

The Short Stories of Playboy and the Crisis of Masculinity

*Men in Playboy's Short Fiction and 1950s
America*

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INTRODUCTION

We look at the world through media. They bring us the news; they bring us entertainment, science, art. They influence the way we view the world. In a way, they influence who we are. This does not mean that they change a person from one day to the next, but they co-determine structures of thought. One specific area in which the role of media becomes clear is gender – perhaps best described as the culturally defined and self-defined aspects of one's identity relating to being a 'man,' a 'woman,' or perhaps something else. Different media propagate ideal images of what it means to be a man or a woman, and in our daily lives these ideal images are not often questioned.

This observation lies at the foundation of this thesis. My initial plan was to examine the ways in which media (re-)present gender identity. In particular, I wanted to examine male gender identity. The first ensuing issue was that as a historian, the historicity of gender and media needs to be acknowledged. In other words, media and masculinities are fluid and change over time. The second issue was that 'media' was too wide a category. Since this thesis is of a limited scope, I needed to demarcate the research further.

Ultimately, I chose one case-study of a magazine in a specific historical context: *Playboy* in 1950s America. The American 1950s were interesting given the subject, since a lot of literature discusses some sort of perceived 'crisis of masculinity' – it was a time where historical developments caused tensions with contemporary male identities that required a re-thinking of masculinity. *Playboy* was perhaps one of the most iconic examples of this re-thinking. The magazine offered a specific masculine identity that reacted to the contemporary gender identity crisis.

In a way, a magazine is a patchwork: It consists of differing elements, from articles to pictorials to advertisements. In order to explore male identity in the magazine in more detail, I chose to highlight one element: short stories. One of the features in *Playboy* that appeared from its start in December 1953 were short works of fiction. Moreover, these appeared on a highly regular basis. Therefore, the short stories made for an ample amount of source material.

The goal of this thesis is thus to answer the following research question: "How do the short stories in *Playboy Magazine* (re-)present a male identity in the context of the American 1950s?"

State of the Art

This research question involves three fields of research: socio-cultural history, gender studies, and literary studies (and to a lesser extent, since it involves a magazine, media studies). The following section will offer a brief overview of some of the relevant works that have been published in these fields, to give an indication of current debates and to better position my research.

History: Male Anxieties in the 1950s

In the popular imagination, the American 1950s have often been seen as a decade of conformity. The post-war era brought an enormous economic boom, and more and more middle class families got to share in the wealth. Suburbs were built on a large scale, causing a migration from the city centres into a harmonious environment where the woman stayed home to cook the meals and take care of the kids while 'dad' went to the city to support his family. Politically, it could be neatly divided between the McCarthy years (1950-1954) and the later, more relaxed Eisenhower years. This is reflected in works like Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound*, which presents us with a society in which Cold War ideology was inextricably linked to the ideal of the nuclear family.¹ After the crises of the Depression and the Second World War subsided, a polarized model of man as breadwinner and women as housewives arose; from this entry point, May goes on to analyse the tensions this caused. Nevertheless, in the popular perception the decade is often depicted as a time of consensus.

However, as Martin Halliwell notes, "Decades, of course, rarely add up to consistent wholes."² Tyler's main source is a longitudinal study in which three hundred well-educated white American Protestants participated. This makes one wonder how representative this study really is. The last years have seen a rise in revisionist studies, which emphasise not the coherence of the post-war society, but the dissonances. On the one hand, this has led to works making the era of the 'grey flannel suit' more colourful.³ On the other hand, other revisionist works focus on the internal anxieties of American society, and in these works it becomes clear that in the harmony of the 1950s there were quite a few murmurs of discontent and anxiety – anxieties that often revolve around questions of identity. Karal Ann Marling's *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (1994), for instance, makes an effort to get rid of the image of the man in the grey flannel suit by writing small histories of the 1950s about Disneyland, Elvis Presley, and Mamie Eisenhower's role as a fashion icon.⁴

The paradox of the 1950s – as a period that was at once a time of optimism and hope, and a period that was plagued by atomic fears – runs through Martin Halliwell's *American Culture in the 1950s* (2007). His discussion on American culture is based on the juxtaposition of modernism and Cold War anxieties. He portrays American culture through several themed chapters on fiction, drama, music and film, amongst others. The result is a well-balanced narrative that combines readings of mainstream cultural artefacts with more marginal ones. It is not without faults, however. In focusing on the 1950s, Halliwell seems to forget about the years that came before it. The book is

¹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1988).

² Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s* (Edinburgh, 2007), 3.

³ Norman L. Rosenberg, "Everyday Culture in the 1950s: Between the Lines – and Beyond", *Reviews in American History* 24 (1996), 150.

⁴ Cf. Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge, 1994).

interspersed with commentary about Americans 'succumbing' to consumerism, while he fails to note that this might have been a welcome change after the Depression and the war. Also, his discussion does not end with the cultural artefacts: he comments on their reception as well, but these comments remain underdeveloped and tenuous at best.

Moving beyond cultural artefacts, other works focus on tensions at the individual level. Wini Breines writes about the life of women in *Young, White and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the 1950s*. In this work, she traces how disappointment, oppression and boredom led young women in the 1950s to grow up as the feminists of the 1960s.⁵ Her book is ultimately a work that serves to explain the developments of the next decade. Her discussion focuses on girls who actively rebelled, joining Beats and juvenile delinquents, but thereby under-examining anxieties and tensions in the lives of 'mainstream' women. By focusing on girls, it also ignores the uneasiness that older women experienced in their suburban lives, casting the older generation primarily as a source of opposition. Perhaps the most impressive part of her work is the chapter on Anne Parsons. Breines argues that the woman committed suicide because of the oppressiveness of the 1950s. While she makes an excellent case, it has to be noted that Parsons was born in 1931 and died in 1964, making it debatable to what degree she was actually a 'product' of the 1950s.

Gender-based anxieties were not limited to women. Men had anxieties of their own. This was already acknowledged in the 1950s, when C. Wright Mills published *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1952). It describes how the formation of a new class, consisting of white-collar workers, produced its own anxieties about male life. For one, the white-collar worker was turned into a 'company man', who received his pay but remained little more than a cog in the machine:

Mechanized and standardized work, the decline of any chance for the employee to see and understand the whole operation, the loss of any chance, save for a very few, for private contact with those in authority – these form the model of the future.⁶

A second, similar frustration for men related to politics. Mills saw the white-collar class as a divided class. Anxieties about prestige and status ensured a lack of homogeneity within the middle classes: the company hierarchy effectively made functioning as a political unity impossible. Secondly, the growing federal bureaucracy and decreasing emphasis on local politics closed off avenues to political influence for a large segment of the new middle classes:

The distance between the individual and centers of power has become greater, and the individual has come to feel powerless. Between political hope and political realization there are the two parties and the federal bureaucracy, which, as means of political action, often seem to cut the nerve of direct political interest.⁷

⁵ Cf. Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston, 1992).

⁶ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York, 1952), 212.

⁷ Mills, *White Collar*, 347.

Thus, even at the beginning of the 'harmonious' decade, economic and political developments apparently produced anxieties for men.

Male Identity

At the end of the twentieth century, gender studies turned to masculinity. But the problem they faced was how it could be rendered as "less repressive, less tyrannical."⁸ The collection of essays in *Constructing Masculinity*, edited by Maurice Berger, Brian Wallace and Simon Watson, are an interdisciplinary effort to theorize masculinity as multiple and fragmentary. Masculinities are "always ambivalent, always complicated, always dependent on the exigencies of personal and institutional power. Masculinity is [...] an interplay of emotional and intellectual factors – an interplay that directly implicates women as well as men, and is mediated by other social factors [...]."⁹ The different contributions explore the varying ways how and why different masculinities are constructed.

Historian Christopher Forth provides a history of "masculinity in crisis" in his work, *Masculinity in the Modern West*. Starting in western, post-1500 cultures, he tracks numerous strands of thought regarding male identity. The result is a solid work of synthesis, giving us an idea of the anxieties that arose out of men's changing roles in civilization. The main point in his work is to show how modernity has a paradoxical influence on masculinity: while developments open up new possibilities and new masculinities, these masculinities are always partly overshadowed by a sense of what was lost – an idea that masculinity was once less constricted by civilization, that it was once more masculine. This reaction to modern developments is inherent to modernity itself, according to Forth: "modernity is continually troubled by what Ulrich Beck describes as 'counter-modernity,' a discourse that 'absorbs, demonizes and dismissed the questions raised and repeated by modernity' by positing 'constructed certitudes' in the face of the liquefying tendencies of modernization."¹⁰

As Eric Mankowski and Kenneth Maton note, "these outcomes have been linked not to gender per se, but to the extent to which individual men endorse beliefs and behaviors that define traditional or hegemonic masculinity."¹¹ This means that the current debates about masculinity do not focus as much on the comparison of men and women, but on different and co-existing forms of masculinity in a hierarchical model – some masculinities are more widely adhered to than others.

⁸ Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson (eds.), *Constructing Masculinity* (New York/London, 1995), 5.

⁹ Berger, Wallis and Watson, *Constructing Masculinity*, 3.

¹⁰ Christopher Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Hampshire/New York, 2008), 5.

¹¹ Eric Mankowski and Kenneth Maton, "A Community Psychology of Men and Masculinity: Historical and Conceptual Review", *American Journal of Community Psychology* 45 (2010), 75.

Magazines

Studies on magazines are not as common as studies on more 'popular' media like film or television. Solid works on magazines have appeared, like James Playsted Wood's *Magazines in the United States* (1949) and Theodore Peterson's *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (1964). The problem, noted in both of these works, is that studies on magazines often limit themselves to the formative period in the nineteenth century. The twentieth century, and especially the second half, remains under-examined. It can be seen as a period that is marked by declining growth or stagnation, due to advertisers moving away from magazines towards television, turning it into the dominant medium.¹² Still, the aforementioned studies show how in the middle of the twentieth century, magazines had a huge market. While Peterson warns that "estimating the aggregate circulations of magazines in the United States over the years is a highly speculative pastime," he gives the estimate that "in 1900 [...], the combined circulation of all 3,500 [American] magazines was 65,000,000 an issue" and that "in 1963, just the eight leading consumer magazines surpassed that total."¹³

Playboy

As a case-study, *Playboy* has at times been used for content analyses. Matacin and Burger conducted a content analysis of sexual themes in *Playboy* cartoons, while Scott and Cuvelier researched cartoons and pictorials in "Violence in *Playboy* Magazine: A Longitudinal Analysis."¹⁴ In 1993, "A Content Analysis of *Playboy* Centrefolds from 1953 through 1990" was published by Bogaert and Turkovich.¹⁵ Besides these quantitative studies, there have been other studies that look at *Playboy* in a manner more akin to close reading. Beggan and Allison studied the *Playmate* interviews in "Tough Women in the Unlikeliest of Places" to see how *Playboy* depicted these women, while Krassas, Blauwkamp and Wesselink compared the sexual rhetoric in *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy* in "Boxing Helena and Corseting Eunice."¹⁶

Several things stand out when we look at this short list of articles. The content analyses vary in their sample size from issues from a single year to all issues over a thirty year period, but their common denominator is that they all seem to come from a female-centred perspective. The same

¹² James Playsted Wood, *Magazines in the United States* (New York, 1971), 324-7.

¹³ Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana/Chicago/London, 1972), 58.

¹⁴ Mala Matacin and Jerry Burger, "A Content Analysis of Sexual Themes in *Playboy* Cartoons", *Sex Roles* 17 (1987), 179-186. Joseph Scott and Stephen Cuvelier, "Violence in *Playboy* Magazine: A Longitudinal Analysis", *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 16 (1987), 279-288.

¹⁵ Anthony Bogaert and Debra Turkovich, "A Content Analysis of *Playboy* Centrefolds from 1953 through 1990: Changes in Explicitness, Objectification, and Model's Age", *The Journal of Sex Research* 30 (1993), 135-139.

¹⁶ James Beggan and Scott Allison, "Tough Women in the Unlikeliest of Places: The Unexpected Toughness of the *Playboy* Playmate", *The Journal of Popular Culture* 38 (2005), 796-818. Nicole Krassas, Joan Blauwkamp and Peggy Wesselink, "Boxing Helena and Corseting Eunice: Sexual Rhetoric in *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy* Magazines", *Sex Roles* 44 (2001), 751-771.

goes for the two articles mentioned last. These articles all seem to take for granted that *Playboy* portrayed a monolithic masculine identity, choosing to problematize representations of women in the magazine. A notable exception is *Playboy's Doctrine of Male* (1961), an article by theologian Harvey Cox which appeared in *Christianity and Crisis*, which deals specifically with the male identity espoused by *Playboy*, seen from a Christian perspective.¹⁷

The past years, however, two monographs have appeared that deal explicitly with *Playboy* and gender identity. Elizabeth Fraterrigo's *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* explores the magazine in its societal context as she tries to show how *Playboy* communicated a lifestyle of indulgence and was a forerunner of change in society.¹⁸ The work focuses more on the context, including an extensive discussion of the Playboy Clubs that Hefner started in the 1960s, and her treatment of *Playboy's* actual content seems subservient to the larger thematic structure of the book. Nonetheless, Fraterrigo's conclusions on the hedonistic lifestyle that *Playboy* propagated and that it was an agent of change in post-war American society are one of the starting points of this essay. The second monograph is Carrie Pitzulo's *Bachelors and Bunnies*. The work focuses on *Playboy's* sexual rhetoric rather than its consumer rhetoric. Pitzulo's goal is to argue that Hugh Hefner, through *Playboy*, developed a coherent sexual ideology that promoted a set of values that advanced certain feminist causes, while remaining within a binary, patriarchal structure.¹⁹ Whether Pitzulo succeeds in this is up for debate, but she convincingly argues that *Playboy* did help to shape debates on sexual liberation. These two monographs share a similar approach to *Playboy*, as they both argue that the magazine expresses a coherent ideology. It is partly from this perspective that I will explore the short stories of *Playboy*.

Theoretical Framework

Before commencing a study on short stories, *Playboy Magazine*, or male identities, several concepts have to be explored. Note that these notions together do not constitute a methodology, but a frame of reference, a way of looking at the aforementioned issues. The first concept we have to tackle is gender, followed by masculinity, identity, new historicism, and media framing theory.

Gender

Gender has been problematized in feminist theory in different ways. A common denominator in these theories is that gender has been consistently defined – though in varying ways – as being separate from sexual identity. This idea can be traced back to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*

¹⁷ Harvey Cox, "Playboy's Doctrine of Male", in: Wayne Cowan (ed.), *Witness to a Generation: Significant Writings from Christianity and Crisis (1941-1966)* (New York, 1966), 132-137.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* (Oxford, 2009), 12-4.

¹⁹ Carrie Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies: The Sexual Politics of Playboy* (Chicago/London, 2011). 5-7.

(1949), in which she claimed that ‘one is not born a woman.’ This claim – and gender theory in general – had the purpose to “contest the naturalization of sexual difference” and study how men and women were “socially constituted and positioned in relations of hierarchy and antagonism.”²⁰

In the 1950s and 1960s a gender identity paradigm was formed, based on a “functionalist and essentializing version of Simone de Beauvoir’s 1940s insight that one is not born a woman.”²¹ The second-wave feminist theory of the 1960s and 1970s was based on this paradigm; debates revolved around ‘biological determinism’ versus ‘social constructionism.’ Typically, second-wave feminist theory assumed that gender is physically determined and focuses on dismantling fictional or artificial social gender narratives, while at the same time revealing the ‘real.’²²

The third-wave theory of the 1980s and 1990s took a standpoint on the opposite side of the spectrum, claiming that gender is *not* physically determined, and is thus (at least to a degree) *fictional*. One of the most influential third-wave theorists has been Judith Butler, who defined gender as a performative act.²³ This means that gender identity is not something that is inherent, or biologically determined. Rather, gender identity is *constructed* within society. Moreover, gender is constructed through continuously acting the part: by *doing* gender, it is constructed.

More recent discussions on gender theory centre on critiques of Butler’s theory regarding her approach to the body, connected to the development of New Materialism, which reacts to the heavy focus on textuality and *fiction*. As several critics have noted, Butler’s “entirely discursive body is constructed as a slate, and nothing but a slate.”²⁴ Another example of this criticism is Rosi Braidotti’s notion of ‘becoming gendered,’ in which ‘performing’ is only a part of becoming, thus potentially reinstating the real dimensions of the body.²⁵ For, even if there is fictionality and narrative, there are also real, tangible bodies. It has to be noted, however, that theory that emphasises the central position of the material body is perhaps not as well-suited for literary analysis. If there are bodies in the text, they are textual bodies. Therefore, it serves us to go back to performativity and Judith Butler’s gender fictions.

One issue with Judith Butler’s definition of gender performativity, as Joseph Harris notes, is that it has a peculiarly a-historical character. Her theories on the undermining of gender roles through deviance from the established gender norms fail to show how “sex and gender might be constructed

²⁰ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London, 1991), 131.

²¹ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 133.

²² Karin Sellberg, “Transitions and Transformations: From Gender Performance to Becoming Gendered”, *Australian Feminist Studies* 24 (2009), 71-2.

²³ Cf. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990).

²⁴ Sellberg, “Transitions and Transformations”, 77.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 79.

in different historical or geographical contexts.”²⁶ Perhaps this criticism might be remedied by looking at Michel Foucault, one of Butler’s influences. In *The History of Sexuality*, he discusses ‘sex’ instead of ‘gender,’ but the two notions are closely intertwined: if gender commonly seen as the culturally defined characterizations of man and woman, then sex and sexuality are essentially the physical characteristics. This idea lies at the heart of the sex/gender distinction, which has received criticism from third-wave feminists (as Butler) that draw on Foucault.²⁷ Foucault defined sex as “the historically specific and discursive product of a diffuse regulatory economy of sexuality which heterosexualizes desire and institutes the production of discrete symmetrical oppositions between *feminine* and *masculine*, where these are understood as expressive attributes of *male* and *female* and the basis for expressing desire in sexual practice.”²⁸ This characterization of sex means that firstly, gender roles are required to be played out in order for this regulatory economy of sex to function. Secondly, it is geared towards heterosexual relations being the norm. Thirdly, as it is defined as a discursive practice, sex is historically contingent and the result of larger systems of thought. Sex and gender are disseminated “through schools, medicine, law, prisons, religion, even art; and in their circulation and reinforcement they actively determine social relations and create subject positions.”²⁹ By discussing gender in a specific historic context, the historic aspects of gender are retained.

Another issue that problematizes Butler’s theory for this specific topic is that her work was part of the beginning of what is now called “queer theory.” Instead of a simple male/female dichotomy, it presupposes a plurality of gender identities along a male-female spectrum. For the goals of this thesis, a queer theory based approach on gender would be impractical, since we will be dealing exclusively with heterosexual masculine identity. As we shall see, a lot of the anxiety about masculinity dealt with the fear of appearing or even becoming feminine. Thus, ideas about masculine identity tended to propagate a “normal”, straight sexuality, as well as a binary man-woman opposition. It does, as we shall see, allow for multiple masculinities.

While there are some snags in Butler’s gender definition, what we can surely take is the performative aspect, as well as the relational aspect. Say Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet:

Gender is not a part of one’s essence, what one is, but an achievement, what one does. Gender is a set of practices through which people construct and claim identities, not simply a system of categorising people. And gender practices are not only about establishing identities but also about managing social relations.³⁰

²⁶ Joseph Harris, “What Butler Saw: Cross-Dressing and Spectatorship in Seventeenth-Century France”, *Paragraph* 29 (2006), 67-79.

²⁷ Jennifer Harding, *Sex Acts: Practices of Femininity and Masculinity* (London, 1998), 45.

²⁸ Harding, *Sex Acts*, 46.

²⁹ Berger, Wallis and Watson, *Constructing Masculinity*, 5.

³⁰ Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge, 2003), 305.

Masculinity

Much work has been done on gender in the service of feminist critique, which aims at exploring the female gender, while the male gender has been consistently defined as normalized. The *dominance* approach to gender that was typical of early feminist critique, saw female gender acts as using a powerless language. An alternative, the *difference* view, was based on the idea that female gender should be seen on its own terms.³¹

While these approaches have done much to illuminate the position of women, they did little to contribute to the study of men. The *dominance* approach, especially, leaves us with a one-dimensional perspective on men. The discussion of masculinity needs to reach beyond a one-sided dominating masculinity to develop a more complex masculinity or rather a complex of masculinities.

An important concept in men's studies has been *hegemonic* masculinity, which can be defined as an abstract, historically determined "pattern of practice (i.e. things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue."³² It takes into account that there are multiple ideas of masculinity, but that at any time, a minority conception can gain hegemony through various channels. However, as noted, this simplification of the social relations surrounding masculinity has to be rejected – to talk merely in terms of *dominance* is inadequate.

What should be retained from *hegemonic masculinity* is that masculinity has to be seen as plural. As Christopher Forth notes, "In practice masculinities are always multiple, complex and often contradictory. They are not easily reduced to a single stereotype, set of qualities or horizon of aspirations."³³ If we stretch Butler's theory, we can see that the gender spectrum does not move from male to female, but from one masculine identity to another. Moreover, the notion of hierarchy in *hegemonic masculinity* is useful: not all competing conceptions of masculinity gain equal currency. Some are widely disseminated, others remain marginalized; some remain at the local level, while others spread to a regional, national or global level.³⁴

Concepts of masculinity are not only based on ideas about what men should act like, but on the body as well. While the aesthetics of the body are of some significance, it is always stressed that the male body should be *capable* of things. Many characteristics that are typically associated with masculinity, like bravery and strength, rely on the body. Traditionally, man can only play his role as

³¹ Sally Johnson and Ulrike Meinhof (eds.), *Language and Masculinity* (Cambridge, 1997). 10-11.

