richard Ellingson, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (January 1959), 8; Letter from Nicholas Carter, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (September 1962), 9; Letter from John T. Gossett, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (September 1962), 9.

<sup>111</sup> Letter from John Quinn, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (January 1959), 6.

along with *Playboy*, proposed only hiring submissive office girls as the solution.<sup>112</sup> One reader expressed concern that with the increasing number of women in the workforce, he found it “difficult to distinguish the girls from the career women.”<sup>113</sup> Donald Linden, a male office worker from Arizona, disagreed with Wylie that women threatened male dominance in the workplace, but concurred that working girls served a purpose outside productivity: male pleasure. Linden perceived that “girls” were in no position to take a man’s spot in the office and elaborated that a man who felt “threatened” by a women had a lack of “resourcefulness” and exhibited “unstableness”. If workplaces continued to hire “beautiful and efficient women”, he noted, they posed no threat to men. He also indicated that one of the pleasures of having women in the workplace was that him and his male colleagues got to ogle and interact with such “beauty” each day.<sup>114</sup> These letters suggest that readers shared Wylie and *Playboy*’s sentiments on women in the workplace, and they too recognized a difference between career women and working girls.

Reader perceptions of Wylie’s “Womanization” of the workforce, and their objectification of women in professional roles, allude to gender’s impact on the postwar workplace. Working men who subscribed to *Playboy*’s dictum that women threatened male dominance in the workplace, reflected a broader issue of negative perceptions of working women in the postwar period. Reader’s hyper-sexualization of women also demonstrates that postwar men viewed their colleagues as sexual ornaments in the workplace, rather than as a part of office productivity. Letters further illuminate that

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<sup>112</sup> Letter from Dwight E. Rexworthy, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (April 1963), 22; Letter from Robert K. Allgeir, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (April 1963), 21; Letter from Charles Wood, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (April 1963), 30; Letter from Obi Wali, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (April 1963), 20.

<sup>113</sup> Letter from Nicholas Carter, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (September 1962), 8.

<sup>114</sup> Letter from Donald Van Der Linden, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (April 1963), 24.

some men accepted women's growing presence and agency in the workplace, so long as it had a positive outcome on male sexual desire. This echoes *Playboy's* own philosophy: that the agency of women in an increasingly liberal postwar society benefited men. As reader letters suggest, women in the context of the workplace posed a "manageable" problem as long as men continued to hire women that they believed represented the ideal secretary, stenographer, or salesclerk. The consensus from male readers was clear: the more she resembled the office Playmate, the better.

### ***You've Lost That Loving Feeling: The Playboy Reader on Marriage***

Although over half the magazine's readership was married, many of its male readers expressed negative sentiments towards the institution or wives. Specifically, readers agreed with *Playboy's* three main "problems" with women who wanted marriage instead of maintaining a casual sexual relationship: they married for money, to control men, or to strip them of individuality. These letters reveal that many men agreed with *Playboy's* championing of polygamy over monogamy, and the vilification of women. Other letters reveal how readers navigated the expectations of sexual pleasure in marriage, while some adopted the magazine's negative stance on wives and marriage.<sup>115</sup>

As early as *Playboy's* first published set of letters, readers echoed its ethos on matrimony. In response to Norman's "Miss Gold Digger 1953" article, which proposed

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<sup>115</sup> Letter from W. Ray Dennis Jr., "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (January 1956), 4; Letter from John Gustafson, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (November 1962), 22; Letter from Charles Wood, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (April 1963), 20; Letter from Obi Wali, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (April 1963), 20; Letter from Dwight E. Rexworthy, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (April 1963), 22; Letter from Joe Campbell, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy*, (April 1963), 24.

that women only married for money, Mike L. Henderson from Missouri shared that he too was “one of those victims of a Miss Gold-digger”, explaining that his wife of two-and-a-half years left him, taking their child. Henderson’s letter is significant in that while lamenting about how he still had to support his wife financially, his greatest concern was not for her or their child’s wellbeing. Instead, Henderson was upset that, despite sending her money, she had never returned to thank him with a sexual favour, or as he put it “spend the night together”.<sup>116</sup>