³² R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept", *Gender & Society* 19 (2005), 832.

³³ Christopher Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Hampshire/New York, 2008), 3.

³⁴ Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity", 849.

supporter of the family if his body is capable of enduring the discomforts of manual labour.³⁵ The body is thus often considered in theoretical conceptions of masculinity. As discussed above, the consideration of the body in this thesis can only go so far – it is limited to fictional and textual bodies. Ultimately, masculinity figures in this essay as a complex of differing conceptions of what it means to be ‘man.’ *Playboy* offered one conception, an alternative to the traditional (or *hegemonic*) model of the time, and it is from this perspective that *Playboy*'s brand of masculinity should be viewed: a re-definition of masculinity at a time that the hegemonic model caused anxieties.

Identity

While gender is a large part of a person's identity, it only constitutes part of the whole. Identity is more than gender – think of national identity, or cultural identity. Thus, if one is to study male identity, gender theory only covers half the subject. A theory on identity has to be taken into account as well. Building on Paul Ricoeur's theory on identity, there are two different forms of identity. The first is *idem* identity, which can be translated as “sameness.” It is a form of identity that is constructed by objectifying the self: one imagines viewing the self as other. The second form is *ipse* identity, which is understood to mean “selfhood.” This designates that core of one's identity that is experienced – the self as one truly is. Inherent to both these forms of identity is change over time. Ricoeur theorizes that “identity in the sense of *ipse* implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of the personality.”³⁶

A second identity theory, which focuses on that aspect of identity called ‘selfhood,’ has been proposed by Jerrold Seigel in the book *The Idea of the Self*. In this work, he discusses the various strands of philosophical thought about selfhood/identity since the seventeenth century. In his introductory chapter, he works out an anatomy of selfhood, laying out the various dimensions of the self. According to Seigel, selfhood can be conceived as multi-dimensional: the bodily self, the relational self, and the reflective self. The bodily self refers to the physical aspects of individuals, “the things about our nature that make us palpable creatures driven by needs, urges, and inclinations, and that give us particular constitutions or temperaments, making us for instance more or less energetic, lethargic, passionate, or apathetic.”³⁷ The relational self refers to the ways in which the self is constituted by interaction, with other individuals or groups – the self constituted by other. The third dimension, the reflective self, is the result of the mind's ability to reflect on itself; to examine itself and its position in the world from a distance.

³⁵ Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West*, 8.

³⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another* (Chicago, 1992), 2.

³⁷ Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe Since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 2005), 5.

While it is true that one-dimensional models of the self (that give precedence to the role of one of the three dimensions) contribute to the understanding of the self in “certain moments of experience,” Seigel acknowledges that a multi-dimensional approach to the self is the most useful, stressing the interrelationship between the dimensions.³⁸ Following Seigel, the research in this thesis will focus on bodily aspects, relational aspects, and reflective aspects of the male characters in *Playboy*'s short stories.

New Historicism

In this essay, the goal is to look at a medium – literature – in the light of its historical context. But the use of literature in historical research is not straightforward; the simple objection might even be made that ‘fiction is fiction.’ Thus, I deem it necessary to take a closer look at the way I will be analysing the short stories, which is based on New Historicism, as propagated by Stephen Greenblatt and others. Put simply, New Historicism tries to simultaneously understand literature through its cultural context and understand the cultural context through literature. Two concepts in New Historicism warrant some closer examination: “thick description,” and “circulation of social energy.”

Thick description was appropriated from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. There is a subtle difference between the two definitions of thick description. According to Ryle, thick description is “an account of the intentions, expectations, circumstances, settings, and purposes that give actions their meanings.”³⁹ An object can be analysed in two different ways, either by ‘thinly’ describing the object itself, or using a ‘thick’ description that takes its context into account. For Geertz – and for New Historicism as well – thick description is characterized by the anecdote. This entails a move away from Ryle as the thickness of the description does not only depend on the method of analysis, but on the object itself as well. By not relying on constructed examples but anthropological field notes, Geertz tries to add an empirical aspect to it. According to Geertz, the context is inscribed in these anecdotes. This would of course imply that the thickness is a characteristic of the object itself. The question is obviously, “are these complexities actually inscribed in the textual fragments, or are they brought to bear upon them from the outside in the course of interpretation?”⁴⁰

The focus on anecdote can be criticized for being non-representational. New Historicism has a tendency towards non-canonical texts, utilized to “puncture [the grand narrative] on purpose, relying as much on their off-beat content as on their formal incisiveness.”⁴¹ From the perspective of this essay, this outlook is helpful. The short stories of *Playboy* are to be seen as anecdotes; they are

³⁸ Seigel, *The Idea of the Self*, 31-2.

³⁹ Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago/London, 2000), 23.

⁴⁰ Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, 26.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 51.

completed stories, but they lend themselves to thick description, meaning that within the contained text of the short story, a cultural context can be uncovered: a “touch of the real.”

There is a catch: especially in the early years, *Playboy* often used short stories published in the past. For instance, the January 1954 issue published Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story *A Scandal in Bohemia*, originally published in 1891. Would a thick description of this short story not result in uncovering the 1891 context? I would argue that while a story like *A Scandal in Bohemia* on itself would not reveal much about 1950s America. However, we must acknowledge that it was published in a 1950s magazine, and a conscious editorial choice preceded this publication. Therefore, it gains renewed relevance in the context of *Playboy* – maybe not in terms of historical context, but certainly in the light of masculine identity.

Geertz’ concept of thick description assumes a method that works from the inside out: one starts with the text, and then expands what one finds there to describe the historical context. The approach of this essay will take the opposite road: from the outside in. It will start with the context and only then move on to the literature, for I believe this will better keep the dual focus of history and medium in place. When the essay turns to the literature, however, the idea that the history is in the medium remains relevant.

The second concept is ‘circulation of social energy,’ which is perhaps akin to thick description. In his work, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Stephen Greenblatt initially has trouble defining social energy: “The term implies something measurable, yet I cannot provide a convenient and reliable formula for isolating a single, stable quantum for examination. We identify *energia* only indirectly, by its effects: it is manifested in the capacity of certain verbal, aural, and visual traces to produce, shape, and organize collective physical and mental experiences.”⁴² Social energy is thus partly intuitive. It is why certain works make certain people laugh, for instance. In a move that is similar to Geertz’ thick description, Greenblatt argues that certain works are encoded with this social energy, that “continues to generate the illusion of life for centuries.”⁴³ There is a process of negotiation, which gives works their social energy. This view of exchange means that there are several assumptions underlying this understanding of literary works. For instance, the author is not the sole origin of art; there is not motiveless creation; the produced artefacts are neither autonomous nor timeless; and all expression has an origin and an object.⁴⁴

This view on literary works places them in a contextual web. There is no art for art’s sake; it is always the result between an ongoing process of negotiation between the social and the textual context. If we define *Playboy* as a cultural artefact, it refers both to historical developments in

⁴² Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation Of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1988), 6.

⁴³ Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 7.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 12.

identity and social anxieties about both individual identity and national character. Furthermore, it can simultaneously be seen to contribute to these developments.

The presumed historicity of literary works means that a short story read in 1950s America is *not* the same short story when it is read 60 years later, that is to say, the meaning attributed to it is different because of the changed context. Thus, the reading of a work must refer to its historical context and cannot focus on the text alone, since without this context, one will attribute to the work a meaning that is solely contemporary. From a historical perspective, the underlying assumption that every period produces literary works through this process of negotiation is open to criticism. It is of course open to debate that every period operates in this fashion. Then again, the perspective of new historicism produces not so much a well-defined or dogmatic theory as a valuable mode of thought: “[...] New historicism is not a repeatable methodology or a literary critical program. Each time we approached that moment in the writing when it might have been appropriate to draw the “theoretical” lesson [...] we stopped, [...] because we cannot bear to see the long chains of close analysis go up in a puff of abstraction.”⁴⁵

Media

As stated above, the short stories in *Playboy* cannot be separated from their magazine context – the editorial decision to include them is one of the factors that allow them to be studied as a group, and to glean from them the male identity that *Playboy* espoused. Magazines are mass media *par excellence*. They are visible every day – on the coffee table, but also in the waiting room at the doctor’s office, in the employee’s restaurant, and at the hairdresser’s. Since the short stories under analysis are integrated into a magazine, it is perhaps useful to keep in mind at least one media effects theory: framing.

One way of looking at mass media is through *framing theory* – the essence of the theory is that mass media have an active role in shaping the frames of reference that individuals ‘use’ to process events. Communications scholar Dietram Scheufele divides the process of framing into four stages. First, organizational pressures, ideologies and other elites influence the construction of media frames. Second, these media frames are communicated to the audience by ‘frame setting’, which is the ways in which the media frame is received by the audience as an audience frame. Third, these audience frames influence individual frames. Fourth, certain individual frames – those of journalists, for example – help shape the elites at the start of this process, closing the circle.⁴⁶

This essay will concern itself with the first part of this process – essentially, how a frame is produced. The reception of such a frame is of course important to investigate, but it lies outside the

⁴⁵ Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, 19.

⁴⁶ Dietram Scheufele, “Framing as a Theory of Media Effects”, *Journal of Communication* 49 (2006), 114-118.

scope of this essay. Nonetheless, the issue of reception should be in the back of one's head while studying frame setting.

Sources

The short stories have been selected from the 72 issues of *Playboy* magazine published between December 1953 and December 1959 (there was no March issue in 1955 due to a failure to meet the press deadline, which explains why there are not 73 issues). These issues have been recently published by *Playboy* in the form of a digitized archive, called *Playboy, Cover to Cover: the 1950s*. While earlier studies had to rely on (often incomplete) available source material – they depended on locally available material – this archive makes a more complete study possible. Nonetheless, due to the incredible amount of material in *Playboy*, I have further specified my research parameters. The editors of *Playboy* distinguished between different kinds of short stories, and I have followed this practice in my research. My analysis is limited to stories that have been categorized as “fiction” in *Playboy* magazine.⁴⁷ I exclude, for example, the category “humour,” which encompasses a wide variety of material, from party jokes to humorous articles, but also some short stories. These stories in the “humour” category, however, are stories with little character detail, making them unsuited for character analysis.

Even with this limitation, the initial sample consists of 201 short story entries. Furthermore, a number of stories were not suited for this analysis, either due to a lack of a primary male character or lack of character detail. For example, some of the entries are two-page triptychs, which contain characters that are too underdeveloped to be satisfyingly analyzed. In the end, the sample size was 193. Every year thirty-three stories on average appeared in *Playboy*, with about three stories a month. In early issues, they tended to be printed on whole pages and in direct succession, while later issues saw short stories spread out over pages throughout the magazine. Moreover, after 1956 short stories were very often interrupted by advertising.

The stories themselves are varied. There were numerous science fiction stories, murder stories, dramas and countryside romances. Perhaps unsurprisingly considering Hugh Hefner's ideas about sexual liberation, many stories featured characters with a sexual morale that defies traditional norms.⁴⁸ Husbands regularly cheat on wives, and vice versa. On at least one occasion, the act of cheating proves beneficial for the happiness of the marriage. The tone of the stories was equally likely to be humorous or more serious. Their length varies just as much, with the shortest stories being just one page in length, and the longest over ten pages. Naturally, this means that some of the

⁴⁷ Note: these works were categorized as fiction both in the magazines themselves and in the *Playboy* digital archive.

⁴⁸ Cf. Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 13.

stories had better developed characters than others. Most of the shorter stories, as well as many of the science fiction stories, tended to be focused on plot, with fewer character descriptions. In contrast, the longer stories were more descriptive in nature, fleshing out characters more. Note that this does not hold for all stories, and that sometimes the longer stories feature a similar scarcity in character description. Furthermore, coding was problematic at times because male characters tend to be relatively less well-described in certain areas – appearance, for example – than female characters. While this complicated the coding of the stories at times, the stories contained sufficient information to adequately define the main male actors. This was not always the protagonist, nor was it always the narrator (if the narrator happened to be male).

The early issues contained primarily republished stories – the first original short story that was published by *Playboy*, Charles Beaumont's *Black Country*, appeared only in September 1954. Even after that, republications occurred frequently. As advertising in the magazine grew, so did the number of original publications, from which we may infer that this trend was primarily dictated by financial concerns. While many of the authors appeared once or twice in the magazine, several authors seemed to be editorial favourites due to the frequent publication of their work. In 1954, *Playboy* published a story by Boccaccio every month. More contemporary favourites were Herbert Gold (who was published fourteen times), Charles Beaumont (twelve times), Ray Bradbury (eight times), Henry Slesar (seven times) and Erskine Caldwell (six times). Note that a number of these authors' stories were not originally published in *Playboy*. Ray Bradbury stands out, since his novel *Fahrenheit 451* was the only serial novel published during the decade – a clear example of how the choice of stories went beyond the theme of sexuality. In 1956, the magazine published Bradbury's original short story *The First Night of Lent*. Other notable authors include Jack Kerouac (*The Rumbling, Rambling Blues* and *Before The Road*, published in 1958 and 1959, respectively) and Roald Dahl (*Taste and Nunc Dimittis*, republished from *The New Yorker* and *Colliers* in 1956, and *A Fine Son*, published in 1959). The overwhelming majority of authors were male, with only a fraction of the stories written by female authors – perhaps among whom the most notable is Alice Denham, who had a short story published in the same issue (July 1956) that featured her as a Playmate.

While the first part of the research will be a content analysis of the total short story collection, the second part will take a closer look at seven selected stories: Herbert Gold's "A Very Good Sidewalk Story," Irwin Shaw's "The Eighty-Yard Run," Charles Beaumont's "A Classic Affair," Richard Matheson's "The Distributor," Fred McMorrow's "Drop Dead," Stanley Cooperman's "Walk To The Station," and Robert Sheckley's "The World of Heart's Desire."⁴⁹ These stories were selected because

⁴⁹ Herbert Gold, "A Very Good Sidewalk Story", *Playboy* (October, 1959). Irwin Shaw, "The Eighty-Yard Run", *Playboy* (May, 1955). Charles Beaumont, "A Classic Affair", *Playboy* (December, 1955). Richard Matheson, "The Distributor", *Playboy* (March, 1958). Fred McMorrow, "Drop Dead", *Playboy* (August, 1958). Stanley

they exemplified the link between different aspects of the 'crisis of masculinity' and thus proved workable case studies.

Methodology

The research on the short stories consists of two parts. First, I will attempt a qualitative content analysis. The stories will be coded using a synthesized coding scheme, and the results (if they reveal significant trends) will be discussed to assess the ways in which, overall, the short stories present a coherent male identity. The coding scheme focuses on three fields: appearance and the body, social relations and domestic situation, and socio-economic position. It also considers plot-related aspects (character goals and main plot obstacles). A more extensive discussion on the coding scheme is included in the introduction to chapter three, which will deal with the results of the content analysis.

Second, the seven selected stories will be explored. While in the content analysis I hope to find the general characteristics of *Playboy's* masculine identity, the second part focuses more on what it means to act like a man, informed by Butler's notion of performativity. Simultaneously, this closer look would allow for linking the historical context of the crisis of masculinity and the short stories. The approach is partly based on Greenblatt's 'circulation of social energy.' On the one hand, it establishes a link between society and literature. On the other hand, it accounts for the use of stories that have been published before appearing in *Playboy* since the 'circulation of social energy' established the historicity of literature. For instance, Irwin Shaw's "The Eighty-Yard Run" first appeared in 1941. In *Playboy*, however, it can be read differently – partially thanks to changes in the story, which for example erase any reference to the Depression, which was a plot-element in the original story. The different historical context allows for a different reading. Furthermore, working from the anecdotal (quotes, separate sentences) results in an approach based more on 'thick-description.' With an approach that is informed by these concepts, I hope to place a performative male identity in a historical context of the 'crisis of masculinity.'

Structure

The approach of this essay will in general be to start with a look at history and then move on to look at media. The task in the first chapter will be to analyse American society in the 1950s and explore the different ways in which historical developments of the time would have been causes for a 'crisis of masculinity.' The literature very frequently refers to this crisis, but in the various historical

Cooperman, "Walk To The Station", *Playboy* (August, 1956). Robert Sheckley, "The World of Heart's Desire", *Playboy* (September, 1959).

works the discussion is often limited to some of the issues. What I want to achieve with this first part of the essay, is to give a multi-faceted explanation of the “crisis of masculinity.”

The short second chapter will signal the move to the medium. In this chapter I will take a look at *Playboy Magazine* in general and discuss its broad editorial policy – which is of importance if we are to discuss the short stories, since they were arguably chosen to be published over others for a reason.

Chapter Three will be a content analysis of the short stories of *Playboy Magazine* in the 1950s. All the stories that are labelled ‘fiction’ in the magazine will be coded, after which the findings will be discussed. The focus will be on general patterns and changes in patterns over the years. Moreover, it is based on similarities between the different male characters in the stories. In other words, in how far do these subjects constitute an *idem* identity?

Chapter Four will dive into several of these short stories, to analyse the theme of male identity in more detail. If the goal of the third chapter is to determine “who/what is the *Playboy* man?” the question that drives the fourth chapter is “how is the *Playboy* man?” The study in the third chapter will hopefully tell us things about age, dress, job, living situation, et cetera. The close reading approach of the fourth chapter will answer questions related to meaning and more subtle aspects of male identity – how does the *Playboy* man act, how does he talk, and so forth. Put differently, it explores *ipse* identity, or the core of one’s identity that is experienced. Furthermore, the chapter will explore the link between the historical context of the ‘crisis of masculinity’ and the short stories.

The conclusion will consist out of an evaluation of my findings and will provide a tentative conclusion regarding male identity in *Playboy’s* short stories in the 1950s.

CHAPTER 1 – The United States in the 1950s

In Maarten van Rossem's work *De Verenigde Staten in de twintigste eeuw*, the chapter on the post-war period is titled "The National Consensus, 1945-1965."¹ This is a telling example of the popular conception of the period. It has to be noted that this chapter title is correct, for the history he writes is a political one, and from a political perspective the period can indeed be seen as a process of consensus building. However, this title is no longer adequate when we move past politics to look at culture and society. The most obvious thing to do is to start with how the Cold War was the major source of anxiety for the American people in the 1950s, citing McCarthyism and the Red Scare. However, this approach potentially "ignore[s] the broad sweep of American culture to focus on government [...] or read[s] all cultural forms through the filter of international relations," with everything becoming "an allegory of political events or an embodiment of the Manichean struggle in which the forces of American democracy are pitted against the godless tyranny of communism."² Naturally, the Cold War was a source of anxiety, but it was not the only one and if we do not look beyond the Cold War, we might miss other social anxieties. Elizabeth Fraterrigo argues that "a multitude of changes in the workplace and family life, in popular culture and national character, [...] generated a discourse on gender upheaval that understood American masculinity as under siege and in crisis."³ In this chapter, these changes will be discussed in detail, in order to provide the cultural framework in which *Playboy* appeared. As I will argue, these changes and the resulting tensions played out on several fields: the economy and the workplace, consumer society, the family and the home, and finally the national and international sphere.

A White-Collar Economy

In the post-war period, the American job-market was transformed as it saw an unprecedented growth of the so-called white-collar occupations. White-collar work is perhaps best defined as managerial or administrative work as opposed to manual labour (which is commonly referred to as blue-collar work). The typical skills of the white-collar worker, says C. Wright Mills, "involve the handling of paper and money and people. [...] The one thing they do not do is live by making things; rather, they live off the social machineries that organize and coordinate the people who do make things."⁴

These skills are, however, just a part of the whole. While white-collar workers are often seen as the American middle classes, this view is problematic. When class "in its simplest objective sense has

¹ Maarten van Rossem, *De Verenigde Staten in de Twintigste Eeuw* (Utrecht, 1984), 206.

² Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s*, 9.

³ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 9.

⁴ Mills, *White Collar*, 65.

to do with the amount and source of income,” it ostensibly becomes an easy term to handle.⁵ However, was the ‘new middle class’ really just that? The wide variety of occupations that are considered to be white-collar professions are spread over a similar variety of income categories. Skilled workers, working in what are considered to be blue-collar positions, could easily make more than certain low white-collar positions. Also, occupations such as that of foreman were seen as white-collar occupations, while socially they were separated from the middle classes. In general, successful actions through unionization improved the economic position of workers, giving them the opportunity to afford a better standard of living.⁶ Thus, class in the 1950s does not lend itself to a definition that is based on objective economic markers like the amount of income or the occupation. As Margo Anderson says, “by many measures, the middle class is the working class – people with wage-earning jobs, with average or below-average wages, with little income-producing property, and with little control over the production process.”⁷ Note, however, that though the relation is certainly partly valid, Anderson here too easily equates the middle classes with white-collar workers.

This tendency to equate ‘white-collar’ to ‘middle-class’ is related to an American tradition of viewing themselves as a wholly middle-class society.⁸ On the one hand, a shift in the population’s distribution over occupations indicates that there was an increase of white-collar functions. This was the continuation of a process that was well underway before the war. In the period 1870-1940, industry jobs that actually involved producing things dropped from 77% to 46%, while the people with servicing and distributing jobs increased from 13% to 20% and from 7% to 23%, respectively.⁹ On the other hand, discussion about class has been masked by terminology. Using headers of ‘trade unionism,’ ‘collective bargaining,’ ‘communism,’ or ‘welfare,’ Americans in fact engaged in a language of class.¹⁰ The late forties had seen a peak in strike activity, while in the fifties trade unions were seen as a possible hub for political ideology (communism).¹¹ Thus, while a certain trend towards an increase in white-collar occupations was noticeable, America did not become a classless society, but for a part assumed a rhetoric of classlessness without totally doing away with class. What became noticeable in the 1950s was “the blurring, culturally and ecologically, of class lines.”¹²

The rise of the white-collar ‘middle class’ was a source of anxiety for its members. C. Wright Mills poignantly depicts the position of the white-collar office worker:

⁵ Ibidem, 71.

⁶ Margo Anderson, “The Language of Class in Twentieth-Century America”, *Social Science History* 12 (1988), 355.

⁷ Anderson, “The Language of Class in Twentieth-Century America”, 355-6.

⁸ Ibidem, 349.

⁹ Mills, *White Collar*, 66.

¹⁰ Anderson, “The Language of Class in Twentieth-Century America”, 360.

¹¹ Ibidem, 363.

¹² Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* 173.

As skyscrapers replace rows of small shops, so offices replace free markets. Each office within the skyscraper is a segment of the enormous file, a part of the symbol factory that produces the billion slips of paper that gear modern society into its daily shape. From the executive's suite to the factory yard, the paper webwork is spun; a thousand rules you never made and don't know about are applied to you by a thousand people you have not met and never will. The office is the unseen Hand become visible as a row of clerks and a set of IBM equipment, a pool of dictaphone transcribers, and sixty receptionists confronting the elevators, one above the other, on each floor.¹³

There are several aspects of the white-collar world that were cause for anxiety. The first aspect relates to real and perceived changes in power relations. Essential to these changes was the development and continuing growth of the managerial hierarchy. Co-ordinating functions in industry rose from 3% to 11% in the 1870-1940 period alone.¹⁴ The system of management established a strict, hierarchical chain of command: business managers at the top gave orders to the middle-section managers. These managers executed part of the orders and passed the rest on further down, repeating the process until the orders reached the lowest levels of the organization. This left everyone but the top-level managers with an increased sense of powerlessness, with little freedom to interpret orders individually. The managerial hierarchy was combined with a parallel process of bureaucratization. Managers higher up the ladder surrounded themselves with an elaborate apparatus of organizational guidelines, subordinates and secretaries. Subsequently they worked within this apparatus. Lower down the ladder were managers who did not dare to work outside the orders given to them from higher up, fearing for their personal job security.¹⁵ This is not to say that competitiveness disappeared from the market, but within organizations, ambition was more and more subordinated to a bureaucratic regimen where the security of one's current job was the prevailing concern. This effectively limited the power of these 'new middle classes' in politics as well. During World War I, the middle classes had formed a sense of unity in the face of an external enemy. However, "this unity burst with the bubble of prosperity because the ideologists of free enterprise [...] had failed to grasp the degree to which this market economy imposes a particular type of dependency upon everyone."¹⁶ In other words, the typical white-collar worker – from clerk to low-level management – was relatively powerless, both in his function and in politics. In the introduction this was already hinted at: the federal bureaucracy grew, and as a result political power became concentrated – small-town politics was in decline, leaving many men with less direct influence.¹⁷ The resulting image is one of a fragmented group of people, each focused on maintaining the security of their own positions. These were the 'organization men.'

¹³ Mills, *White Collar*, 189.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 66.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 93.

¹⁶ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* 67-8.

¹⁷ Mills, *White Collar*, 347.

As a result of this (relative) powerlessness, there was an increased focus on prestige. Generally, white-collar workers see their position in society as more prestigious than blue-collar workers. As they could not persuasively distinguish themselves from 'lower classes' by income markers due to the rising economic position of blue-collar workers, the middle classes had to separate themselves in other ways. Shelley Nickles notes that "as an expression of social values and identity, taste was an impediment to social mobility from the working to middle class and within the middle class. [...] The upper-middle class was [...] tightening their entrance requirements [...] by emphasizing those things that money couldn't buy, such as 'good taste.'"¹⁸ Taste became a way to differentiate between the 'low-middle' and the 'high-middle.' Of course, the requirement of 'good taste' was linked to the costs of the goods – tasteful appliances cost a bit more. Anxious for prestige, the middle class would more easily go for designer equipment.¹⁹ Furthermore, it is indicated that cost aside, the lower class workers had a different view on appearance and good taste. They were more prone to affordable 'populuxe' items, and unlikely to "pay such a high price for a plain refrigerator."²⁰ Besides having good taste, white-collar workers could realistically claim greater prestige on other grounds as well. They had at least a high school level of education; they could 'borrow' prestige from the firm they worked at; at work they were afforded small liberties– they wore street clothes to work and could decide on work procedures within the policy boundaries. Also, while the white-collar occupations had grown sizeably, wage-workers still outnumbered them.²¹

The indications are that an increasingly white-collar world caused anxiety for two main reasons. First, we see that the hierarchical chain of command along with a tendency towards strict bureaucratization caused a feeling of powerlessness for many workers, relegating them to the position of 'organization man,' more defined by loyalty to the company than by individual ambition. Second, this lack of power led white-collar workers to become increasingly anxious about prestige. If they did not have real power, they could at least have some social standing.

Women and the Feminization of the Workplace

The post-war period saw changes in the participation of women in the economy, a process that began during the Depression, but only really took off during World War II. In the Depression, women worked out of necessity, and the idea of women contributing to the support of the family was embraced, though "these alternatives were viewed as temporary measures caused by unfortunate

¹⁸ Shelley Nickles, "More is Better: Mass Consumption, Gender, and Class Identity in Postwar America", *American Quarterly* 54 (2002), 604.

¹⁹ Nickles, "More is Better", 602.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 592.

²¹ Mills, *White Collar*, 74.

circumstances, rather than as positive outcomes of the crisis.”²² During the Second World War, women started to work *en masse*, replacing men who were sent away to fight. The iconic Rosie the Riveter represented this development: a woman doing what was typically masculine work, while still maintaining her femininity. Before World War II, women mostly performed poorly paid functions in the service sector. The better paying factory jobs during the war provided a welcome change. As the war ended and the men returned home to jobs and wives, it became a goal to return women to their homes.²³ However, in spite of this emphasis on domesticity, the situation did not reverse entirely and women kept working in larger numbers than before the war.²⁴ In the course of the 1950s, participation grew until in 1963, “41 percent of American women 25 to 44 years old were in the labor force.”²⁵ This data implies that a transformation was underway in which women of all ages were reshaping the family, the economy, and society. Therefore, the post-war years represented a change in the *status quo* as opposed to the return to pre-war customs. As Joanne Meyerowitz mentions, “various studies noted women war workers’ enhanced self-confidence in the post-war era, a ‘nascent feminist consciousness’ in Hollywood films of the late 1940s, more egalitarian relations between post-war husbands and wives, and new state laws that strengthened women’s rights.”²⁶

Fears of female strength were one of the sources of anxiety about masculinity. Wartime employment, men feared, had offered women too much independence and made them un-domestic and un-feminine.²⁷ Rhetoric from conservative critics, as well as active government policy – like cutting the funding of day-care centres, or the G.I. Bill that granted benefits to a low proportion of women – called for women to find fulfilment in their roles as wives and mothers. The popular depiction of the 1950s was a society in which “white women stayed home in the expanding suburbs, giving birth to more children and drinking coffee with their neighbours.”²⁸ Thus, while women made some progress as part of the workforce, they remained barred by a wall of cultural apprehension. Attitudes towards gender roles did not change so easily. Even during the Second World War, when women first took up the ‘man-sized jobs,’ they were still primarily viewed as ‘the wife of...’ They earned less than men: women earned around 60% of the wage their male colleagues earned.²⁹ They

²² May, *Homeward Bound*, 52.

²³ Leila Rupp, “From Rosie the Riveter to the Global Assembly Line: American Women on the World Stage”, *OAH Magazine of History* 18 (2004), 53.

²⁴ Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 3.

²⁵ Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago/London, 2000), 50.

²⁶ Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia, 1994), 4.

²⁷ Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable*, 33.

²⁸ Rupp, “From Rosie the Riveter to the Global Assembly Line”, 54.

²⁹ Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America* (Baltimore, 1975), 207.

continued to be treated as 'the fair sex,' due to employers' concerns about women 'distracting' their male colleagues, and left them vulnerable to male advances.³⁰

In the post-war period, there was a widespread preference for keeping women at home and discouraging professional activity, running parallel to the socio-economic developments: "as women increasingly joined the workforce, cultural expectations for fulltime domesticity rose throughout the Cold War period."³¹ These views did not exclusively originate with men. Women had a hand as well in perpetuating traditional gender roles. While some women gave the advice to pursue careers, other authors propagated the traditional domestic role. In the 1950s, this tension between work and the home was occasionally resolved by journalists who formulated a 'life cycle' of the modern woman: if women wanted a career, they should pursue it when single or later in life when their children had grown up. Married women with young children should work only part-time at most.³²

Contemporary voices already recognized that there was no widespread displacement of men by women in neither economy nor society: the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. noted in 1958 that the hysterical warnings by critics who 'blamed women' and warned against an impending matriarchy (like Philip Wylie) were naive or overly pessimistic.³³ In fact, male dominance in the workforce was still unquestioned. While women worked more, they did not usually gain positions of power, and overall were relegated to working 'pink-collar' jobs. Men, meanwhile, still held political power; they had easier access to jobs, with higher income; and they still had easier access to higher education.³⁴ Arguments that women were trying to usurp the dominant power position in society were thus incongruent with reality.

While these ideas deviated from the actual socio-economic situation, they remained common, for women were an easy scapegoat. Even in the Depression women were blamed from displacing men on the job-market, while the actual female unemployment rate increased faster and peaked at a higher level during the 1930s. The president of Carnegie Technical Institute argued that "women have usurped all, or nearly all, of the white-collar jobs."³⁵ A large segment of his respondents held the same view: the woman should remain at home.

As we can see, the rhetoric of female domestic containment was on the one hand an anomaly when compared to increasing economic participation. On the other hand, the rhetoric was in line with

³⁰ Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, 176. Cf. Fraterrigo, 113. Cf. May, *Homeward Bound*, 96.

³¹ Linda Eisenmann, *Higher Education for Women in Postwar America, 1945-1965* (Baltimore, 2006), 27.

³² Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: a Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958", in: Joanne Meyerowitz (ed.), *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia, 1994), 239.

³³ K.A. Cuordileone, "Politics in an Age of Anxiety: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960", *The Journal of American History* 87 (2000), 524.

³⁴ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 27.

³⁵ Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, 160-1.

traditional attitudes towards gender roles. This disparity between perception and reality might be partially explained by the notion that “white middle-class Americans, in search of security, turned to an idealized vision of home and family that domesticated and subordinated women.”³⁶

For the other part, the anxiety about the influx of women to the workplace can be explained as a reaction to the transformation of the work itself. While the continuing rise of the white-collar professions left men feeling powerless and anxious about what little prestige they could achieve, the nature of the work had something distinctly feminine about it. James Gilbert illustrates this at the hand of the 1957 film *No Down Payment*. The newly wed Jean Martin worries about her husband:

men are becoming like women, she insists, [...] and nine out of ten of their careers could easily be filled by women, she continues: “look at their jobs – salesmen, clerks, accountants, desk jobs.”³⁷

Certainly, these jobs were not as manly as being a metalworker, or a soldier. As noted in works like *The Lonely Crowd* by sociologist David Riesman, these white-collar jobs traded in a traditional inner-directed character for an other-directed character. What Riesman calls the inner-directed character might best be defined as the individualistic entrepreneur (exemplified by the great late-nineteenth century magnates like Andrew Carnegie or J.D. Rockefeller). The other-directed character, in contrast, embraces “being attuned to others, worrying about their opinions and feelings, being adaptable and avoiding conflict – precisely the traits and skills demanded by the corporations and white-collar occupations [...]” which were all “traditional feminine personality characteristics.”³⁸ Indeed, the white-collar office environment did not need men with individualist tendencies. Rather, it needed conformist behaviour – people who got along well with their colleagues and worked well in a group context. Instead of a man at the top, like the old entrepreneurs, businesses needed a man in the middle.

Corporations tried to counter these worries by defining the white-collar jobs in traditional terms. First, anxieties over conformity were linked to the depreciation of earlier traditional ethics, like diligence and thrift.³⁹ But this comparison solved only part of the problem faced by corporations. Corporate values could only be made compatible with masculine values up to a certain point: while hard work and self-restraint were more easily defined as masculine, the American appreciation for individualism was not so easily united with corporate values.⁴⁰ References to America’s melting-pot remained little more than unconvincing rhetorical strategies. Granted, they had to combat more popular images, like the anxious salesman *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and other depictions of men

³⁶ Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 3.

³⁷ James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago, 2005), 194.

³⁸ Breines, *Young, White and Miserable*, 31.

³⁹ Erica Arthur, “The Organization Strikes Back: Rhetorical Empowerment Strategies in 1950s Business Representations of White-Collar Manhood”, *Journal of American Studies* 38 (2004), 27.

⁴⁰ Arthur, “The Organization Strikes Back”, 28.

in grey flannel suits. Regardless of competing representations, this kind of rhetoric employed by businesses could not solve the anxieties surrounding the perceived femininity of these jobs.

In a similar way, some tried to link the occupation of salesman with warfare, by explaining how the salesman employed 'strategies' to 'strike' at the customer, and so forth. This again called for typically masculine traits as health, brains, character and courage: "the definition of selling in terms of will power and conspicuous inclusion of brains in a list of more obviously 'masculine' traits attempted to overcome the effeminacy associated with forms of mental labour."⁴¹ Unfortunately, these efforts did not do much to assuage worries over the feminizing traits of white-collar work. If anything, the theoretical emphasis on heroic strength and independence made the lack of these traits in practice even more glaring.

To recapitulate, there were several interrelating tensions regarding women and the changing workplace. The economic reality was one in which there was a steadily growing percentage of women joining the workforce. This process did not stagnate during the decade, nor was it reversed. On the other hand, there was a *cultural* reality in which traditional values called for a division between the male breadwinner and the female homemaker. Finally, the white-collar work environment was widely perceived to be more feminine in nature than workplaces had been before – men's work had previously been a source of masculinity, but now there was tension between masculinity and work. This increasingly "feminized" work environment did not appear out of the blue, but was the result of an increased need for manpower in the tertiary sector, brought about by a rapidly growing consumer society.

The Consumer Society

The 1950s were a time of economic growth after a period in which almost every consumer article had been in short supply. During the late 1940s, people rushed to spend money on consumer goods when production started up again. At the end of the decade, however, this spending urge began to wear down, halting economic growth. In the early 1950s, the economy was given a boost by military spending: "between 1950 to 1953, the Defence Department budget increased from \$14.3 billion to \$49.3 billion, while as a percentage of the Gross National Product [...] it almost tripled from 5 percent to 13.5 percent. As a result, unemployment in 1953 dropped to a decade-low of 1.8 percent."⁴² The anxieties about communism – which I will discuss more elaborately later on – thus provided crucial momentum for the economic development. The middle years of the 1950s were peak years in consumer spending and industry productivity, though after 1957 there was a slump caused by over-expansion and market saturation.

⁴¹ Ibidem, 34.

⁴² Marty Jezer, *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States 1945-1960* (Boston, 1982), 119.

Together with the increase of spending capital, men had more leisure time – after all, they had to have time to spend their money and to do that, they had to be able to enjoy the goods.⁴³ In earlier times, shopping had been seen as a female activity. Advertising was focused on women as the primary shoppers of the family, though there was a simultaneous growth in men’s authority over the family wallet.⁴⁴ While advertisers had tried their hand at resolving these issues before – in the 1950s, there was an increasing collaboration between advertisers and sociologists, so they could better target specific groups of consumers in order to persuade them to ‘join in’ – there were still lingering tensions and ‘consuming’ retained its decidedly female flavour.⁴⁵ Added to this was the fear that men with a lot of free time on their hands, spending and enjoying luxury goods, were going (or had gone) soft. For example, in the course of the decade, an increasing amount of attention was paid to combating overweight, which became a growing cause for concern and was perceived as a result of the mass consumer society: “Lavish supermarkets and bigger freezers ensured that too much food was available when both sexes returned from their no-longer-Herculean labours, after which the family would gather around the television and gobble sweets instead of going for a walk.”⁴⁶ Because of these troubling observations, some Americans in the 1950s raised concerns that their society had become inhospitable to men.

The consumer society generated a shift of values, “evident in the displacement of ‘character’ by ‘personality’ as key to success.”⁴⁷ This was particularly clear in the sales sector, where personality was everything. It is perhaps best to define these two terms by relating them to the inner-directed and other-directed personas of Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*. Character is innate, it makes up part of who you are; personality is also what a person ‘emits’, there is a more clearer interpersonal component. Since the salesman only had pre-priced goods at his disposal, he needed to make them more attractive to potential buyers in other ways. As a result, a good personality could go a long way in terms of pay – more than skill or sheer intelligence. This growing demand for ‘personality’ was partly a stimulus for the consumer market, since it could have a direct influence on the buying behaviour of the many shoppers. Then again, “the personality market, the most decisive effect and symptom of the great salesroom, underlies the all-pervasive distrust and self-alienation so characteristic of metropolitan people.”⁴⁸ It was thought that it removed common values from the interaction between people, with manipulation of behaviour becoming the characterizing factor in human relations. Naturally, this shift was not abrupt, but new demands were still made for “the

⁴³ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 60.

⁴⁴ Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 76.

⁴⁵ Jezer, *The Dark Ages*, 128.

⁴⁶ Jesse Berrett, “Feeding the Organization Man: Diet and Masculinity in Postwar America”, *Journal of Social History* 30 (1997), 808.

⁴⁷ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 220.

⁴⁸ Mills, *White Collar*, 187-8.

presentation of the self, which had important ramifications for men's position within the new visual and consumer culture."⁴⁹

With the advancement of post-war consumer culture during the 1950s, the 'powers that be' had all the reason to loosen their morals, even if it was only slightly: economic growth was, after all, held to be the source of society's health. The central focus was on what was called the 'good life,' which involved comfort, security and abundance. While the consumer society apparently offered manufactured goods in excess and security in material well-being, "its inducements to consume and its commodification of appearance and personality also provoked unease."⁵⁰ There was an older traditional ethic that had not suddenly died out with the advent of consumer society. Thrift, self-discipline, these were traditional American values that had been commonly held in earlier centuries, and causes of tension (such as in the workplace, as we have seen). Thus, to sustain the pattern of economic growth, the American people had to not merely participate in the consumer society, but they had to participate in such a way that they believed that what they were doing did not go against the values of society: consumerism had to be positively associated with morality.⁵¹ It can be argued that the reaction against 'thrift' had two sides, an aesthetic and an economic one, represented by a new opulent mass aesthetic and the growth of consumer credit.

The 1950s gave rise to a mass aesthetic to accompany the consumer culture. An aesthetic of 'more is better' was underpinned by a three-tiered (good – better – best) design strategy. As Shelley Nickles points out, this populuxe styling "was not popularized in the sense of taste trickling down to the newly prosperous masses," but that "as mass-produced shiny appliances blurred the collar line in the kitchen, working-class values pervaded mainstream middle-class culture."⁵² It could be argued that 'values' is too broad a term, and that 'aesthetic' would be more accurate. Nickles' argument points much towards the physical appearance of these appliances, and the middle-class 'values' she claims are adopted by middle-class culture are limited to aesthetic preferences.

The historian Jan Logemann argues that an essential part of the development of the consumer society was the financing of consumer credit. Starting in the interwar years, consumer credit facilitated a shift towards durable goods and cars.⁵³ In the post-war period, mass consumer credit took off on an even larger scale, when the higher financial prosperity made it easier for retailers to provide their customers with credit. In turn, consumers could continue to buy: while it could possibly take years for people to save up for a car, for example, consumer credit brought it within instant

⁴⁹ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 220.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 8

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 5.

⁵² Nickles, "More is Better", 594-5.

⁵³ Jan Logemann, "Different Paths to Mass Consumption: Consumer Credit in the United States and West Germany During the 1950s and '60s", *Journal of Social History* 41 (2008), 525-7.

reach.⁵⁴ Increased prosperity alone did not cause this boom. During World War II, the government had placed restrictions on consumer credit, resulting in a decrease in loans. When the Korean War caused the government to reinstate restrictions, extensive lobbying successfully framed credit as critical to attaining a good standard of living. Government responded positively and a consensus formed that saw credit as desirable. The market responded, as evidenced by the average length of loans – down-payments on cars, in this case – shifting from eighteen months in the pre-war period to thirty months.⁵⁵ Outstanding consumer credit more than doubled over the decade, rising from \$21.5 billion in 1950 to \$56.1 billion in 1960 – an accumulation that was accelerated at the end of the decade by the advent of credit cards, which provided convenience for the consumer and extra profits for banks due to high interest rates on unpaid card debts.⁵⁶ This massive increase in money lending, with people accumulating debt at an unprecedented rate, implies the successful breaking down of the traditional ethic of thrift. Under the influence of increasing wages and beneficial loan rates, there were only lingering “hints and signs that debt continued to leave Americans uneasy, if only vaguely so.”⁵⁷

Of course, the story of affluence was a white one: these visions of abundance were fully focused on white, middle class families.⁵⁸ It has been noted that the working classes profited less from things like the GI Bill, and had a less easy time in getting access to bank loans. The same thing peculiarly goes for women: while they received a great deal of attention from advertisers who saw them as a lucrative target, their spending power increasingly got tied up with their husbands’ as he had the access to credit.⁵⁹ Despite these less-than-prosperous realities, the dominating discourse that spread throughout the United States was one of affluence and the good life.