Other letters echoed *Playboy*’s sentiments on the financial aspect of marriage. One reader worried that since he had recently come into a bit of money from inheritance, he would not be able to distinguish whether “girls were drawn” to him or his money. He vowed that he would rather stay single than end up with a woman who drained him financially via marriage, and thus asked *Playboy* for tips on how to spot his ideal woman: a “girl” that acted as no-strings-attached sexual companion rather a woman who wanted to be his wife. In response, *Playboy* warned him to pay close attention to a woman’s behaviour. If she was beautiful, the response noted, he should disregard his confusion and just enjoy her company as a sexual companion until he saw fit to end the relationship and move on to the next.<sup>117</sup>

Readers also expressed these concerns within the context of second marriages or when considering marriage to widows or divorcees.<sup>118</sup> A Texas man wrote worriedly to *Playboy* about proposing to the divorcee he was dating, who also had custody of a child from her first marriage. Despite declaring he cared for and loved her deeply, he feared

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<sup>116</sup> Letter from Mike L. Henderson, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (January 1954), 2.

<sup>117</sup> Letter from A.S., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (May 1962), 31.

<sup>118</sup> Letter from W.H., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (September 1962), 33.

that if he were to marry her, he would be drained financially and lose his individuality upon taking the role of husband and fatherhood so suddenly.<sup>119</sup> Other letters agreed wholeheartedly with the magazine: marriage was not worth the loss of male individuality or casual sex with multiple women. In these instances, men always prided themselves on not succumbing to the “trap” of marriage as had many of their friends or colleagues.<sup>120</sup> Engaged men also wrote to the magazine, some noting that they were questioning their choice to get married in the first place.<sup>121</sup> A reader from Michigan whose friends had warned him that after marriage, “most men lose interest in a girl, once she is no longer a mystery”, shared his concerns with *Playboy*.<sup>122</sup>

Another common theme in reader letters was men complaining that their girlfriends or sexual companions were acting too much like wives or expected to get married after a long period of dating.<sup>123</sup> These letters indicate that many of *Playboy*'s readers wanted to pursue courtship for the sake of their own sexual pleasure, rather than move on to the next life stage of marriage. When girlfriends hinted at their hopes to marry, some readers became troubled, wanting advice on how to “let her down easy” from *Playboy*. “Marriage is implied in her every action,” observed a reader from Philadelphia, who asked how to maintain a “casual” sexual relationship without committing to marriage.<sup>124</sup> “I am planning to throw a large dinner party and my girlfriend

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<sup>119</sup> Letter from E.T., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (June 1962), 39.

<sup>120</sup> Letter from G.R., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (August 1962), 32; Letter from L.L., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (January 1961), 33; Letter from A.S., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (June 1961), 41; Letter from A.J., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (October 1961), 57.

<sup>121</sup> Letter from G.M., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (December 1962), 40; Letter from B.G., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (May 1961), 41.

<sup>122</sup> Letter from G.M., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (December 1962), 40.

<sup>123</sup> Letter from M.S., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (April 1962), 33; Letter from W.O., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (April 1962), 66.

<sup>124</sup> Letter from G.B., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (July 1961), 32.

wants to act as a hostess ... I'm afraid it will give her the notion she's just a licence fee away from being a bride," another letter declared.<sup>125</sup>

Some readers disagreed with *Playboy's* dismissal of marriage but echoed its ideologies about retaining a gendered familial hierarchy. A married man should at least hope for a submissive wife. Several discussed marriages within the context of their own sexual pleasure. Others asked for advice regarding how they could make their marriages work better for them than their wives. A 1962 letter solicited *Playboy* for advice on how he could communicate with his wife that he wanted more sex, while a newly-wed man commented that his pre-marital sex life was far more pleasurable than his married one.<sup>126</sup> Readers also asked *Playboy* how to better control their wives, with some letters inquiring about the appropriate amount of physical punishment to use when they "stepped out of line".<sup>127</sup> One reader, writing in disgust that his wife attempted to throw out his copy of *Playboy* and other men's magazines, asked with how much "force" he should hit her to insure she does not make the same "mistake" twice. *Playboy* echoed the reader's sentiments, agreeing that he should use the back of his hand, rather than his palm to strike his wife, to assure the message "got across".<sup>128</sup>

Reader letters indicate that many of *Playboy's* male readers shared the magazine's sentiments on marriage. They reveal that men who considered proposing to their girlfriends were aware of, and sometimes agreed with, *Playboy's* vilification of wives, marriage, and family. Reader correspondence also indicates that many young postwar

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<sup>125</sup> Letter from N.K., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (March 1961), 43.