In the decades before the war, the seeds of a set of values that were more in tune with a consumer culture had been sown, but the Depression and war had frustrated the growth of these ideals and the ability of the people to attain material well-being. After the war and an initial uneasy period of readjustment, with the nation returned to peace, increased prosperity allowed these values to take root: this new ethic of consumerism which extolled indulgence and enjoyment was essential to the continuing growth of American consumer capitalism.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Logemann, “Different Paths to Mass Consumption”, 537.

⁵⁵ Robert Shay, “Postwar Developments in the Market for Consumer Instalment Credit”, *The Journal of Finance* 11 (1956), 240.

⁵⁶ Jezer, *The Dark Ages*, 126.

⁵⁷ David Steigerwald, “Did the Protestant Ethic Disappear? The Virtue of Thrift on the Cusp of Postwar Affluence”, *Enterprise and Society* 9 (2008), 810.

⁵⁸ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 2-3.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Arens, “From Citizen to Consumer”, *Policy Review* (2003), 86-7.

⁶⁰ Arens, “From Citizen to Consumer”, 82.

Suburbia

Intimately tied up with the consumer society was the growth of the suburbs. These areas figured in media representations as the ideal environment of the American (middle-class) family: it was a green environment, with single family houses neatly separated by white picket fences. It was an image easily exported by the media. As Alan Levine remarks, “it was widely believed, in the 1950s, that if people from other than middle-class origins migrated to the suburbs, they were absorbed into the homogenous middle class [...]” Next to media propaganda, there were several government measures that expedited the growth of the suburbs. Federal mortgage guarantees privileged new single-family dwellings, making it attractive to buy a new house in the ever-expanding suburbs. Similarly, federal income tax policies gave benefits to families in which the wife did not work, echoing the wider held cultural values on the roles in marriage that have been discussed earlier.⁶¹

And the people responded favourably. The suburban population increased 43% between 1947 and 1953 alone.⁶² The residents did not all fit into the white-collar media image: trends in home-ownership once more show how blurred the typical line between middle and lower classes is. Throughout the 1950s, the percentage of homeowners with management functions rose from 66% in 1949 to 80% in 1959. People with clerical and sales functions went from 46% in 1949 to 58% in 1959, while the percentage for semi-skilled workers rose from 52% to 63% – though there is the possibility that this data is slightly skewed, since for the years 1949 and 1954, skilled and semi-skilled workers are indistinguishable.⁶³ Still, this data implies that skilled workers had a higher ownership rate than people with (lower) white-collar jobs. Though initially, the suburbs had an equalizing effect, the more well-off white-collar families eventually moved on to newer, more luxurious neighbourhoods. Thus, suburban society remained stratified.⁶⁴

While suburbia was praised by many as part of the American Dream, it was not embraced by everyone. The suburbs were criticized in a variety of ways, forming a sometimes contradictory tangle of commentaries.⁶⁵ One point of criticism was that the suburbs were inauthentic, which meant that they were not “phenomena that arose naturally like cities or rural villages,” but deliberately constructed artefacts.⁶⁶ The suburbs were perceived as a collection of faux styles – thoughtless imitations of what was perceived to be the good, American standard of living. This kind of criticism

⁶¹ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 3.

⁶² Arens, “From Citizen to Consumer”, 87.

⁶³ Richard Harris and Chris Hamnett, “The Myth of the Promised Land: The Social Diffusion of Home Ownership in Britain and North America”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77 (1987), 183.

⁶⁴ Arens, “From Citizen to Consumer”, 88.

⁶⁵ Alan Levine, *Bad Old Days: The Myth of the 1950s* (New Jersey, 2008), 124.

⁶⁶ Douglas Muzzio and Thomas Halper, “Pleasantville?: The Suburb and Its Representation in American Movies,” *Urban Affairs Review* 37 (2002), 556. A fervent critic of the suburbs as being non-organic was Lewis Mumford. Cf. Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s*, 35.

was symptomatic of wider discussions on authenticity. After the rough experience of the Depression and World War II, consumerism, and suburban life with it, seemed shallow.⁶⁷ Moreover, there was the notion that the mass flight to the inauthentic suburbs came at a price: inner city areas were neglected, together with public housing. The suburbs had an infrastructure that was shaped around the use of automobiles, which led to a prioritizing of the development of highways over that of public transportation.⁶⁸

Another critique was offered by David Riesman, who contended that suburban life was frivolous in nature; it shied away from the problems of the nation, only to retreat into small-scale life where trivial issues were the order of the day. The participation in the community, which was often quite extensive – think of the many Parent-Teacher Associations, for example – was praised by some, while it was criticized as being detrimental to national political participation by others. Habermas also supported this theory – he saw in the suburbs a form of congenial co-operation instead of the competition over ideas that was necessary to give birth to a genuine public sphere.⁶⁹

While this idea of trivial suburban life was ingrained into popular conceptions, recent historians have argued against this notion. Robyn Muncy, for example, notes how “many of the most common [suburban associations] – co-ops of all kinds, PTAs and school boards – faced members with the most significant national problems of the post-war period, including racial justice and the anticommunist crusade.”⁷⁰ Suburbia was thus far from cut-off from the nation’s problems, nor from its fears, as we shall see later when we turn to the Cold War.

The suburban life called for men to participate more actively in family life, to become not just a father, but a ‘dad.’ The family was redefined as the nuclear family: the extended family, such as grandparents who used to live very nearby, were separated from the nuclear family by the suburbs. For this smaller family, a central concept was ‘togetherness.’ A man was not creating a family as a man, but as *part of a family*. They were all in it together, theoretically speaking. The reality was that often, suburban life resulted in fragmentation: “children had their activities, men had their organizations, women had charitable and service clubs all their own.”⁷¹ Narratives of suburban life were occasionally typified by long commutes to white-collar jobs, “nervous, fugitive interactions with wives and children” and “strictly rationed leisure time.”⁷² Because men had to commute to work, when they got home the family typically only gathered to watch television. Hence, what was needed, were family activities to spread togetherness.

⁶⁷ Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s*, 10.

⁶⁸ Levine, *Bad Old Days*, 133-4.

⁶⁹ Robyn Muncy, “Cooperative Motherhood and Democratic Civic Culture in Postwar Suburbia, 1940-1965”, *Journal of Social History* 38 (2004), 285.

⁷⁰ Muncy, “Cooperative Motherhood”, 299.

⁷¹ Jezer, *The Dark Ages*, 225. Cf. Breines, *Young, White, And Miserable*, 52.

⁷² Berrett, “Feeding the Organization Man”, 812.

Men's roles in the new suburbs had to be redefined. There were several ways in which the man could be linked to the suburban home. First, there was home improvement: men were expected to perform handiwork around the house, fixing broken furniture, drainage, and so forth.⁷³ While this do-it-yourself movement was not new, in the post-war period this trend exploded, causing *Business Week* to declare the 1950s as the "Age of do-it-yourself."⁷⁴ Magazines and local hardware stores catered knowledge and tools to this new public, the idea being that this would bring traditional manual labour – masculine work – back into suburbia and integrate it into the consumer society. Not everyone reacted positively to that, with one criticism being that "all this do-it-yourself stuff [is] like housework for men."⁷⁵

Suburban neighbourhoods brought nature to the doorstep, with tree-lined lanes and lawns around every house. This was the scene of one of the more popular family activities: outdoor grilling. It offered a way for men to be involved with their family as it occupied the area between male activity and family (more feminine) activity.⁷⁶ Outdoor grilling harkened back to a historical tradition, when explorers sat around the campfire to roast meat. By defining the outdoor grill in these terms, it became a specifically masculine activity, not to be confused with the otherwise feminine activity of cooking.

Nonetheless, the suburban environment was problematic for men due to the strong 'domestic containment' ideology that was discussed earlier.⁷⁷ While reinforcing the role of the man as breadwinner, it simultaneously transformed the home into the domain of the woman. These notions of feminine domesticity caused frictions with the idea that men needed to spend more time in the home with their families. In the light of these frictions, activities like outdoor grilling appear like questionable attempts to re-establish traditional masculine spaces within the suburban home. The idea of a feminine domestic sphere could not be so easily united with the idea of the suburban family man.

Suburbia, as the proverbial home base, was not only linked to the crisis of masculinity, for there was a group of people who spent a lot more of their time there, and who were linked to a different range of concerns: America's youth.

⁷³ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 85.

⁷⁴ Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 152.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, 194.

⁷⁶ Tim Miller, "The Birth of the Patio Daddy-O: Outdoor Grilling in Postwar America", *The Journal of American Culture* 33 (2010), 7.

⁷⁷ Bill Osgerby, "The Bachelor Pad as Cultural Icon: Masculinity, Consumption and Interior Design in American Men's Magazines 1930-65," *Journal of Design History* 18 (2005), 104.

The Men of Tomorrow

The generation gap in the post-war era was much wider than it had ever been. Of course, in the 1920s there had been the reckless young émigrés in Paris, the flappers and the jazz-listening bohemians, but this was a strictly limited group: its members belonged to the higher echelons of society, the first people to share in a new affluence.⁷⁸ The post-war ‘teenagers’ had a ‘new cohesive generational sensibility, spurred by increasingly rapid social change, new economic freedom, and common generational experiences, particularly high school.’⁷⁹ Seen from the older generation’s point of view, this more clearly set them apart and made it easier to turn them into an object of attention, not all of which was positive.

In the United States, people believed there was a crisis amongst the nation’s youth. Juvenile delinquency posed a threat to the country’s safety.⁸⁰ Critics blamed everything, from comic books to the bad influence of Elvis Presley’s pelvic rotations and his ducktail haircut. There was one cause, however, that outshone the others in frequency: the home situation and the parents. There were many things that could ‘go wrong’ inside the household, from absentee fathers or marital problems to cases where there was ‘too little parental responsibility.’ These things could cause kids to rebel or worse, become juvenile delinquents. The scapegoat, however, was the mother: she was most often blamed for the deviant behaviour of her offspring. Perhaps the most virulent proponent of this theory was Philip Wylie, who already in the 1940s had propagated his concept of ‘momism,’ but continued his misogynist rhetoric in the 1950s. According to Wylie, ‘moms’ were instable women who were so overbearing and protective that they kept their sons from maturing into decent American men. While the ‘mom’ dominated the household, the ‘dad’ was relegated to playing the role of ‘pal’, instead of being a proper male role model.⁸¹

Moms were not only blamed for raising juvenile delinquents, but also for producing homosexuals, a group of people that was extensively vilified during the 1950s. Of course, vilification of homosexuality was not new, but it has been suggested that homosexuals caught the spotlight in the 1950s thanks to studies like the Kinsey report. The study found that 37 percent of males had “reached orgasm through at least one homosexual act.”⁸² While this concerned all men and it did fuel anxieties about sexual perversity, Kyle Cuordileone notes that “most psychiatrists attributed it [the

⁷⁸ Jezer, *The Dark Ages*, 236.

⁷⁹ Lily Philips, “Blue Jeans, Black Leather Jackets, and a Sneer: The Iconography of the 1950s Biker and its Translation Abroad”, *International Journal of Motorcycle Studies* 1 (2005), 2.

⁸⁰ Judith Kafka, “Disciplining Youth, Disciplining Women: Motherhood, Delinquency, and Race in Postwar American Schooling”, *Educational Studies* 44 (2008), 200.

⁸¹ Kafka, “Disciplining Youth”, 201.

⁸² Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 40.

cause of homosexuality] to family dynamics, that is, weak fathers and strong mothers.”⁸³ Moreover, the media explicitly linked anxieties about homosexuality to the youth in films like *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955). The interaction between James Dean’s troubled and rebellious character and Sal Mineo’s effeminate character has clear homosexual undertones. Moreover, in the movie the blame is clearly put on the parents. James Dean’s parents in the movie do not provide traditional role models. Instead, he has an overbearing mom and an effeminate father. Sal Mineo’s character, who is portrayed as much more disturbed, has almost no parental guidance, with both parents absent throughout the movie.

Besides concerns about homosexuality, there were concerns about the accepted heterosexual relations among teenagers as well. Elizabeth Fraterrigo argues that “as men and women found new avenues for self-expression in the realm of public amusements and nightlife, earlier codes of morality calling for social decorum and sexual restraint began to break down. Family and community no longer watched over courtship; instead couples ‘went out’ on ‘dates’ in the new commercial venues [...]”⁸⁴ Beth Bailey, however, sees a different development during the 1950s. She gives us an image of pre-war dating rituals in which the focus was not on cultivating one’s attractiveness so that multiple suitors could be dated at the same time. In contrast, the post-war youth focused on ‘going steady’ with only one partner. This sat uneasily with their parents for several reasons. First, there was of course the notion that ‘going steady’ made it easier for young people to go further sexually. Second, ‘going steady’ seemed to be in conflict with the traditional American value of competition and risk. In short, it went against the idea of a free market, with writers advising boys that “to be sure of anything is to cripple one’s powers of growth,” and that “competition [...] sharpens your wits, teaches you how to get along well in spite of difficulties.”⁸⁵ The young age of marriage, particularly for men, was abnormal compared to earlier times, when the average age of marriage for men had been considerably higher. The older generation, therefore, did not quite know what to make of this development.

A reason for this penchant for rebellion on the one hand, and the search for early security in marriage on the other, might be explained by a lack of confidence that was the very result of a society of affluence. The older generation had lived through the Depression and World War II, and could face anxieties with a rhetoric of tradition and courage. The younger generation did not have

⁸³ Cuordileone, "Politics in an Age of Anxiety", 530.

⁸⁴ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 7

⁸⁵ Beth Bailey, "Rebels Without A Cause? American Teenagers in the 50s", *History Today* 40 (1990), 30.

this spirit of unity; they were a generation raised in a transformed society, and venerable traditions did not have the same hold on them as they had on the older generation.⁸⁶

There were, to recapitulate, several issues concerning youth. First, juvenile delinquency was perceived to be a serious problem on a national scale. Second, there were anxieties about the youth and homosexuality, which was related to a lack of male role models in the suburbs where mothers had a high degree of influence. Third, there were concerns about the early search for safety and stability, which was seen as incongruent with the American entrepreneurial spirit. The anxieties about America's youth were partially anxieties about gender – were the men of tomorrow real men, and would the women be good women? For the other part, these worries were linked to doubts for the youth's suitability as future soldiers in the Cold War.

The Cold War

Overlapping the aforementioned social tensions, which manifested mostly on an individual level, were the anxieties resulting from the Cold War. Both politics and culture in the 1950s were thoroughly influenced by the Cold War, though there was a perceivable shift in attitude during the decade, a degree of relaxation marked by the presidency of Eisenhower. The first years of the 1950s, in contrast, were characterized by McCarthyism, which might be best described as a mass sense of paranoia and a fear of internal communist threats. In the following paragraphs, I will first discuss the influence of McCarthyism on Cold War anxieties, and how political concerns informed anxieties about masculinity – in particular, notions of strength and the ability to fight communism. Next, I will look at the fear of the atomic bomb, which grew during the second half of the decade, and how it was related to home and the family.

A somewhat paranoid political situation had already developed during the last years of the 1940s, with the Truman Doctrine determining foreign policy, and the 1947 Federal Loyalty Program inducing anti-communist thought in the government by introducing internal investigations.⁸⁷ This political climate made it possible for Senator McCarthy to claim the spotlight with his accusations that the government was infiltrated by communists. It is noteworthy that those accused by McCarthy were primarily his political opponents.⁸⁸ He gained momentum due to insecurities regarding the electorate: the 1948 elections had proven the popularity of the Democrats, while for the Republicans an allegiance with McCarthy was part of a strategy to make the Democrats appear to be soft on communism, which mirrored other contemporary critiques. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. for example, saw

⁸⁶ Jezer, *The Dark Ages*, 237.

⁸⁷ Van Rossem, *De Verenigde Staten in de Twintigste Eeuw*, 214-5.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, 216-7.

divided over the political spectrum two forms of masculinity in crisis: while “the conservative has all too often embodied an exhausted, spent masculine potency, the left-progressive never had sufficient masculinity.”⁸⁹ Furthermore, there were concerns that were not as explicitly political. These were related to notions of national strength. After all, America had to defend itself against communism. But could the men rise up to the task if they were stuck in complacent, white-collar jobs, and living in feminized suburbia? Some were of the opinion that “the nation was in danger of becoming ‘too soft, too complacent and too home-oriented to meet the challenge of dynamic nations like China and the Soviet Union.’”⁹⁰ This line of thought hinged on a critique of mass consumer society, and here links can be made with other, traditional notions that were discussed in the sections above. However, it is notable that the consumer society figured as a positive icon of the United States as well. To take a case from national politics, we might look at the 1959 ‘kitchen debate’, a debate between Nixon and Khrushchev at the National Exhibition in Moscow, in which “the battleground had shifted from bombs to domestic appliances.”⁹¹ Mass society here was a good thing, according to Nixon, as it had brought peaceful, technological progress. There were thus multiple ways of representing consumer society in a Cold War context, and these ways were not necessarily congruent.

Kyle Cuordileone argues that the uncertainties about the nation’s men were caused by co-existence of mass consumer society on the one hand, and a hyper-militarized state on the other. The issue was that it was unclear if the nation’s men would not be ‘hard’ enough to cope with the discipline and the toughness of the army.⁹² To be sure, the friction between a nation that constantly had to be in a state of preparedness and a nation that extolled ideals of mass consumption and leisure were a part of the anxieties that beset Americans. However, they cannot satisfyingly explain all the various tensions, as some of these have been argued to have internal causes, while the hyper-militarized state has an external cause in the stand-off with the Soviet Union.

The assumption held by the Republican elite that anti-communism was as fervently present in the electorate as it was prevalent among their own ranks. After McCarthy, the question if this anti-communism had been present was not at issue anymore since the events in government had created a ‘red scare’ by itself, which lingered on after McCarthy left the political stage – McCarthy’s ambitions brought about his own downfall when he extended his accusations to include the army and the ensuing court case broke down his support.⁹³ Afterwards the message sent out by the American government was, leading to internal political calm.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Cuordileone, "Politics in an Age of Anxiety", 517-8.

⁹⁰ Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s*, 40-1.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, 5.

⁹² Cuordileone, "Politics in an Age of Anxiety", 527-8.

⁹³ Jezer, *The Dark Ages*, 99.

⁹⁴ Van Rossem, *De Verenigde Staten in de Twintigste Eeuw*, 224

While the first half of the decade was characterized by anxieties about possible communists within the United States, it later turned into a more concrete fear: fear of the bomb. The atomic bomb, which had ended the war with Japan so convincingly, became a source for anxiety as, first, the Soviet Union started building them, and second, the dangers of fallout became better known amongst the American public. The decline of ignorance about fallout has been noted by Allan Winkler, who states that “in the spring of 1955, a Gallup poll reported that only 17 percent of a national sample knew what fallout was,” while “by the spring of 1957, 52 percent considered it a ‘real danger.’”⁹⁵ This spread of awareness was mostly the result of scientific debates that were magnified by media attention. The growing preoccupation with fallout coincided with a changing emphasis in civil defence methods. The early years of the decade were characterized by naive optimism, exemplified by the ‘duck and cover!’ campaigns in American schools. Even after the McCarthyite years, the fear of the a-bomb was still present in many households.⁹⁶ As bombs became bigger and fallout became a larger threat, the emphasis initially shifted to evacuation. Civil defence experts, arguing for a more dispersed mode of living – with a population spread over many suburbs instead of densely packed cities – pointed out that “the urban center would be the bull’s-eye in the event of an atomic attack.”⁹⁷ For instance, the 1955 “Operation Alert” was a test to determine if government officials could evacuate the capital and relocate to other sites, so emergency plans could be performed from there.⁹⁸ The operation was a failure; clearly, evacuation was not feasible on a large scale. Therefore, in the second half of the decade, the emphasis shifted to shelters. The Eisenhower administration did little to provide for public shelters, as indicated by the 1958 National Shelter Policy, which “operated under the assumption that every citizen was responsible for his or her own protection, and emphasized private shelter construction by homeowners.”⁹⁹ For many, this literally brought the Cold War into the backyard.

Cold war anxieties figured as a reason for the mass focus on *security* – early marriage, a family, a house in suburbia. The suburbs were promoted as safer than city centres, with advertising stressing that they were beyond the reach of nuclear bombs and fallout (assuming that the bombs would fall on the big cities).¹⁰⁰ Besides citing traditional values as a reason for starting a family, some offered a more bellicose explanation. Elaine Tyler Mae argues that the Cold War made people look to the home as a shelter against attacks, with at least one husband claiming that family gave him “a sense

⁹⁵ Alan Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety About the Atom* (New York/Oxford, 1993), 101.

⁹⁶ Breines, *Young, White and Miserable*, 7.

⁹⁷ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 95.

⁹⁸ Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud*, 117.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, 120.

¹⁰⁰ Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s*, 34.

of responsibility, a feeling of being a member of a group that in spite of many disagreements internally always will face its external enemies together.”¹⁰¹

The anxieties that were issues on an individual level fed into Cold War anxieties. The increasing participation of women in the workforce and the challenge this posed for traditional gender roles, for instance, were seen to be possible risks for the nation. The employment of married women resulted in unsupervised homes, while younger working women were more tempted to engage in sexual promiscuity. The result was perceived to be a “decline of sexual morality among youths and a weakening of the nation’s moral fibre at a time when the country had to be strong.”¹⁰² Moreover, there seemed to have been voices who deplored the notion that more working women meant that there were less strong and able offspring.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that the crisis of masculinity had causes on various levels of society. Changes in the workplace threatened an older, individualist notion of enterprise; men were uneasy about the increasing participation of women in the workforce; a new suburban environment threatened traditional notions of the male role in the family; and finally, concerns about the country’s youth and a Cold War climate made people anxious about the ‘health’ of the nation.

Did these developments together make up a crisis of masculinity? One could say that “assertions of masculine crisis exaggerated the impingements on male power at mid-century.”¹⁰³ As discussed above, men still were way ahead in society in terms of access to benefits, economic power, political power, and so forth. Furthermore, it can be noted that the concerns, anxieties and arguments were often confused, contradictory even. It implies that people did not quite know what to make of it all. But then again, this might be hitting the nail on the head. The question of “was there a crisis in masculinity?” is related to perspective. No matter that male dominance in society was not affected in general. Just as masculinity is a concept, a crisis in masculinity is an idea. As it gains currency, people start to think it is true; it becomes true when people start acting like it is true. What has been done in this chapter is thus point to the developments in society that are implied in the concept “crisis of masculinity.”

Men thus seemed to be in need of answers, or at least guidelines. How would they reconcile this changing society with traditional conceptions of male identity? Could they be combined? Or was a re-conception of male identity in order? As society struggled for answers to these questions, *Playboy Magazine* made an appearance.

¹⁰¹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 88.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, 96.

¹⁰³ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 27.

CHAPTER 2 – Notes on *Playboy*'s Editorial Practices

This chapter explores the editorial practices of *Playboy* magazine in the context of the magazine industry. To start, I will discuss the magazine industry to see how the nature of the market allowed *Playboy* to become successful. Second, one major source of inspiration for the magazine will be discussed: *Esquire* magazine. Thirdly, I will turn to another important factor, editor-in-chief Hugh Hefner. To conclude, I examine the *Playboy* philosophy by looking at earlier studies.

The Magazine Industry

Unlike other modern magazines, Hefner did not include advertising in the magazine in the first years, starting to run advertisements only in 1956. Theodore Peterson suggests that “Hefner did not solicit advertising [...] because he knew he could not attract the kinds that would be most profitable and in keeping with his ideas for the magazine.”¹ This was a committed motive, but also a risky one. It meant that the magazine was kept afloat on proceeds from sale of publications alone, which was quite uncommon for the magazine industry.² To be profitable, a magazine had to print advertising. In fact, if magazines did not print advertisements, there was a big chance that they would show deficits at the end of the fiscal year. During the first half of the twentieth century, advertising had consolidated its place in the magazine. As more money was invested in advertising, more pages in magazines were filled by advertisements. And as advertisements became more visually appealing, the editorial copy followed suit – after all, they had to draw the readers’ attention as well. In this fashion, magazines became more design-focused during the first half of the twentieth century.³ Not only did advertising shape the content of magazines, it also actively shaped their form. The standardization of the paper size was a strategy of publishers to make it easier for advertisers to publish their advertisements in multiple magazines, and thus make it easier for magazines to draw them in.⁴

In the 1950s, of course, magazine advertising started to get competition from television. At the start of the decade, three percent of all advertising investments were spent on television ads, while a decade and a half later, this figure was steadily climbing towards twenty percent. But magazine advertising revenue did not plummet. Instead, magazines focused on what, in terms of advertising, was their strength: their selectivity. While magazines can be considered to be mass media, they do not reach the huge audience that television does. No matter how big the circulation of a magazine is, it is primarily directed at a specific group. This specific group can range from smaller interests groups

¹ Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, 317.

² *Ibidem*, 22-5.

³ *Ibidem*, 36.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 34-5.

like 'gardening enthusiasts' to large groups like 'women.' Additionally, as part of their response to television, magazines started to offer multi-tiered models for advertising, ranging from the regional to the national level, furthering their retreat "into being 'class' magazines which offer selective rather than mass markets."⁵ Magazines thus offered the opportunity for advertisers to reach a specific target audience, while advertising made decent profits possible for magazines. If *Playboy* did not print advertising until 1956, it was knee-deep in advertisements a decade later: a 1967 two-page 'board-game' called "The Grooming Game", contained more than sixty product references, price included.⁶ Obviously, Hefner had found advertisements that catered to his standards.

The magazine market was a very open market – it was easy to establish a new magazine, if you could gather the venture capital. There were various levels in the market, ranging from small periodicals that struggled for their continued existence to a couple of big whales at the top who competed among each other. The magazine market was not a static environment; it constantly fluctuated, with new magazines starting up and old magazines going out. A reason for this fluidity was the high risk factor involved in starting *and* maintaining a successful magazine. A magazine could not settle down once it had achieved a leading position – it had to continue to seek and find approval from readers and advertisers, who were fickle. Fresh ideas and shifts in audience expectations could bankrupt successful companies, but just as easily "on a borrowed \$5,000, DeWitt Wallace could launch his *Reader's Digest*, which in a few years was pouring millions of dollars into the bank accounts of its two owners and was blanketing the world with copies."⁷

Thus, despite (or perhaps, thanks to) a focus on specificity and continuing financial contributions by advertising, the magazine market was far from declining. In the United States, there were thousands of magazines in business and throughout the fifties there was a top segment of nearly fifty magazines that each had circulation numbers of over one million copies – with one lone magazine boasting a circulation of over ten million copies.⁸ While this shows that the magazine market was booming, it also showed how small the chance for real success was: fifty out of thousands were making big profits. In the course of the 1950s, *Playboy* managed to become one of those fifty. Part of Hefner's success with *Playboy* was thus due to the nature of the market: an easy-access, but high-risk environment that offered real opportunity for magazines with profitable ideas.

⁵ Playsted Wood, *Magazines in the United States*, 326.

⁶ *Playboy* (March, 1967), printed in Carrie Pitzulo, *Bunnies and Bachelors*, 90-1.

⁷ Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, 68.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 632.

Esquire Magazine

Playboy was not a completely original concept; it had predecessors. Historians have consistently made a link between *Playboy* magazine and the older *Esquire* magazine, and in the light of *Playboy's* editorial practices it is useful to explore this link a bit further. *Esquire* magazine was established in 1933, developing out of a menswear trade magazine. Founded by David A. Smart and Arnold Gingrich, it retained its focus on fashion, but was also filled with a variety of articles, from sports to interior design. The magazine had 'girlie' features as well, featuring illustrated pin-ups. The main goal of *Esquire* was to present a model of a male consumer. To counter the association with femininity or homosexuality, the pin-ups and regular sports coverage provided the magazine with a masculine veneer.⁹ Instead of a bunny, *Esquire* had a cartoon dandy for a mascot – a middle-aged man, impeccably dressed, with a big walrus moustache whose bulging eyes were constantly leering at busty females, perhaps a visualisation of the *Esquire* rhetoric. One historian describes that rhetoric of the magazine's editors as the "simultaneous exploitation and denial of the feminine."¹⁰ The magazine took formulas from women's magazines but used them to subvert femininity. Articles portrayed women as creatures of bad taste and worse behaviour.¹¹ The implication was, of course, that men were creatures of good taste, and therefore should not feel hindered by social preconceptions about consumption. Men should embrace it. This was the editorial guideline throughout the 1930s, until the 1940s saw a certain slackening in *Esquire's* editorial practices – marking the absence of editor Gingrich – and suffered from lack of direction.¹² After 1952 it lost its girlie features and started taking a more 'serious' approach, with fiction by famous writers and items on politics. And as *Esquire* moved away from sex, *Playboy* filled up the gap.

The ties with *Esquire* become clearer when we look at how the magazine influenced *Playboy's* head editor. Hugh Hefner himself was an avid fan of the magazine when he was younger. When he was 22, he briefly worked at the magazine at the subscription department, though working there did not live up to his expectations.¹³ He found it dull; the job did not have the glamour or the excitement he associated with the magazine. When *Esquire* shut down its Chicago office and moved its operations to New York, the company was not willing to give him a raise he asked for – twenty five dollars a week to offset the costs of moving (*Esquire* would not go higher than twenty) – so he quit. Though it might have been a disappointing experience, it is safe to assume that he picked up a thing or two while working there, and no matter what he thought of working for the company, the

⁹ Osgerby, "The Bachelor Pad as Cultural Icon", 102.

¹⁰ Kenon Breazeale, "In Spite of Women: *Esquire* Magazine and the Construction of the Male Consumer", *Signs* 20 (1994), 5.

¹¹ Breazeale, "In Spite of Women", 8.

¹² Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, 276.

¹³ Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 80.

magazine itself remained an inspiration for *Playboy*, as evidenced by the similarities in content – items focusing on the masculine consumer and urban life, interspersed by pin-ups.

Esquire, together with earlier magazines such as *McClure's* and the *Saturday Evening Post* provided a model for *Playboy* to build on. Since a magazine such as *Esquire* already provided a similar model of a 'masculine consumer,' it could be argued that *Playboy* was preaching established norms. As Bill Osgerby notes, "even amid the economic desolation that followed the stock market crash of 1929, masculine identities based upon the pleasures of consumption not only survived, but in some respects thrived," evidenced by the success of *Esquire* magazine.¹⁴ Similarly, Kenon Breazeale argues that the Depression and the New Deal shaped the idea of the masculine consumer.¹⁵ The conclusions of Breazeale and Osgerby have some merit: the popularity of cultural artefacts as *Esquire* suggests that a male consumer rhetoric was being disseminated. However, the fact that in the 1950s the same kind of tensions regarding work, home, and so forth, were still present or even more present, suggests that the ideas that formed in the 1930s by *Esquire* were not as successfully picked up by the general public. In other words, it suggests that the *Esquire* brand of masculinity did not attain a hegemonic position but remained a minority identity. This notion is corroborated by Elizabeth Fraterrigo, who comes to the conclusion that "although a number of cultural forms accommodated and promoted the new values [of male consumption], tensions persisted between these and earlier standards," noting that "important questions remained [...] about men's relationship to the economic system and the consumer society it fuelled."¹⁶ This is also in line with Barbara Ehrenreich, who in her 1984 work *Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight From Commitment* argued that men in the 1950s and early 1960s started to distance themselves from the traditional breadwinner/homemaker dichotomy.

Hugh Hefner

The editorial practices of *Playboy Magazine* cannot be clearly separated from its publisher and chief editor, Hugh Hefner. Since *Playboy* first appeared in 1953 Hefner was at the centre of public attention, be it as a visionary entrepreneur or as a sexist smut publisher. He can be thus envisioned in multiple ways. Most positive accounts of Hefner share similarities with traditional accounts of American, individualistic entrepreneurs – starting with little, and ultimately gaining much. They might emphasise how, for instance, Hefner scraped together the funding of the first issue – a \$500 bank loan and some \$7,000 from stock sold to friends.¹⁷ The first issue relied for a large part on the pictorial of Marilyn Monroe's 1949 calendar shoot, which Hefner had purchased for a couple

¹⁴ Osgerby, "The Bachelor Pad as a Cultural Icon", 101.

¹⁵ Breazeale, "In Spite of Women", 2.

¹⁶ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 8.

¹⁷ Playsted Wood, *Magazines in the United States*, 279.

hundred dollars. Of approximately 70,000 published copies, that first issue sold almost 80 percent, despite concerns Hefner had about his new publication.¹⁸

Hefner could be portrayed as a visionary, combating censorship and paving the way for sexual liberty. In 1955, he fought the censorship powers of the Post Office, which at the time refused to issue mailing privileges (which made it financially feasible for magazines to deliver subscriptions) to merchandise they considered unsuitable. The court validated *Playboy's* claim for mailing privileges, arguably setting a precedent for later erotically tinted material. Even if the main motive for fighting censorship was money, this did not make the results of the court case any less liberating.

Instead of seeing Hefner only as an exceptional individual, he should also be seen as a product of his time. Uneasiness about the society he grew up in is apparent in his pre-*Playboy* life. He was raised in a liberal environment, and an army stint intensified his distaste for racism and bigotry.¹⁹ His period in the army did not require him to even leave the country: he was a clerk in Washington. After the war, he went to college – profiting from the GI Bill – and he soon married his high school sweetheart.²⁰ A typical pattern can be distinguished that resembles the expectations that mainstream society promulgated: from school to college to job to marriage, all in a very short time span. Hefner's early adulthood thus mirrored national trends. Similarly, it mirrored the concerns set out in the previous chapter. First, his marriage was unsatisfying. He was ill at ease with the domestic life that he and his wife had settled into after getting married; the suburbs did not suit him well. Moreover, whilst they were engaged, his fiancée Mildred Williams confessed to having an affair, an event that devastated him and no doubt contributed to his misgivings about marriage. As Steven Watts suggests, “the affair, it seems clear, encouraged Hefner to distrust women and the notion of commitment to, and from, them.”²¹ By 1957, he had left his wife and was living in his office, from where he embarked on a series of affairs, marking the beginning of his re-invention as a playboy.²² This new image was partly cultivated as the embodiment of the magazine's ‘ideology’, a hedonistic lifestyle aimed at *enjoying* life, the *Playboy* way. Just as the magazine was the result of Hefner's ideas, so was the playboy image. It is perhaps difficult to differentiate between Hefner and society on a wider scale when discussing the magazine's editorial practices, but I would argue that a magazine cannot be reduced to merely a representation of what one man ‘likes.’ It has to catch on, the public has to like it, and thus a magazine has to represent something that relates to a large amount of

¹⁸ Steve Watts, *Mr. Playboy: Hugh Hefner and the American Dream* (New Jersey, 2008), 70.

¹⁹ Watts, *Mr. Playboy*, 37.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 40-5.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 48.

²² Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 46.

people. *Playboy* had that from the start – its circulation was at 175,000 by the end of the first year, and by the early 1960s the magazine’s circulation had climbed to over 1.3 million.²³

Second, after college he worked a series of jobs that were unfulfilling – copywriting and office work that did not engage his interests.²⁴ His first job, a functionary in human resources, was indicative of the white-collar workplace. The search for a bigger challenge was part of what led him to start *Playboy*, and his workdays at the editorial office were in themselves a challenge to the nine to five, white-collar workdays: Dexedrine-fuelled work sessions were common.²⁵ Even if we ignore the stimulants, Hefner was a hardworking achiever. And this was not an average *job*, it was *work* – it had the seeming quality of the traditional, masculine ideal, an occupation that produced something and that, moreover, gave a sense of individuality to the person (in contrast to the other-directed office jobs). In short, Hefner was struggling with the same issues as men across the country, and this of course might be one of the reasons why *Playboy* became so popular.

The Playboy Philosophy

Various studies have been written about *Playboy*, all with varying results. These studies seem to focus on either the representation of gender and sex roles, or the magazine’s relation to consumer society. They all point to the ways in which *Playboy*’s content serves to create a masculine identity. Gerson and Lund describe the *Playboy* stereotypical man by taking the Rabbit mascot as its most concrete representation. They stress that the *Playboy* stereotype has two main characteristics, which are ‘sophistication’ and ‘playing it cool.’²⁶ The main goal of the *Playboy* stereotype seems to be ‘having fun,’ while the most often cited way of having fun is through the seduction of (many) women. Gerson and Lund argue that *Playboy* validates this code of conduct through the affirmation of the morality of this lifestyle, while Balswick and Peek argue that the *Playboy* stereotype is able to seduce by being both inexpressive and unfeeling towards women.²⁷ Despite these differing interpretations of the *Playboy* stereotype, these studies agree that the magazine promotes the sexual liberation of men, stressing an extended period of bachelorhood, in which casual relations with women can be pursued without thoughts about a home in the suburbs.

Of course, a discourse that stresses seduction has to be based on a stereotype of the seducible woman. A number of studies have looked at the representation of women in the context of

²³ Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, 317. Cf. Playsted Wood, *Magazines in the United States*, 280.

²⁴ Watts, *Mr. Playboy*, 51.

²⁵ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 58. Note: Dextroamphetamine, or Dexedrine, is a stimulant that increases focus and wakefulness and decreases appetite and fatigue.

²⁶ Walter Gerson and Sander Lund, “Playboy Magazine: Sophisticated Smut or Social Revolution?”, *Journal of Popular Culture* 1 (1967), 223.

²⁷ Gerson and Lund, “Playboy Magazine”, 224, Cf. Jack Balswick and Charles Peek, “The Inexpressive Male: A Tragedy of American Society”, *The Family Coordinator* 20 (1971), 364-5.

'Othering.' The results of these studies have not been unanimous. Early feminist criticisms directed against *Playboy* argued that Playmate centrefolds and *Playboy* Bunnies objectified and degraded women.²⁸ A study by Bogaert and Turkovich – by analysing centrefolds through a coding scheme – found that the measure of objectification in centrefolds was actually quite small.²⁹ They note, however, that the objectification of centrefolds might not lie in the visual imagery (the object of their study) but in the de-emphasis of personal characteristics. This argument is opposed by James Beggan and Scott Allison, who argue that through the text accompanying the pictorials, "*Playboy* presents [Playmates] as possessing much more complex characters than popular wisdom would allow."³⁰ However, it might be equally plausible to suggest that this tough persona, which includes attributing traditionally masculine interests to the Playmates, serves to depict them as simply what their title suggests: things for men to play with, things that are devoid of any real interests besides 'fun.' This ambiguous attitude is also found when we look at the magazine's response to feminist critique. Hugh Hefner and *Playboy*, naturally, claimed the moral high ground, reacting with incredulity to these criticisms. Their argument was that they were in fact feminists *avant la lettre* themselves, voicing support for liberated womanhood. However, there were limits to liberation, it seemed, since the kind of womanhood that *Playboy* supported was akin to the 'Single Girl' as later delineated in the 1962 book *Sex and the Single Girl*, by Helen Gurley Brown. This kind of liberated woman was freed from the environment of the home and the family and was characterized as a 'working girl.' On the other hand, the Single Girl did not challenge traditional gender roles too much, as the traditional dominance of men was still recognized.³¹ Feminist criticisms directed at this patriarchal view of society were derided by *Playboy*. The magazine depicted 'militant' feminists as hysterical critics opposing sexual liberation, as "the feminists shared in the repressive, Puritan heritage of America."³² One article by Harvey Cox differs from other studies by concluding that this casual attitude to sex, in which "the nude woman symbolizes total sexual accessibility, but demands nothing from the observer," is anti-sexual in nature.³³ It dilutes sexuality and keeps it at a distance; it protects men from the frightening nature of 'authentic' sexuality by reducing it to an item of consumption. While this conclusion can be argued, it is right in concluding that *Playboy* magazine stresses consumption. According to Diane Barthel, the *Playboy* man was a precursor to the New Man of the 1980s, a man that had ostensibly lowered his resistance to the feminine aspects of consumption completely, by

²⁸ Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 127.

²⁹ Bogaert and Turkovich, "A Content Analysis of *Playboy* Centrefolds from 1953 through 1990", 138.

³⁰ Beggan and Allison, "Tough Women in the Unlikeliest of Places", 797.

³¹ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 106-112.

³² Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 129.

³³ Cox, "Playboy's Doctrine of Male", 136-7.

veiling consumption by a layer of masculine rhetoric.³⁴ However, the *Playboy* editors still warned against all too conspicuous consumption, telling men to “evaluate themselves based on the ideals [of consumption] portrayed in the magazine, but apparently not to the detriment of good manners.”³⁵ *Playboy*’s brand of consumption was about taste and refinement; a high standard of quality that guides both consumption and conduct.³⁶ The fashion articles promulgated a conservative style; music articles praised jazz and derided rock-and-roll.³⁷ It can be argued if this was merely a matter of the preferences of the magazine’s editors, or if this conservative take on tastes and consumption was a safeguard against associations with femininity. This safeguard against femininity is also found in *Playboy*’s preference for urban living, as opposed to the feminine suburbs. The magazine propagated living in a ‘bachelor pad,’ which was of course tastefully decorated and catered to the goal of the playboy – having fun and seducing women.³⁸

In summary, we can view *Playboy*’s editorial practices as the result of three elements. First, the nature of the magazine industry and its reliance on advertising necessarily meant that consumer society would be a part of the magazine. Secondly, Hugh Hefner’s own preferences and his own misgivings about American society guided the magazine’s early years and led *Playboy* to actively embrace the consumer society. Thirdly, *Playboy* built on an earlier concept that was developed by *Esquire* magazine, though it did so with a more explicit focus on a casual, consumer-like focus on sex, and in the context of the booming 1950s instead of the Depression and war-influenced 1930s. With this in mind, we will now turn to the short stories in *Playboy*.

³⁴ Diane Barthel, “When Men Put On Appearances: Advertising and the Social Construction of Masculinity,” in: Steve Craig (ed.), *Men, Masculinity and the Media* (Newbury Park, 1992), 147-149.

³⁵ Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 103.

³⁶ Gerson and Lund, “Playboy Magazine”, 222.

³⁷ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 61-6.

³⁸ Osgerby, “The Bachelor Pad as a Cultural Icon”, 105. Cf. Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 83.