<sup>126</sup> Letter from R.B., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (December 1962), 66.

<sup>127</sup> Letter from J.W., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (December 1962), 65.

<sup>128</sup> Letter from Ed Weeks, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (April 1959), 10.

men dated multiple women to avoid leading their long-term girlfriends on the assumed path of marriage. Letters from married men show some sought to retain conservative gender roles in marriage, such as prioritizing male sexuality in the marital bed over that of women, asking advice on how to make their wives more submissive, or physically abusing their wives if they stepped out of line. Reader letters thus point to a vilification of wives and family as imagined by *Playboy's* new alternative masculinity. The result: the continuing subordination of postwar women in marriage, but without the promise of family-centered husbands.

### ***You Can't Hurry Love: Postwar Men's Behaviours in Sex and Courtship***

Beginning in 1960, *Playboy* began running its own advice column at the request of readers, which have not yet been thoroughly examined by *Playboy* scholars. Readers who wrote to the "Playboy Advisor" and responses to these letters offer crucial insight into the extent to which the magazine molded the behaviours of postwar men. Beyond viewing its images of pinup women, reader letters demonstrate how its consumers used the magazine to inform their behaviours within the contexts of courtship and sex. Men used *Playboy* as a handbook when navigating complex situations such as courtship, relationships, and their own understandings, expectations, and performance of gender and heterosexuality.

Reader letters to *Playboy's* advice column exhibit how men applied *Playboy's* ideologies in their everyday lives, more specifically in their relationships with women. Men writing to the "Playboy Advisor" were extremely vocal about their experiences with women, courtship, and their own sex lives. Some also wrote to *Playboy* because they sought more advice from the magazine, claiming they followed its dating tips yet were

still unsuccessful.<sup>129</sup> This is significant in that not only does dialogue between *Playboy* and its male readers in its advice column paint a portrait of how men behaved in the postwar period, but it also reveals how these behaviours lead to the subordination of women within courtship.

Firstly, letters indicate that many postwar men practised or desired to practise one of *Playboy*'s signature approaches to courtship: dating multiple women at once. Several readers expressed desire to date their girlfriend's friends, either behind their backs, or after their current female companions had "fulfilled their purpose" of sex or temporary female companionship.<sup>130</sup> A reader from Massachusetts wrote to *Playboy* asking for advice on how to breakup with his current girlfriend, after realizing he preferred her roommate instead. "Is there a tactful, diplomatic way of switching, or am I doomed to disappointment?" he asked in reference to dating the "overwhelmingly" attractive roommate in favour of the "intelligent" women he was currently dating.<sup>131</sup> He did not consider the needs of the girlfriend or her roommate, if he could simply "switch" between women as he so desired. This exhibits how some took the *Playboy* philosophy as gospel: that if a man desired to abandon his girlfriend for a woman he felt more attractive, then it was his right to do so as an individual who practiced *Playboy*'s new masculinity.

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<sup>129</sup> Letter from John Gustafson, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (November 1962), 22; Letter from Earl F. Roger, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (November 1962), 16; Letter from T.J., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (October 1960), 39.

<sup>130</sup> Letter from M.S., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (October 1960), 19; Letter from E.G., "Dear Playboy," (December 1960), 49; Letter from J.P., "the Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (January 1963), 35; Letter from F.W., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (November 1962), 65.

<sup>131</sup> Letter from E.G., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (December 1960), 49; Letter from H.V., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (August 1962), 31; Letter from B.J., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (August 1962), 33.

Despite boasting about having multiple sexual partners, reader letters reveal that men were quite critical of women who did the same.<sup>132</sup> In this, they mirror the double-standard that *Playboy*, and postwar society more broadly, placed upon women, who were expected to be alluring enough to attract a suitor but not act upon their own sexual desires as freely as men. Many letters highlighted *Playboy*'s celebration of male sexual autonomy and condemnations of female desire to explore polyandry. Readers thus reinforced *Playboy*'s hedonistic philosophies prioritizing male sexual pleasure. One letter noted that his date, or as he referred to her an "attractive young thing," had no right to be "arm in arm with another guy" at a party they attended with friends.<sup>133</sup> Another reader from Florida aired his concerns about proposing to a woman with a reputation for having multiple sexual partners. Not only was he concerned about his friends and colleagues shaming him for dating a woman with a promiscuous reputation, but he also did not want his own morals compromised by association with her. *Playboy* reassured him that she was not worth his time, as she would surely seek extramarital affairs.<sup>134</sup> Another from New York wrote that although he frequently had affairs with other women, it was unacceptable for his girlfriend to do the same. "My point is," he remarked, "If I can't have the relationship on my terms, I'd rather do without it."<sup>135</sup>

Other readers confessed to manipulative tendencies so they could experience sexual pleasure with multiple women, while ensuring that their female companions remained loyal. A man from Phoenix proudly boasted how he convinced his girlfriend

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<sup>132</sup> Letter from H.W., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (March 1961), 37. See also Letter from P.F. "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy*, (March 1963), 35.

<sup>133</sup> Letter from J.L., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (January 1961), 33.

<sup>134</sup> Letter from T.A., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (January 1963), 35.

<sup>135</sup> Letter from A.B., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (May 1962), 31.

that it was acceptable for him to have affairs while she was out of town, as she would not want him to be “lonely and depressed” in her absence. Their relationship, he insisted to her, would only be stronger because of it.<sup>136</sup> Cases such as these exhibit *Playboy*’s double standard wherein male sexual autonomy was celebrated, while female sexuality was only deemed acceptable if women were loyal to their partners.

Letters to advice columns also illuminate that several readers sought dominance over the women they dated, in some cases enlisting *Playboy* to help them change the behaviour or physical appearances of their girlfriends and female companions. A reader from Boston asked *Playboy* for advice on convincing his girlfriend to dress in a way that appealed to him. “Anatomically she’s dreamy,” he noted. “But, and what a ‘butt’ ... her clothes look like rejects from a rubbish sale.”<sup>137</sup> Another reader from Baltimore wrote to *Playboy* and asked, “how can I tactfully tell my girl she’s getting pudgy?” He went on to note that he worried he would no longer find her attractive if she gained too much weight.<sup>138</sup> Conversely, readers wanted to ensure that their girlfriends retained a “Girl Next Door” image, despite having sex before marriage. A Chicago reader wrote asking how to convince his girlfriend to dress more modestly, given she had a “terrific body and level of sensuality to her”. He voiced his concerns that when they went out together in public, other men stared at her breasts and legs. “She says she’s just trying to make me proud of her. But how can I persuade her to dress more demurely without sounding like a prude?”<sup>139</sup> Each of these cases suggest that readers, perhaps inadvertently, desired the

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<sup>136</sup> Letter from P.K. “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (July 1962), 29.

<sup>137</sup> Letter from R.U., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (March 1961), 37.

<sup>138</sup> Letter from T.G., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (May 1961), 43.

<sup>139</sup> Letter from W.M., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (January 1962), 31.

women they dated to resemble the idealized versions of femininity presented in the magazine: dressing to accentuate feminine figures, body shapes that reflected Playmates, and the simultaneous sultry and chaste “Girl Next Door”.

Other readers complained that their female companions desired to make changes in the relationship to benefit their own sexualities, or control certain aspects of their boyfriend’s behaviours. An office worker from Cleveland confided frustration with his girlfriend, who requested that he spend less time at work or with his friends, and more quality time with her. He worried that if he agreed to spending more time with his girlfriend, it would endanger his individuality. *Playboy* responded by stating that before he could take a course of action, he should consider whether she was “a domineering, competitive woman [who lurked] behind the façade of the ‘girl,’” or not. The magazine opined a man should never compromise his individuality for a woman. “Marriage is a career for a woman, not for a man.”<sup>140</sup> Another reader expressed grievances about his girlfriend wanting to drive him around town. *Playboy* responded that although there was no harm in letting her “play” with power occasionally, a man who wished to retain his individuality should always “put [him]self behind the wheel” of the automobile and the relationship.<sup>141</sup>

Others asked for tips on how to seduce women, such as to how “shy” or “Girl Next Door” types could be coaxed out of their puritanical shells. Others asked for tips on how to have sex discretely, without their girlfriends’ parents or friends finding out.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Letter from S.S., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (November 1961), 51.

<sup>141</sup> Letter from D.M., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (March 1963), 35.