CHAPTER 3 – The Short Stories of *Playboy*: A Content Analysis

The goal of this chapter is twofold. First, it is to provide a general overview of the “*Playboy* man,” that is, the ideal male identity propagated by the short stories. Through the use of a coding scheme designed to focus on three fields (body, social relations and domestic situation, and socio-economic position) as well as plot-related aspects (character goals and main plot obstacles) I hope to be able to provide an outline of this male identity. Second, I want to see if this *Playboy* man corresponds to the general *Playboy* philosophy – to see if the short stories diverge in their representation of male identity from Hefner's intentions with the magazine.

As discussed in the introduction, this chapter is based on research that was done on 193 short stories, published in *Playboy* from December 1953 to December 1959. In general, the magazine showed a preference for exciting stories, either in the form of sexually tinted stories, or specific genres (science fiction, war stories, and horror). Formally, the short stories were adapted to the format of the magazine, and their publication was at least partly determined by the amount of free space – there are no issues with multiple stories of considerable length, for example. In the first years, the choice of author and story depended on available finances, but after several years the variety of authors and original publications increased. In the following analysis, I will try to see if there are trends in the depiction of male characters.

Method and Coding Scheme

The stories were coded using a scheme mainly based on Kate Peirce's article “Women's Magazine Fiction: A Content Analysis of the Roles, Attributes, and Occupations of Main Characters.” Peirce utilizes a number of variables to analyze female protagonists in short stories, taking a comparative approach by looking at multiple magazines. Her coding scheme is made up out of thirteen categories: age, marital status, appearance, economic status, education, occupation, number of children, residence, housing, goal, problem, race/nationality, and dependence.

Peirce's research is partly based on studies by Beverly Loughlin and Margaret Bailey who both analyzed the heroines of women's magazine short stories.¹ Since Peirce's study is tailored to female characters, it had to be adjusted to better suit the analysis of male characters. The “race” variable has been omitted – the goal here is to look for universal characteristics of male identity, not to look for racial differences. Moreover, I've omitted the “dependence” variable, which she herself took

¹ Kate Peirce, “Women's Magazine Fiction: A Content Analysis of the Roles, Attributes, and Occupations of Main Characters”, *Sex Roles* 37 (1997), 585.

from Cornelia Butler Flora (used to analyze the aspect of passivity in the representation of women).² While this category is useful for women's magazine research in researching female dependence on men, it would obviously not lead to significant results in the current study. Finally, though both Peirce and Flora used class to determine economic status, their subdivision was the generic division between low, middle and higher class. I have opted instead for a more elaborate division. The other part of my coding scheme is based on a study by Rosemary Ricciardelli, Kimberley Clow and Philip White. Their study looks more at aesthetics and other bodily aspects, as well as leisure activities.³ As *Playboy* magazine puts a lot of emphasis on entertainment, I felt it necessary to include a "leisure" variable in the study. The aesthetic and bodily aspects are included as well, though they are not as elaborate as in Ricciardelli, Clow and White. The final coding scheme is as follows:

Appearance

- 1) *Age* – (a) 18-25 (young), (b) 26-35, (c) 36-45, (d) 46-60, (e) 60+. In stories where there was no explicit mention of a character's age, certain markers (like "young", "middle-aged") were interpreted to place the character in a category.
- 2) *Appearance (Aesthetic)* – (a) Ugly, (b) Average, (c) Attractive, (d) Handsome, (e) Rugged. The category "rugged" was included after several stories featured male characters with facial characteristics that were not necessarily attractive or handsome, but were more "weathered." Also, if no reference to the aesthetic appearance is given, the appearance is considered "average," which after all is the lack of special characteristics.
- 3) *Appearance (Body)* – (a) thin, (b) Average, (c) Muscular, (d) Overweight. Again, if no explicit reference to the character's body is made, it is considered "average."
- 4) *Dress* – (a) Poorly Dressed, (b) Practically Dressed, (c) Well Dressed, (d) No Reference.

Relationships and living situation

- 5) *Marital Status* – (a) Single, (b) Married/Committed Relationship, (c) Separated, (d) Divorced, (e) Widowed. If no reference to a partner was given, the character was considered to be single.
- 6) *Number of Children* – (a) none, (b) one or two, (c) three to five, (d) 6 or more. When no reference was made to children, the number of children was considered to be 0.
- 7) *Residence* – (a) City, (b) Countryside, (c) Suburbs, (d) Small Town.
- 8) *Housing* – (a) House, (b) Apartment, (c) Hotel, (d) Room. Some characters inhabited special quarters like cells or tents. These were interpreted as rooms.

Socio-economic

- 9) *Economic Status* – (a) Low-low (blue collar), (b) high-low (e.g. skilled blue collar), (c) low-mid (White collar), (d) high-mid (White collar, management), (e) Upper.

²Cornelia Butler Flora, "The Passive Female: Her Comparative Image by Class and Culture in Women's Magazine Fiction", *Journal of Marriage and Family* 33 (1971), 435.

³Rosemary Ricciardelli, Kimberley Clow and Philip White, "Investigating Hegemonic Masculinity: Portrayals in Masculinity in Men's Lifestyle Magazines", *Sex Roles* 63 (2010), 67-8.

10) *Occupation* – (a) Unemployed, (b) Job, (c) Career, (d) Leisure. The difference between “job” and “career” was considered to be based primarily on salary and status. Also, occupations were considered to be careers when they required education and/or offered the possibility of future socio-economic advancement.

11) *Education* – (a) Grade school, (b) High School, (c) College, (d) (Post-)graduate, (e) No Reference.

12) *Leisure* – (a) Sports, (b) Travel, (c) Social, (d) Cultural, (e) No Reference. A typical “Social” activity would be going to a bar, while a typical “Cultural” activity would be to go to a museum, or to paint.

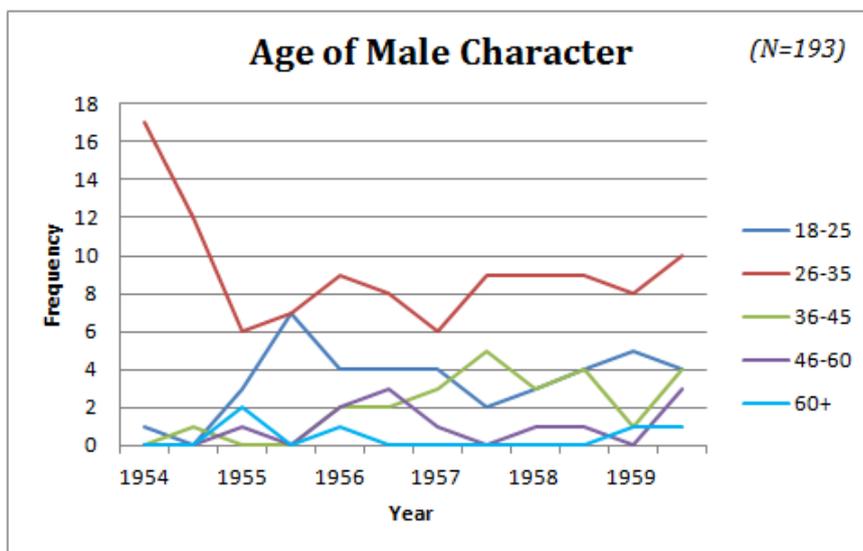
Plot-related

13) *Goal* – (a) Romantic Love/Sexual Affair, (b) Career/Work, (c) Material, (d) Personal Fulfilment, (e) Community Betterment, (f) Family Happiness. This category determines the primary goal of the coded character within the limits of the plot. Following Peirce, “personal fulfilment” has been defined as a “desire to have or do something not included in any other category”).⁴

14) *Problem* – (a) Marital, (b) Children, (c) Psychological/Internal, (d) Romantic, (e) Work/Finances, (f) Health, (g) Appearance, (h) Interpersonal/Community, (i) Danger (physical). This category determines the primary problem the character has within the limits of the plot. This might be the problem which keeps him from realizing his goal, but if the goal is reached without problems, the “problem” might be something else (the cause of his goal, for example).

Results

Age



The age seems to correspond to the general readership of the magazine. The majority of the characters were in their late twenties, early thirties (56.99%), while the category 18-25 was a close second (21.24%). Men aged 36-45 totalled 12.95%; old characters of

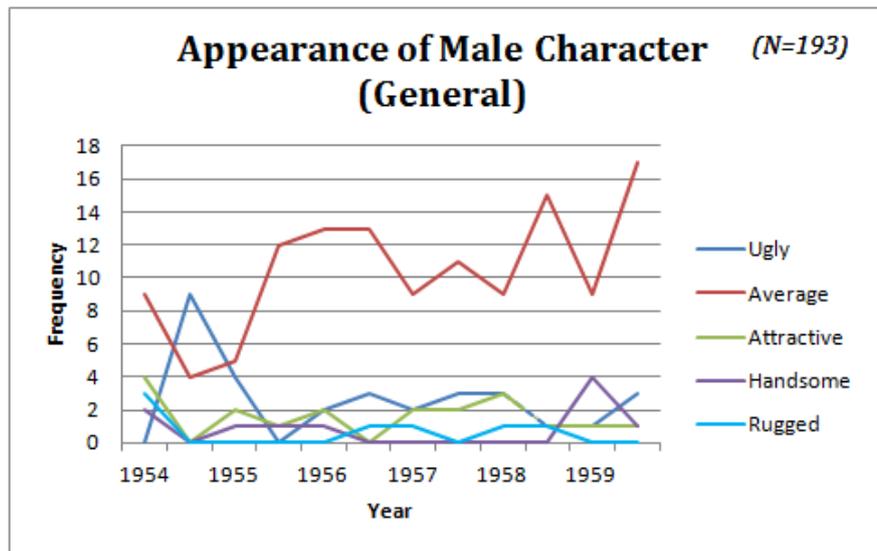
age 60+ appeared in 2.59% of the stories, while the category 46-60 consisted of 6.22% of the total. The high rate of occurrence of the 26-35 early on coincides with a high amount of republished short

⁴ Peirce, “Women’s Magazine Fiction”, 586.

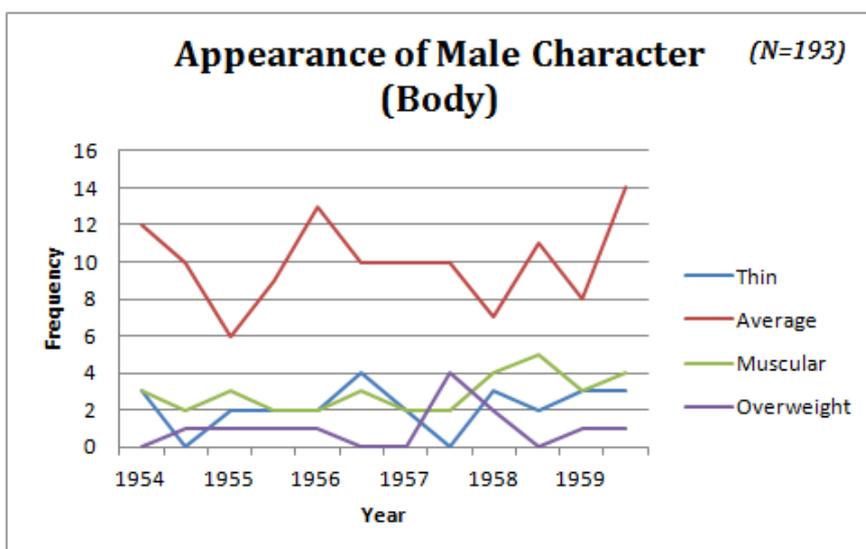
stories, like the adventures of Sherlock Holmes and stories from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.⁵ In general, however, the age of the male character seems to be of minor importance, which explains the large number of characters that are of “average age.” When a character is young, he mostly stars in specific stories – the young boy looking for intimate relations, the young soldier, the juvenile delinquent, and so on – which implies that non-average age is more dependent on the specific plot than anything else. This is corroborated by the instances where the character is 60+: he is often typecast as the rich lecher.

Appearance

The appearance of the male characters was for a large part average – stories featuring average-looking characters totalled 65.28%. A large part of these characters were actually nondescript. Stories that featured plots that could ‘happen to everyone’ (like stories of men being



seduced by beautiful women) seemed especially prone to featuring average-looking guys. Handsome men (5.18%) were more likely to be young as well and would be feature heavily in plots involving



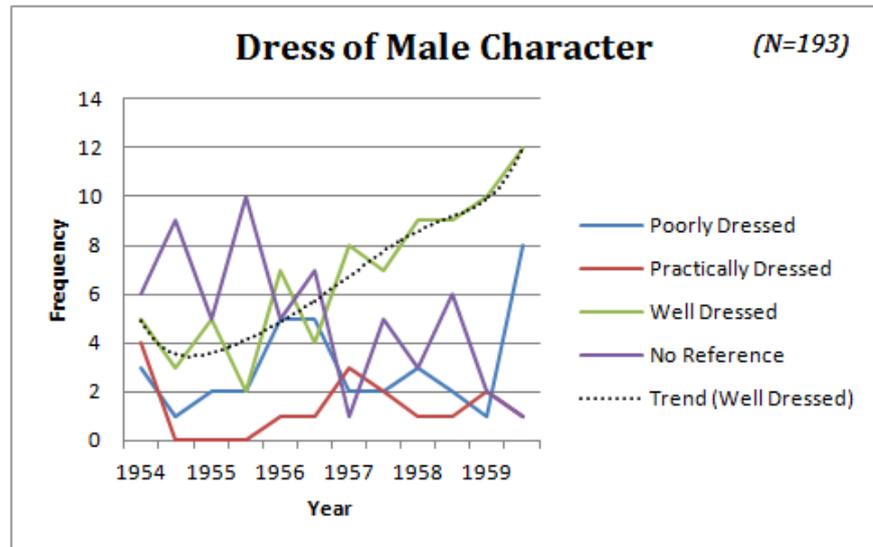
romantic love, while “rugged” men (3.63%) were typically older. Similarly, in stories of a more depressing tone, ugly men (16.06%) would be characterized by their inability to find love. All in all, there are no distinguishable significant trends; “average” looks

⁵ Sherlock Holmes stories appeared in December 1953, January 1954 and February 1954. Stories from the *Decameron* featured monthly from December 1953 to December 1954.

are more frequent, while other types of appearance are equally likely to be featured. The most frequent body type is “average” (62.18%) There seems to be a correlation between age and body type; thin characters (13.47%) are slightly more likely to be young, while overweight characters (6.22%) were somewhat older.

Dress

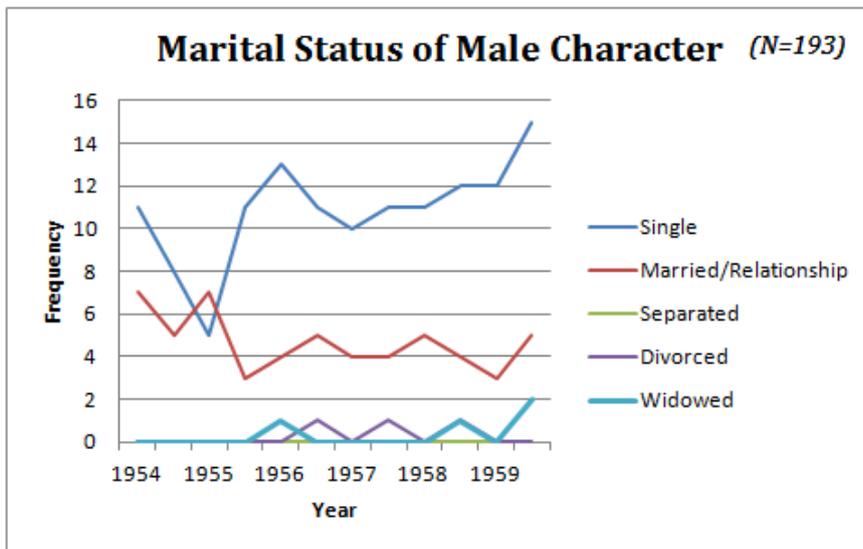
When we look at the clothing of the characters, several trends become clear. First, there is a general decline over the years in the frequency of stories where no reference to clothing is made. Early on, clothing seems to have mattered less, while later on the



dress became more explicitly mentioned. Second, there is a noticeable increase in the occurrence of “well dressed.” From the start of the magazine, “well dressed” occurs more and more frequently, overtaking “no reference” around 1956-7. “Well dressed” characters occur in the majority of the stories (41.97%) while “poorly dressed” (18.65%) comes third after “no reference” (31.09%). This mirrors the articles on clothing elsewhere in *Playboy*, where the magazine extolled a refined, conservative style that combined a drive for consumerism with a carefully worded view of masculinity.⁶ Finally, “practically dressed” (8.29%) occurs in stories with soldiers as main characters, or in science fiction stories with space travellers – in these cases, clothing is more the result of the choice of genre than anything else.

⁶ Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 88.

Marital Status



As becomes clear from the data, the share of “divorced” (1.55%) and “widowed” (2.07%) categories is insignificant compared to the first two categories. “Separated” characters do not occur at all, which is perhaps significant in its own right.

The stories that deal with

divorced characters involve somewhat melancholy characters. Charles Beaumont’s *The Deadly Will To Win* portrays a conflicted race-car driver, whose divorce is a source of sadness and whose loneliness is one of the themes of the story.⁷ *The Flip Side* by Charles Einstein features the manager of a music industry starlet; it is mentioned that he had several marriages, and that his work may have played a large part in ending them.⁸ Though successful in his work, he has no social interaction outside it. The third divorced character, in Philip Lee Smith’s *The Sweet Sadness*, is a businessman who is philandering in Havana. Ultimately, his search for love fails and he too is left alone.⁹ We might thus conclude that divorce was not a favourable topic, and when it was mentioned, the divorced men were portrayed as sad or lonely, having failed at something. Being married or in a committed relationship (29.02% of the stories) was obviously preferred over being divorced. However, marriage was often written as a source of trouble or conflict. In line with *Playboy*’s bachelor lifestyle, single men occurred most often in the stories (67.36%). Within this category, there exists a wide spectrum: there are young men looking for love, bachelors just looking for a good time, adventurers who have no time for ‘frivolities,’ and so on. When we look at the change over time, there is a slight decline in the frequency of the occurrence of “married” characters, while there is an increase in the occurrence of “single” characters.

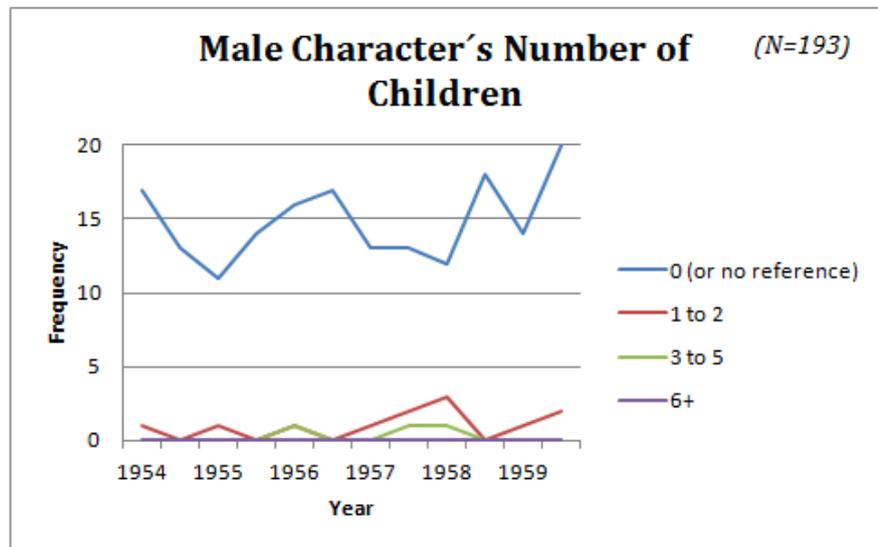
⁷ Charles Beaumont, “The Deadly Will To Win”, *Playboy* (November, 1957).

⁸ Charles Einstein, “The Flip Side”, *Playboy* (November, 1956).

⁹ Philip Lee Smith, “The Sweet Sadness”, *Playboy* (July, 1958).

Number of Children

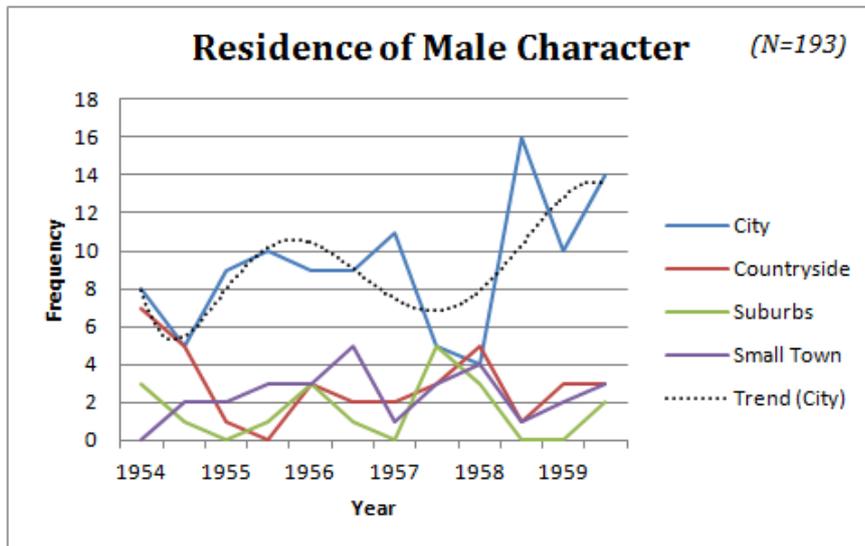
One glance at the data makes it easy to conclude that children play almost no role in the lives of the male characters in *Playboy's* short stories. Childless characters feature in 92.23% of the stories; it is either explicitly mentioned that they are childless, but



frequently children are just not mentioned at all. Only very exceptionally is this childlessness a source of problems, and when it is, it is likely that the character's partner wants kids. This prevalence of childless characters does not fluctuate much over time, slightly increasing in frequency over the decade and averaging out at about fifteen instances per half-year.

When the character does have children, he is most likely to have a small family of one or two children: 6.22% of the stories. In 1.55% of the stories (i.e. three stories) the character has three to five children. Men with children are invariably older, falling either in the 26-35 or 36-45 age categories. Between "number of children" and other categories there were correlations as well: characters with children typically were married, owned houses and had careers. The goal of these characters was more often "family happiness" (33.33% of the characters with children). There was only one instance where a married man *with* children pursued a sexual affair, and the story's morale was that he had made a mistake. While other stories saw married men cheating on their wives, there were no children involved. Overall, the start of a family meant the end of extra-marital affairs. Still, the sporadic appearance of children in the stories implies that *Playboy* did not feel the need to stress the point too much. The choice of stories obviously suggests that *Playboy* separated leisurely pursuits from the business of raising children.

Residence



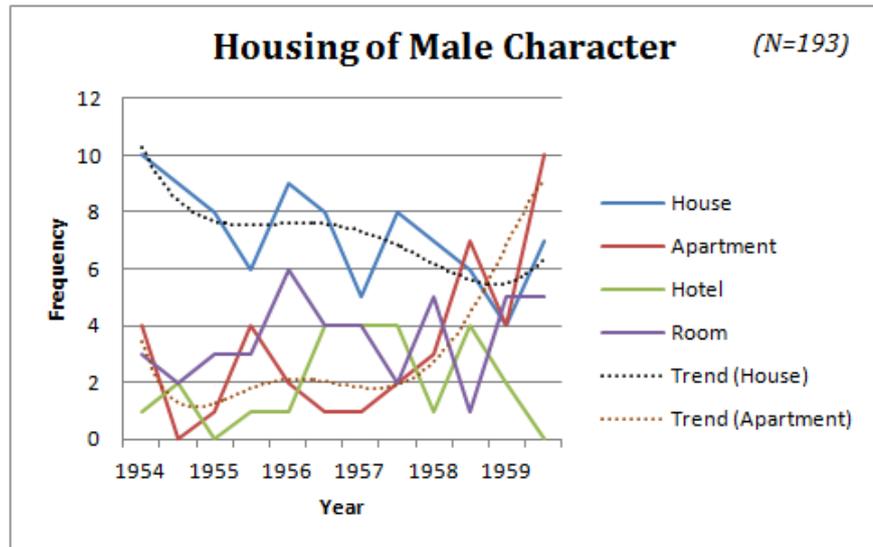
Male characters most often resided in the city. City-dwellers accounted for 57% of the total, while 15.03% lived in a small town. The countryside was inhabited by 18.13%. Over time, we see a general decline in countryside living. A closer look shows that

the initial frequency of countryside living was influenced by the high amount of republished short stories. Several of the stories from the *Decameron* had a rural setting, as well as several other classic stories. As the number of republished stories declined, so did the frequency of countryside living. In contrast, the amount of characters living in the city rose on average throughout the years. Small town settings do not become more or less frequent (five times a year, on average). In this respect it resembles the focus on urban living that *Playboy* shows throughout the rest of the magazine. Perhaps not surprisingly if we keep in mind the magazine's misgivings for suburban living, the suburbs feature in only 19 stories (9.84%). In the second half of 1957 and the first half of 1958, an unexplained drop in the frequency of city dwelling characters resulted in more stories with characters living elsewhere, and half of the stories with suburban settings were published. The suburbs were slightly more likely to be the setting for stories with a more ironic or negative tone. The neighbourhood where the main character of *Fahrenheit 451* lives could perhaps be best described as a dystopian suburb. A non-science fiction example is *The Distributor* by Richard Matheson.¹⁰ There, the stealthy meddling of the main character unhinges suburban life completely, leading to chaos in the neighbourhood. It is uncertain if Matheson was trying to make a point about the suburbs in this story, but it can be read as a subversion of the ideal of peaceful suburban living – it only takes one man to destroy the illusion of peace.

¹⁰ Philip Matheson, "The Distributor", *Playboy* (March, 1958).

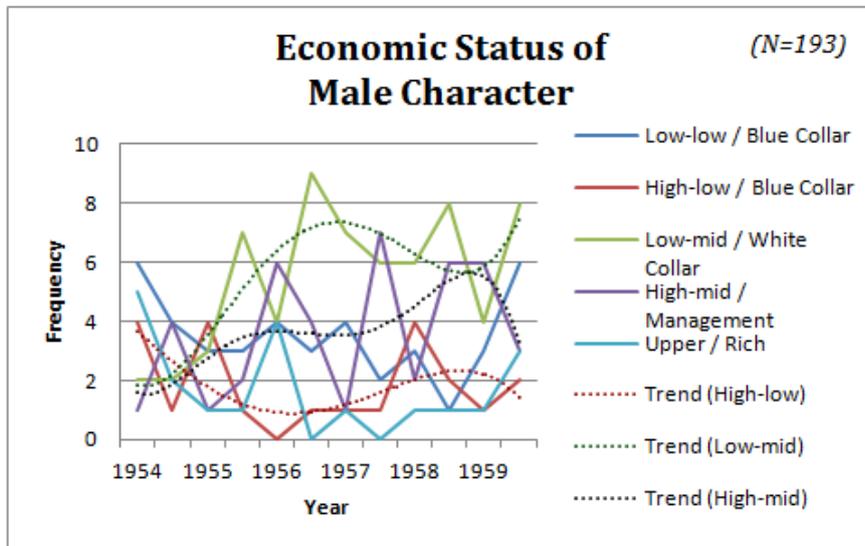
Housing

The distribution in the category “housing” seems to be clear. Most characters live in houses (45.08%). Second comes “room” (22.28%), followed by “apartment” (20.21%) and “hotel” (12.44%). When the data is plotted over time, two opposing trends become



visible. While the frequency of characters with room-like housing and characters living in hotels stays more or less the same, there is a downward trend in the frequency of characters living in houses. In contrast, the share of characters living in apartments steadily climbs over the years. Again, I would like to suggest that the initial high level of characters with a house is influenced by the high rate of republications in the magazine. The stories from the *Decameron* often involve characters from the higher echelons of society, who invariably lived in houses. The suburban dystopia of *Fahrenheit 451* adds another three entries to this category in the first half-year. From 1956 onwards (coinciding with a decline in republications of older stories) there is a steady climb in the number of characters living in apartments. As mentioned above, the “room” category encompasses not only single-room living arrangements, but also room-like quarters like a prison cell. In some cases, a tent functioned as living quarters, which was coded as a room in the countryside. Even if we discard these instances, the trend in the frequency of this category would not change in shape, but only turn out lower in the graph. Thus, given the data, the only significant changes happened in the “house” and “apartment” categories. When we examine these trends in relation to the changes discussed regarding residence, we may again corroborate *Playboy’s* penchant for promoting urban apartment living. The bachelor pad as envisioned by the design articles is featured only sporadically – most apartments are normal places, not specifically designed with a hedonistic purpose in mind – but most of the characters pursuing pleasure tend to manage even if there is no revolving bed.

Economic Status



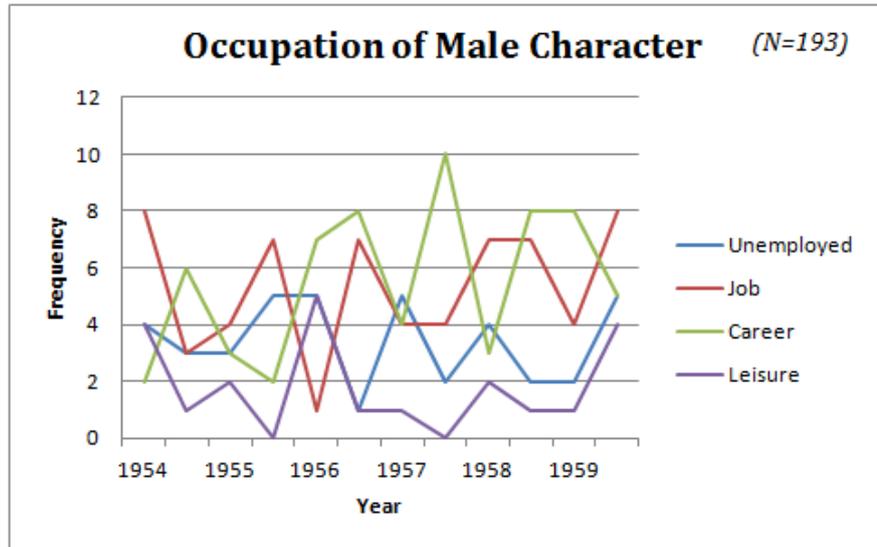
The distribution over the various categories in economic status is somewhat more equally divided. The most often occurring status is low-mid (34.20%). This encompasses most white collar office functions, functions that are not specifically linked to high

social status, that come with moderate salaries, and that do not necessarily promise promotions. Less frequent is “high-mid” (22.28%), closely followed by “low-low” (21.76%). characters with “low-low” status are frequently criminals or delinquents, poor labourers in the countryside, and so on. “High-mid” characters typically hold management functions that offer higher salaries, social status and/or opportunity for advancement. The “high-low” category (11.40%) straddles the boundary between low and middle, and includes those people who were not quite middle class, but also not as bad off as the characters of “low-low” status – for example, skilled workers or land-owning farmers. The characters interpreted as “upper” class, which appeared in 10.36% of the stories, were mostly aristocrats. There is an early peak in the first six months of *Playboy*, thanks to stories from the *Decameron* and other older stories. Sherlock Holmes, too, is considered as an upper class character (though he deliberately lives a middle class life).

Over time, there are several interesting developments. In the course of the decade, there are fewer instances of upper class characters. Indeed, 65% of the upper-class characters appear in the first two and a half years of the magazine. More interestingly, though, is the downward trend in low-class characters, compared to the upward trend in middle-class characters. The downward trend for the lower-class characters is not dramatic. At times, they occur quite often – “low-low” characters, especially criminals, make a wide range of plots possible. The upward trend for middle-class characters – especially “low-mid” – is greater. In fact, from the second half of 1955 onwards, “low-mid” appears most often, while dips in frequency coincide with a peak in “high-mid” characters. Together, the stories appear to portray characters that represent the (middle-class) target audience of *Playboy* magazine.

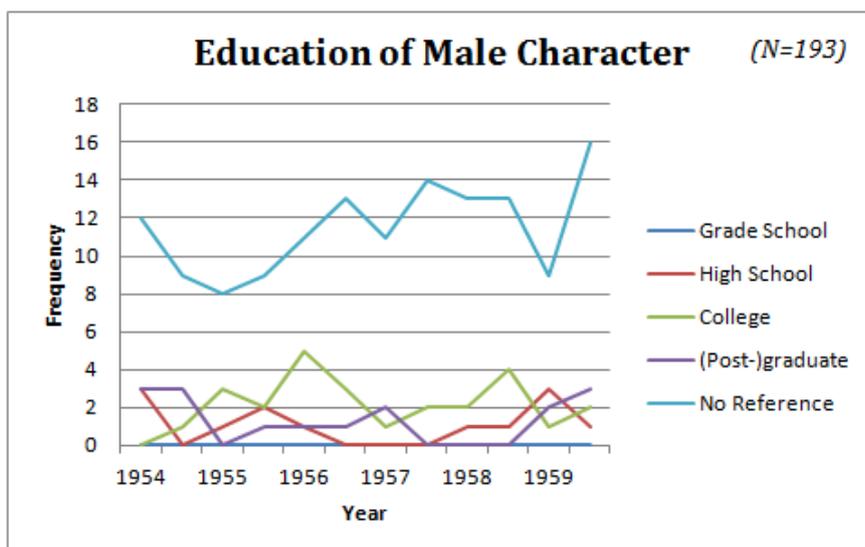
Occupation

Characters were almost equally likely to have a job as a career (33.16% and 34.20%, respectively). Unemployed characters accounted for 21.24%, while 11.40% were men of leisure. Note that criminals were also counted as unemployed characters, since their way



of making money is not socially accepted. Men of leisure were most likely to be upper class as well, though there were a few instances in which a “high-mid” character was a man of leisure as well (for instance, due to retirement). Most of these instances coincide with the peaks of “upper class” characters described above, with one additional peak in the last half of 1959, which included a sorcerer, two heirs and a retired man. Entries with “jobs” show a slight upward trend, but really it is “careers” that increase significantly. A peak occurs in the second half of 1957, and the characters are quite typical: a captain, a scientist, a businessman, successful fur retailers, and so on. Afterwards, dips in frequency are met with high numbers in the “jobs” category.

Education



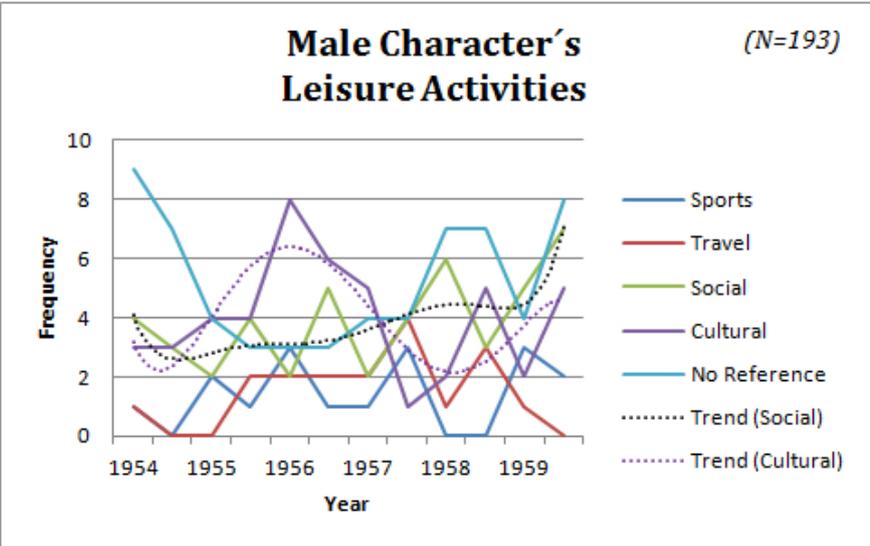
Education proved to be a problematic category to code properly, often due to a lack of specific reference to education. Moreover, in many of those cases it was not possible to infer a level of education from the context (except in stories that involved

physicians, in which case postgraduate education was presumed). As a result, 71.50% of the stories

provided no reference to education. When education was mentioned, however, it was likely that the character had either had college level education (13.47%) or (post-)graduate level education (8.29%). When the data is analyzed over time, there are no distinguishable trends, except for two slight peaks in the occurrence of “college” markers. These peaks are not really significant, however, due to the low amount of entries they represent. The high percentage of stories with “no reference” to education, plus the lack of distinguishable trends during the decade, imply that level of education was not an issue that was high on *Playboy’s* list of topics. The cases where it is mentioned suggest that the *Playboy* man was more likely to be at least college educated.

Leisure

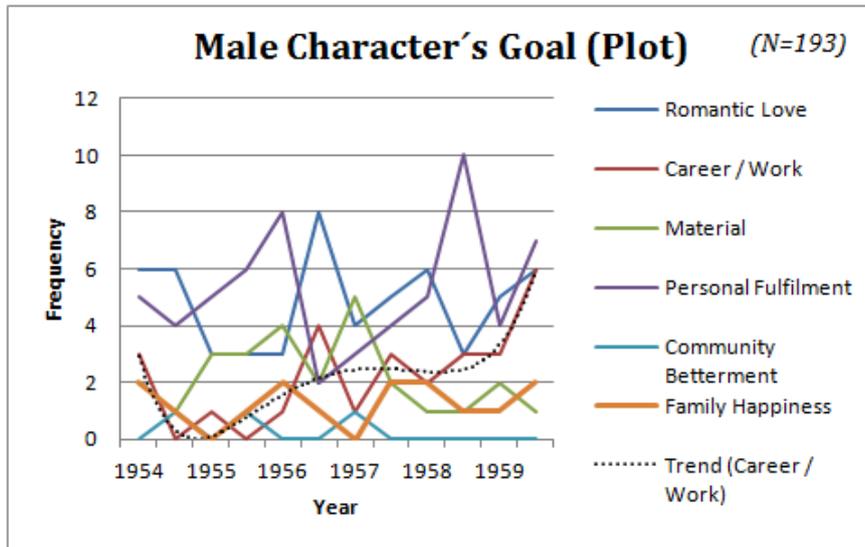
The leisure activities provide a more diverse image than the results of education. While “sports” and “travel” occasionally feature as favoured interests (8.81% and 9.33%, respectively), the “social” (24.35%) and “cultural” (24.87%) categories are the most



often occurring leisure activities. Social activities most often involved going to bars, cafés and restaurants, while parties tended to function more as a setting: at parties, the chance was that the conversation served to foreground cultural interests. These most often involved literature and music, while visual arts were referenced slightly less frequently. When music was a central issue, the genre that was written about was typically jazz, reflecting *Playboy’s* enthusiasm for the genre and Hefner’s own musical interests.¹¹ Despite (or perhaps thanks to) editorial interest in the issue, the frequency of “cultural” interests remained relatively constant, regardless of a sudden peak in the first half of 1956. In contrast, the occurrence of “social” shows a clear trend, moving upwards on average, albeit with irregular steps.

¹¹ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 65-6. An example of a jazz story is Charles Beaumont, “Black Country”, *Playboy* (September, 1954).

Plot



The goals the characters had, demonstrate a clear preference for “romantic love” (30.05%). Most of these stories revolve around characters that pursue sexual relations, often casual or without ending in a lasting commitment. However, a

significant enough number of plots involve characters that are actually ‘looking for love.’ Mostly, these characters tend to be younger, while older characters are somewhat more likely to have casual sexual affairs, occasionally cheating on their spouses in the process. As mentioned above, the subject of casual sex is approached quite positively. Not many characters reflect on the ethics of adultery.

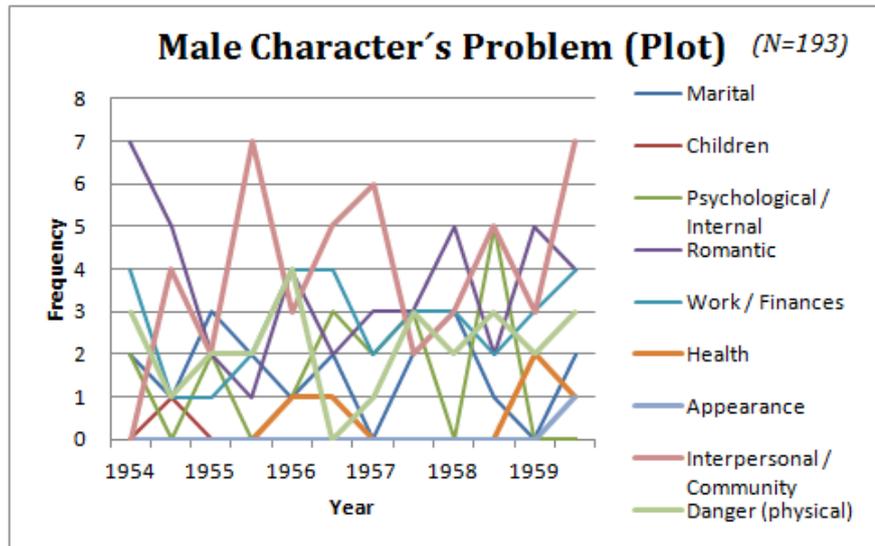
The category “personal fulfilment” is, as mentioned above, a catch-all for character goals that cannot be placed in other categories. One of the most common goals in this category was murder, typically of a spouse or partner and/or a man the partner was conducting an affair with. They variably succeeded or failed in their attempts. For instance, *No Such Thing As A Vampire*, by Richard Matheson, depicts a man who plots the demise of his wife’s youthful lover and seems to succeed in his plan, while in Mindret Lord’s *Naked Lady* the character fails to murder his wife and instead dies of a heart attack himself.¹²

The categories “work” and “material” both occurred 27 times (13.99%). Characters with material goals longed for wealth or luxury consumer goods, while work-driven characters desired primarily to perform their work-related duties. Despite the focus on consumerism that is apparent *Playboy* magazine, there is a slight downward trend in the “material” category from 1957 on. In contrast, the “work” category shows an upward trend, starting an upwards movement in 1955-1956.

Finally, “family happiness” was the goal of 7.77% of the stories, and typically involved satisfying the demands or wishes of the spouse and safeguarding the integrity of the marriage. Overall, the characters display a penchant towards individualism – “community betterment” is the goal of only three characters (1.55%) – two scientists and one political leader.

¹² Mindret Lord, “Naked Lady”, *Playboy* (May, 1955). Richard Matheson, “No Such Thing As A Vampire”, *Playboy* (October, 1959).