<sup>142</sup> Letter from B.B., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (February 1962), 23; Letter from A.U., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (February 1962), 23; Letter from M.S., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (April 1962), 28; Letter from R.K., “The Playboy Advisor,” *Playboy* (September 1962), 57; (March 1961)

Other letters indicated that men wanted advice on convincing their girlfriends to lose their virginities before marriage.<sup>143</sup> Some readers expressed frustration with girlfriends who wanted to progress slowly with kissing and heavy petting before intercourse, while others noted they were frustrated that their partners wanted to wait until marriage before having sex.<sup>144</sup>

These letters reveal that rather than a subscription to a crisis of masculinity, anxieties about women's dominance over men was deeply engrained in some postwar men's own perceptions of gender. Readers revealed fears that if they couldn't convince their girlfriends to have sex with them, then their friends or colleagues may perceive them as effeminate or, one man's biggest fear, a "latent homosexual".<sup>145</sup> In wishing to emulate *Playboy's* version of masculinity, which held dominance over women, individuality and sexual pleasure as its pillars, some men sought to practise this alternative version of masculinity.

Men's thoughts on the women they dated also reveal how the magazine shaped male idealization of femininity. Trends in reader letters reveal that men preferred submissive women on campuses, in workplaces, marriages, courtship, and in the most intimate sexual settings. Women that posed any threat to the gendered order, save for being dominant enough to request sex with their male partner, were condemned by

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<sup>143</sup> Letter from J.B., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (March 1962), 27; Letter from J.H., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (December 1962), 55; Letter from A.M., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (December 1962), 56; Letter from G.M., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (December 1962), 57.

<sup>144</sup> Letter from P.B., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (February 1963), 33; D.P., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (March 1963), 33.

<sup>145</sup> Letter from D.P., "The Playboy Advisor," *Playboy* (March 1963), 32.

readers. Not only did *Playboy* place women below men in the gendered hierarchy of the 1950s, but so too did many of the men who enjoyed the magazine.

***“...We Don’t Think It’s Fair!”: Women’s Responses to Playboy***

Letters from female students, working women, and wives help to reinforce the fact that *Playboy* facilitated women’s subordination in relationships, universities, and their workplaces. Female students wrote to *Playboy* that the magazine impacted the expectations their male peers or boyfriends had of them. As their letters reveal, young women attending university were aware that the magazine imposed standards of submissive yet alluring femininity that they felt they were unable to maintain. Their letters allude to the broader impact of *Playboy* on campus, with women recognizing that male students sought attributes of Playmate and pin-ups in them. Furthermore, female students’ experiences suggest that these expectations got in the way of their personal relationships.

Letters from working women shed light on how they perceived or were personally affected by workplace sexism. As some letters make evident, women made direct connections between their own experiences with sexism in the workplace, and the content their male colleagues read in *Playboy*. This reinforces *Playboy*’s impact on male perceptions of women in the professional sphere, and more specifically, the vilification and objectification of female colleagues within the context of women seeking equity and advancement in the postwar workforce. Letters from married women reveal that some wives understood how their husbands’ expectations of them were informed by the magazine’s editorials and images. As a result, some wives felt inadequate in both appearance and behaviour to the Playmates their husbands idealized in *Playboy*. At all

stages of the postwar woman's lifecycle-school, courtship, work, and marriage-it is evident that the men in their lives who read *Playboy*, used the magazine as a field guide for their relationships and expectations of women.

Letters from female students indicate that *Playboy's* version of femininity-young, big-breasted, and sexually alluring, yet chaste and submissive-trickled into the ideologies and expectations of their female peers. Evidence of this is echoed by two "unhappy" female students at the University of Michigan, who wrote to *Playboy* concerned that their boyfriends had disregarded them because they did not look or act like Playmates. In reference to *Playboy's* expectation of women going out of their way to have sex appeal to attract potential suitors, the female students stated, "We were both dismayed and disgruntled to find out that the innocent minds of our boyfriends are being poisoned with such wicked ideas...[H]ow can we ever satisfy them when you tempt their virile minds with such voluptuousness? What we mean to say is we don't think it's fair!"<sup>146</sup>

Another letter from Barbara Frank, a student at the University of Southern California, asked *Playboy* for advice as to how she and her sorority sisters could resemble Playmates, to attract male coeds. Frank's letter indicates that she was confused as to why she and her friends did not pique the interest of their male peers, even though they felt they had tried their best physically to resemble women shown in the magazine. In response to her concerns, *Playboy* simply stated "So send us some pictures", so the magazine could give more feedback about her appearance.<sup>147</sup> Frank's letter also triggered a response from a group of male students at the nearby Santa Barbara College: "[W]e feel

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<sup>146</sup> Letter from Two Unhappy Co-eds at the University of Michigan, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (April 1956), 3.

<sup>147</sup> Letter from Barbara Frank, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (April 1956), 3.

that the letter sent to you by Miss Barbara regarding the caliber of Southern California coeds is a gross exaggeration.” Their letter went on to declare that they would “cast a huge vote for chorus girls and models as Playmates” over Frank and females at their own school.<sup>148</sup> These letters from Frank and the “Two Unhappy Coeds” indicate that *Playboy*’s ideologies and prescribed expectations for femininity made its way into the inner workings of campus life.

Reader letters from women further exhibit how the magazine fueled workplace sexism. A 1954 letter signed by a female secretary from New York detailed how upon receiving her boss’ copy of the magazine at her office, she peeked inside and saw images of a working girl playmate stripping for the camera. She threw the magazine out, hoping her boss would never see its images of women that would “distort the minds” and sexual expectations of her male coworkers. “If you were our secretary,” *Playboy* replied to her letter, “you would never see a paycheck.”<sup>149</sup>

Some women readers took exception to the magazine’s objectification of working women. Three airline stewardesses declared they were writing in response to *Playboy*’s pictorials and Playmate spreads that featured air stewardesses in short skirts, stripping, or having a private audience with male flyers. “We are three airline stewardesses who take a very dim view of your featuring stewardesses as your July Playmate. We realize you publish beauty where you find it, but in this case, we feel you could have left this beauty in the sky. Stewardesses are trained to dress modestly. The public expects to see us this way. But when it sees one of us so immodestly pictured, it can’t help but wonder if we

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<sup>148</sup> Letter from Sheldon Manchester, Roy Askins, George Plasch, Dale Pennington, and Richard Barnes, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (July 1956), 5.

<sup>149</sup> Letter from An Executive Secretary, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (December 1954), 3.

are nothing but a bunch of sex machines.”<sup>150</sup> Female readers were aware that *Playboy* acted as a sort of guide for male behaviour and perception of women in professional roles and deplored its depreciative portrayal of women in the workplace. “Career women are not happy in this role they are forced to play,” an anonymous reader wrote. “We career women want men that see beyond so-called perfect figure and face.”<sup>151</sup> Letters such as this indicate that women were aware of the impact of *Playboy*’s ideologies on working women, suggesting that the magazine had a sizeable impact on perpetuating sexism in the workplace throughout the 1950s.

Some wives who wrote to *Playboy* asked for advice as to how they could better satisfy their husbands sexually or how they could make sure they did not overstep their place in the pecking order. Wives expressed that they were willing to try new things in the bedroom to please their husbands, such as installing a mirror above their bed, or agreeing to their husbands who wanted to take pictures of them and send copies to *Playboy*. “[My husband] says I’m a good Playmate,” a married women noted in a 1956 letter.<sup>152</sup> Other letters from wives of *Playboy* subscribers worried that, once their husbands looked at Playmates, they would be less attracted to them. Others noted that their husbands discussed Playmates with them, making some wives feel inadequate. One letter signed “A Married Playmate” asked *Playboy* to print articles giving advice for men on how to have fun with marital sex, rather than encouraging men to conduct affairs

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<sup>150</sup> Letter from Dorothy Chapman, Kaki Ross, and Shirley Hoffecker, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (October 1957), 6.

<sup>151</sup> Letter from Anonymous, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (April 1963), 22.

<sup>152</sup> Letter from Barbara Starr, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (December 1956), 5; Letter from Mrs. W.B., “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (December 1962), 38.

outside marriage.<sup>153</sup> In their responses, *Playboy* never affirmed that a woman need not look or act like a Playmate to please her husband sexually.

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<sup>153</sup> Letter from A Married Playmate, "Dear Playboy," *Playboy* (September 1956), 8.

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion

In January 1960, the first ever birth announcement appeared in *Playboy*. “Please be advised of [the] birth of Richard Paul Proctor Junior, 6:10AM [undisclosed date of letter] at six pounds thirteen ounces. Paul Paulter, friend of family, wishes to assist in proper education by giving lifetime subscription of *Playboy*. Hope he is your youngest subscriber.”<sup>154</sup> Although an unexpected sight, Paulter’s letter reverberates with many postwar men’s sentiments that *Playboy* was more than just a “girlie” magazine: it was a guide. As reader letters demonstrate, men from across *Playboy*’s readership utilized the magazine for a multifold of purposes, including dating advice, a sexual outlet, or as a sounding board to express their own opinions on women, society, relationships, and sex. The consequence of this, however, echoes in reader letters, especially those from women, that demonstrate *Playboy*’s ideologies contributed to the continued subordination of women on campuses, in courtship, marriage, and the workplace.

Since its publication in December 1953, religious leaders, conservative politicians, and anti-pornography groups have consistently criticized the magazine for its rejection of traditional conservative mores of gender and family and promotion of sexual rebellion.<sup>155</sup> Although *Playboy* received and published host of negative reactions, correspondence from students, servicemen, working, and married men exhibit that

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<sup>154</sup> Letter from Paul Paulter, “Dear Playboy,” *Playboy* (January 1960), 15.

<sup>155</sup> “Magazine Ban Barred By Court,” *Detroit Free Press*, Oct. 17, 1956; “Women Militants Disrupt Cavett Show with Hefner,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1970; Bryce Nelson, “Antibunnies Jeer at Hefner Peace Bash,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 1970; United States Dept. of Justice, Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography: Final Report (Washington, D.C., 1986).

*Playboy*'s sexist ideologies became hardwired in the minds and behaviours of its broader male audience. Letters exhibit that *Playboy* cemented a male tendency to view women as sexual objects, a development fostered by an explosion of print pornography in the mid Twentieth century. Readers detailing their own experiences with women on campus, at work, courtship, or in marriages demonstrate that the *Playboy philosophy* infected potentially healthy relationships. Although Hefner framed *Playboy* as his personal rebellion against "soul-crushing" conservative ideologies, his magazine still presented restrictive gender and sex roles for women. Reader discourse thus exhibits a second conservative onslaught on women in the home, on campuses, and the public sphere in the lead up to the women's liberation movement that shortly followed.

It is also important to consider that these reader letters from men and women offer insight to understanding how culture impacted the lived behaviours and experiences of its audience. They have a broader purpose outside of confirming that *Playboy* helped to facilitate neo-conservative ideologies of gender and sexuality in the behaviours of its largest consumer base. Letters from women offer key insights into women's voices prior to the second-wave feminist movement. Their letters suggest that postwar women were aware of the subordination they faced at school, and in their relationships with men, and sexual harassment in the workplace, long before they had the tools or wider platforms to attest the impact of this culture in their lives.

An analysis of reader letters from *Playboy*'s first decade historicizes the perpetuation of misogyny in print culture. Furthermore, it helps to bridge a gap between women's experiences in the postwar period, and the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s. Before Helen Gurley Brown's 1962 advice book *Sex and the Single Girl*,

which chronicled how women should seek sexual and financial freedom outside marriage, women writing to *Playboy* demonstrated that they attempted to pursue sexual and romantic relationships with men.<sup>156</sup> Their letters allude to loosening American sexual behaviour prior the sexual revolution and second wave feminism, while still acknowledges that they faced subordination in their relationships with men. Women's letters also illuminate that the culture consumed by their boyfriends, husbands, colleagues, and classmates, continued to reinforce traditional sexual and gender models that had been subordinating women for centuries. This paper provides evidence that not only did culture produce misogyny, but it also facilitated its reproduction in the lived behaviours of the men who consumed it.

Reader discourse also brings to light women's own recognition of subordination, harassment, and misogyny, despite the loosening of sexual and gendered mores in culture during the 1950s. Letters to *Playboy* reveal that before having the tools to express their frustrations, women in the 1950s had a platform in which they vocalized their grievances towards how the magazine made their desires for equity and equality more difficult to achieve. Prior to Betty Friedan releasing *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, women observing the behaviours of men informed by *Playboy* were articulating women's continual subordination at home, work, school, and in relationships. Nearly a decade before Friedan, through *Playboy*, women were unknowingly giving a voice to "the problem that has no name."<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Helen Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 1962).

<sup>157</sup> "The Problem that Has no Name," in Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, NY.: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 1-32.

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