The problems the characters encounter in the story vary widely. Just as “romantic love” is one of the most prominent goals, it is the cause of the main problem as well (21.76%). Typically, this meant that the woman the character pursues either does not want him,



or in some other way cannot fulfil his desire (because she is married, for instance). In most cases, the goal-problem combination was both romantic love, but there are exceptions. The story *Love, the Healer*, by Herbert Gold had a character who wanted romantic love, but was hampered by health issues (health issues were not common, comprising only 2.59% of the total).¹³ In Noel Clad’s *A Long Time To Swing Alone*, the male character fell in love with the main female character, but had trouble pursuing her because of his hunchbacked appearance.¹⁴

Conclusions

The first thing that these findings point to is a lack of interest in physical appearance. Notably, *A Long Time To Swing Alone* was the only story that featured a character that made an issue of his appearance. This makes sense when we combine it with the results from the “Appearance” categories, which shows a large amount of “average” looking characters. This suggests that *Playboy* was not all that concerned with how a man physically looked. For one, too great a focus on beauty could create unwanted associations with cosmetics, femininity, or homosexuality. Second, *Playboy* stressed that a playboy was something anyone could become, a standpoint that would become problematic if it involved looks. Instead, the appearance of the *Playboy* relied on the right choice of clothing – the right appearance was buyable. As mentioned, other articles in *Playboy* were carefully worded in a language that stressed the clothing’s masculinity. The stories, in contrast, do not discuss clothing in detail. Most of the time, there will be only brief references to establish that the character in question is dressed in the latest fashions, or in otherwise expensive clothing. I would suggest that by approaching it casually and not going into details, dress is normalized as a part of male identity.

¹³ Herbert Gold, “Love, The Healer”, *Playboy* (January, 1956).

¹⁴ Noel Clad, “A Long Time To Swing Alone”, *Playboy* (November, 1959).

Secondly, the trends relating to marriage and children resemble the *Playboy* philosophy. On the one hand, there is the overall tendency toward a hedonistic outlook on man-woman relationships – the bachelor lifestyle partly revolving around leisurely “play,” and the avoidance of committed relationships.¹⁵ On the other hand, as evidenced by the stories where the main character had a family with children, that casual attitude towards sexual contact had its limits. This view was conveyed in general by *Playboy*: though it favoured an extended bachelorhood, it still considered bachelorhood as a distinct phase and not as something that could be prolonged indefinitely.¹⁶ Ultimately, the magazine’s standpoint was that marriage was more important than exciting affairs.¹⁷ This is perhaps reflected as well in the scarcity of divorced characters, and the somewhat negative way they are described. Rather, it was *early* marriage that *Playboy* advised against: an extended period of bachelorhood served to prepare men for a marriage that would prove more stable if *both* partners had sown their wild oats – the magazine acknowledged that women had to approach these issues in similar ways.

Third, the short stories favour urban living, and there is a greater occurrence of apartments. The bachelor apartment was indeed one of *Playboy*’s favourite topics. The rise of characters with apartments rose from 1956 onwards – the year *Playboy* in which published its first article on “*Playboy*’s Penthouse Apartment.”¹⁸

Fourth, the findings in the work-related categories – a high frequency of characters with jobs and careers, coupled with a relatively large percentage of characters with work-related goals – are not surprising if we compare them with the *Playboy* philosophy. Hugh Hefner was a workaholic, using Dexedrine to fuel his long hours.¹⁹ Even if we ignore this extreme, he considered hard work to be the other side of hedonism. To be a playboy did not mean you could spend your life idling. Rather, *Playboy* developed a work- and play ethic that framed luxurious consumption as the reward of hard work. In a way, this provided a resolution between tensions of a conformist white collar workplace, an individual-minded consumer ethos, as well as moral critiques of that consumerism. As Fraterrigo phrases it: “[*Playboy*] magazine reconciled competing desires for individualism and belonging: the playboy’s connoisseurship made him part of the in-group and set him apart from the crowd. [...] [N]ot only did men earn the rewards of the good life through their efforts, in both their work and play they drove the economy forward and contributed to the strength of the nation.”²⁰

¹⁵ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 97.

¹⁶ Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 118-9.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 120.

¹⁸ *Playboy* (September, 1956), 53-60.

¹⁹ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 58.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 49.

Interestingly enough, a polynomial trend of the “Economic Status – high-mid” shows what seems to be the beginning of a downward trend towards the end of the decade. The same kind of downward movement can be perceived from a polynomial trend line based on the “Occupation – career” data. In contrast, the lines from “Occupation – Job”, “Economic Status – low-mid” and “Goal – Career/Work” show movements upwards. Because these changes occur late in the decade – the last year or so – and later stories are not analysed, a definite prediction cannot be made. The combined trends at least suggest a decreased focus on characters with a higher economic status and management functions, in favour of white-collar characters with lower-status jobs.

In many categories, a change one way or another appears to occur in or after 1956. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this is the year that *Playboy* magazine started printing advertising in earnest. I suggest that rising revenue made it possible to invest in original material, meaning that the magazine had a greater degree of control over actual content. Pitzulo argues that “mindful of the glossy, chic quality he hoped to achieve, Hefner shunned the low-end advertisers initially willing to associate with his magazine.”²¹ As an editorial comment stated in 1955, “bigger sales means a bigger, better *Playboy*.”²² More money (and advertising provided just that) would, according to the editors, result in a better magazine.

Thus, from 1956 we can more clearly see a trend towards a *Playboy* man: single, well dressed, living in a city apartment. He has a white collar job, and (though little attention is paid to it) typically has at least a college education. His goals are varied, though (not considering the catch-all “personal fulfilment” category that for a great deal consists of overly dramatic goals like murder) the majority is focused on pursuing romantic contacts, attaining material possessions, and performing at work. Harvey Cox, in his critique of *Playboy* magazine, argues that

[*Playboy's*] regular run of stories relies on a repetitious and predictable formula. A successful young man, either single or somewhat less than ideally married—a figure with whom readers have no difficulty identifying—encounters a gorgeous and seductive woman who makes no demands on him except sex. She is the prose duplication of the cool-eyed but hot-blooded playmate of the foldout page.²³

As has become clear from the data in this chapter, this claim covers only a part of the stories. While these formulaic stories were indeed included in the magazine, there was more variety than Harvey Cox acknowledges. A large amount of science fiction, (murder) mystery stories, horror and adventure stories broaden the range of *Playboy's* short stories, and move the motivations of the characters beyond casual sexual liaisons.

²¹ Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 78.

²² Editorial statement, *Playboy* (April, 1955), 2.

²³ Cox, “*Playboy's* Doctrine of Male”, 134.

We now have at least the silhouette of the *Playboy* man as it is communicated through the stories. How he looks, how he lives, and who he lives with is clear, but this data does not divulge much about his internal life – what he thinks, his motivations and his anxieties. For this reason, the next chapter will take a closer look at several stories.

CHAPTER 4 – The Short Stories of *Playboy*: A Closer Look

After examining the whole collection of *Playboy* short stories and we have an indication of a general male identity. However, what this analysis lacks is a clear view on the performative aspect of masculinity; the idea that being masculine is acting masculine. Furthermore, though trends that have been derived from the results help explain *Playboy's* reaction to anxieties about masculinity – the *Playboy* philosophy – the results only get us so far. For example, it is one thing to say that the high amount of single men or the low amount of children points to a preference for a bachelor lifestyle. But this does not tell us much about what it means to be a bachelor, how one acts, et cetera. In this chapter, I will try to address that gap by looking more closely at several stories published in *Playboy*. The analysis will have a double focus. First, the relationship between the story and the crisis of masculinity of the 1950s will be examined. Second, in order to analyze how men of the time behaved in the face of these issues, I will examine the male protagonists. This, hopefully, will tell us something about what a man *should* be.

Work and Women: A Very Good Sidewalk Story

A Very Good Sidewalk Story, by Herbert Gold, appeared in the October 1959 issue of *Playboy*. It is the story of Paul Conway and his relationship with Kate Barker. Paul, at the start of the story, appears as a typical white-collar office worker, with secret aspirations:

Paul, publicity director for a small corporation, spent most of the year writing its annual report. The rest of the time he pretended to be working on the annual report and wrote poetry in his drawer, slamming it shut and lighting a cigarette like a serious thinker when an officer of the company passed his desk.¹

The main character, Paul, is clearly unhappy with his work. He prefers writing poetry over writing annual reports, though he seems to be better at the latter: “he sometimes thought that it [his poetry] was at least good, but in his heart of hearts he knew that it was not yet good, either. He was very good, however, even wonderful, at annual reports.”² His is a corporate environment, and individual expression like poetry is not appreciated or he would not feel the need to slam the drawer of his desk shut whenever one of his superiors walks past. Instead, he pretends work on his annual report, which gives his poetic activities a somewhat clandestine air.

He looks for an escape from this corporate life, and he fantasizes about doing so by marrying an heiress who can support him while he works on his poetry. He has literary ambitions, but he wants the easy way out: he does not want to endure the drudgery for the sake of his ambition. It is no wonder that, failing to find this heiress, he walks around with “the gloomy face of unsatisfied

¹ Herbert Gold, “A Very Good Sidewalk Story”, *Playboy* (October, 1959), 59

² Gold, “A Very Good Sidewalk Story”, 59.

desire.”³ This sentence echoes the sentiments voiced in contemporary social criticism. In *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman writes about the other-directed person, that “he is often torn between the illusion that life should be easy, if he could only find the ways of proper adjustment to the group, and the half-buried feeling that it is not easy for him.”⁴ Paul exhibits discomfort regarding his actual work and his personal ambitions. Moreover, fulfilling his desires does not come easy: he cannot seem to find a suitable wife and his poetry is mediocre at best, something he acknowledges himself when he later thinks that “he knew that he had not been a good poet [...]”⁵ Lighting a cigarette “like a serious thinker” might thus be more related to Paul’s aspiration to become a serious poet than to establish him as a serious thinker. At the start of the story, he is thus in a position where he finds satisfaction neither in his work nor in his poetry. Says C. Wright Mills, “whatever satisfaction alienated men gain from work occurs within the framework of alienation; whatever satisfaction they gain from life occurs outside the boundaries of work.”⁶ Paul only begins to find satisfaction when he meets Kate Barker, an aspiring actress. She seems to inspire him to write better poetry. Moreover, she counteracts the “hollow, racketing loneliness of unattached young men and women in the great city.”⁷ While *Playboy* magazine extolled an urban bachelor lifestyle, this particular story seems to express traditional sentiments towards a man’s romantic life: he is either married, or lonely.

While the first half of the story deals with Paul’s dissatisfaction with his work and his bachelor life, the second half of the story deals with his developing relationship with Kate. A complication in their relationship occurs when Kate gets a job offer to join a touring road company. The story then turns into a struggle between Kate’s desire to further her career and Paul’s desire for a more stable marriage. He retains a male-focused view of the situation, thinking at one point:

Is it better to be the wife of an unknown poet but well-known nice guy, living in Greenwich Village, than to have a small part in a fairly good road company of a well-tested play? He was answering his own question: Yes. She would be a dope to risk losing me.⁸

When she asks how he would feel if she asked him to stop writing poetry, he states that “there’s no comparison. It doesn’t interfere with us.”⁹ Paul does not even acknowledge the possibility of things working out; he continually blocks Kate’s arguments and eventually resorts to threats about leaving her if she were to take the job. Ultimately, Kate ‘sees the light,’ so to speak, realizing that she would rather be with Paul than work on her career. Paul writes a part in his play for Kate almost as a

³ Ibidem.

⁴ David Riesman, Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven/New York, 1971), 160.

⁵ Gold, “A Very Good Sidewalk Story”, 88.

⁶ Mills, *White Collar*, 235.

⁷ Gold, “A Very Good Sidewalk Story”, 60.

⁸ Ibidem, 88.

⁹ Ibidem.

compromise, but in the end he re-establishes his power position in the relationship after it has been threatened by Kate's impending autonomy. Conversely, a job for Paul that had involved travel would probably not have been an issue, as it was reconcilable with traditional role divisions.

In the end, Paul straddles the line between a masculinity that allows for individual indulgence and a traditional notion of patriarchy: the rule of husbands over wives. Barbara Ehrenreich argues that *Playboy* played a part in the decline of patriarchy by making consumerism masculine. Male consumerism removed the dependence of men on women, thereby removing a historical necessity for marriage.¹⁰ *A Very Good Sidewalk Story*, however, still appears to be firmly entrenched in patriarchal views on marriage. This perhaps raises the question if *Playboy* really was a force in the decline of patriarchy, or if it adhered to traditional ideas. After all, its envisioned period of extended bachelorhood only serves in this case as a prelude to marriage, and even the envisioned bachelor is seen as very much in control of women. *A Very Good Sidewalk Story* thus points first to the dissatisfaction with a white-collar job. Second, it promotes urban living through Paul's insistence on staying in Greenwich Village. Third, while Paul does not pursue a bachelor lifestyle, the kind of relationship with Kate he strives to maintain is one that places him in the power position. While not in control at work, he will surely be in control at home.

Unfulfilled Promises: The Eighty-Yard Run

That was the high point, Darling thought, fifteen years ago, on an autumn afternoon, twenty years old and far from death, with the air coming easily into his lungs, and a deep feeling inside him that he could do anything, knock over anybody, outrun whatever had to be outrun.¹¹

The Eighty-Yard Run, by Irwin Shaw, is a story about disappointment. First published in *Esquire* in 1941, it was republished in *Playboy* in May 1955, and serves as an example of the parallels between the *Esquire* and *Playboy* masculinities. It touches on many of the insecurities of the post-war man even though it was written years earlier. The main character, Christian Darling, starts out full of promise; he is an athlete with a pretty girlfriend; after college he gets a nice job at the New York branch of his father-in-law's ink company, and they move into a decent apartment.

These early paragraphs seem to mirror the early lives of many American young people. Milestones of life were passed in quick succession: high school, college, marriage, work. Everything seems to go smoothly, and Christian feels like he can do anything. Then, after the war, the father-in-law's firm goes bankrupt; Christian is left without a job and from that point on his luck changes. Fifteen years later, with the knowledge that the promises of his early life had not been fulfilled, he comes to a

¹⁰ Barbara Ehrenreich, "The Decline of Patriarchy", in: Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (eds.), *Constructing Masculinity* (New York/London, 1995), 287.

¹¹ Irwin Shaw, "The Eighty-Yard Run", *Playboy* (May, 1955), 40.

realization that “he had practiced the wrong thing, perhaps. He hadn’t practiced for New York City and a girl who would turn into a woman.”¹²

This early security turning into disappointment corroborates the argument of Beth Bailey, who characterizes the generation gap in the post-war period as differing interpretations of the American Dream – was that dream epitomized by security in material affluence or by the struggles of the self-made man? The life of Christian Darling, which had been defined by comfort – he had talent, but did not do much with it, his girlfriend was devoted to him no matter what he did, his father-in-law provided him with a job – did ultimately not lead to fulfilment. Instead, he recognizes that things went too smooth for him initially. Says Bailey, “fulfilment, in this vision, was not only through material comforts, but through the prominence, social standing, and influence in the public sphere one achieved in the struggle for success.”¹³

After his father-in-law goes bankrupt, he is left without a comfortable management function. Initially, he starts drinking heavily, but after a while he holds a string of sales jobs, “selling real estate and automobiles, but somehow, although he had a desk with his name on a wooden wedge on it, and he went to the office religiously at nine each morning, he never managed to sell anything and he never made any money.”¹⁴ These low-status, low-income jobs do not give him satisfaction, and he struggles both at work and at home, as his failure to cope with his lack of accomplishment alienates him from his wife. He becomes, like so many other white-collar men, quite anxious about status and accomplishment. When he hears that Alfred Diederich, the man who displaced him from his football team, broke his neck and had to wear an iron brace for years, “Darling smiled. That, at least, had turned out well.”¹⁵ At the end of the story, Darling gets a job as a travelling sales representative, taking pride in the salary of fifty dollars a week. His job entails going from college to college – he is hired because the company wants a representative “who as soon as you look at him you say, ‘there’s a university man.’”¹⁶ So, he returns to the environment where he had felt most successful, but with the knowledge that he, fifteen years later, has never fulfilled the promises that life held while in college. Note that his job as a sales representative does not completely return autonomy or satisfaction – his success is only partial. Part of him “hoped fiercely, longingly for [Louise] to say, ‘No, Baby, you stay right here,’” but as his marriage has already cooled considerably, Louise says he should take the job – his absence gives her the opportunity to develop.¹⁷

¹² Shaw, “The Eighty-Yard Run”, 40.

¹³ Bailey, “Rebels Without A Cause?”, 26.

¹⁴ Shaw, “The Eighty-Yard Run”, 10.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 32.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

While Darling loses his management function after the firm's bankruptcy, his wife's career blossoms. While Christian sits at home drinking, Louise steadily climbs the career ladder at a woman's fashion magazine, and starts an exciting social life, associating with artists, writers, and intellectuals. Christian, a typical jock, hardly fits in with this crowd, and while "[Louise's] friends liked Darling and sometimes he found a man who wanted to get off in the corner and talk about [football]," most of the time "he sat on the edge of things," being unable to comprehend the discussions, let alone contribute to them.¹⁸ Louise builds a career, while his own career flounders. Like Paul Conway, he feels uneasy about his wife's success. This is exemplified by a scene where Louise comes home after having drinks. Christian reacts coolly, clearly bothered by his wife's late-night outings – this time, she had to take an author out for cocktails. After she goes to take a bath, Christian picks up Louise's new hat, which symbolizes his troubles with her career:

meaningless on his big hand, but on his wife's head a signal of something... big city, smart and knowing women drinking and dining with men other than their husbands, conversation about things a normal man wouldn't know much about [...] and wives calling their husbands "Baby."¹⁹

Several things stand out in this quote, which is basically a summary of Christian's marital troubles. First, he dislikes his wife's independence from him. Despite the fact that he has had affairs of his own, he does not want Louise to go out to dinner with other men. This independence, which is facilitated through her intelligence and knowledge, he perceives as an attack on his manhood. A "normal man" would not know much about the intellectual topics she discusses with painters, composers, philosophers or authors – according to Christian, these men are obviously not real men. A real man is someone who had athletic ability or at least interest in sports, not in the class consciousness of the proletariat, for instance. While he views these men unfavourably, he is aware of the fact that he cannot keep up with his wife intellectually, and it bothers him. Furthermore, he is annoyed by "wives calling their husbands 'Baby.'" His wife pays the bills, she supports him, while he feels that it should be the other way around. Christian should be the one who gives his wife sweet nicknames. His wife calling him 'Baby' signifies his own helplessness, exacerbated by the fact that at the time he is drinking heavily ("on the bottle"). Unlike Paul Conway in *A Very Good Sidewalk Story*, Christian has no power over her decisions. Louise is smarter than he is, more successful than he is; she *has* to work to support him, he has no economic power in the relationship and thus no leverage of his own. It is the position that men of the times feared to be in: a home where the woman was truly in charge. In fact, however, men were still very much in charge in the economy and society – preferably, women remained at home or (if necessary) worked part-time at best.²⁰ Women had a low

¹⁸ Ibidem, 32.

¹⁹ Ibidem, 10.

²⁰ Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique", 239.

glass ceiling and generally did not obtain positions of power, while men had easier access to higher education, political power and high-income jobs. In contrast, Louise “moved along [all manner of intellectuals], confidently, knowing what they were talking about, with opinions that they listened to and argued about just as though she were a man.”²¹ Compared to the historical context, Louise’s position is an exceptional one. But the story is ultimately not about Louise’s success, but about Christian’s anxieties. It is implied that Christian Darling is an old-fashioned man in a changing world – he does not prepare for it properly, sticking to traditional male domains like sports, while his wife embraces big city life with its exciting social gatherings and refined entertainment. His main fault is perhaps his lack of adaptability. He tries to take an interest in his wife’s cultural life, but he ultimately gives up, letting his wife go to plays with other men who *were* interested in those plays, while Christian stays at home. He is the wrong kind of man for this world, he should have embraced big city life with its social excitement; maybe then, he would not have alienated his wife from him – a suspected cuckold, with a low-status sales job and no achievements to speak of, besides one glorious eighty-yard run during a college football training.

Excessive Consumerism: A Classic Affair

Published in *Playboy* magazine in December 1955, *A Classic Affair* by Charles Beaumont at first appears to be about a man cheating on his wife, Ruth. She calls her friend, Dave, to help her find out what her husband has been up to. Dave, who has had feelings for Ruth for a long time, nevertheless agrees to help her – if he helps exposing the husband’s infidelity, he and Ruth might even end up together. The problem is that the husband “was just exactly what he seemed. A solid substantial citizen. [...] Mr. Average in every way. Except that he loved Ruth. Almost as much as I [Dave] did, maybe: and when you feel this way about Ruth, extra-curricular activities simply don’t interest you much.”²²

As it turns out, the husband is not seeing another woman. Instead, he is obsessed with a car: a 1929 supercharged Duesenberg J. The husband starts enthusing about the car’s features; how beautiful it is, how amazing the specifications are; the variety of gadgets and features, and so on. While Dave is listening to the husband, he hatches a plan: he will buy the car and trade it for Ruth. After all, the husband said he would give anything to own that Duesenberg. Dave then takes out a large loan and buys the Duesenberg for \$6,000. Before handing it over to the husband, Dave takes it for a test drive, and then another one, and another one. In the end, he says “I’ll probably turn it over

²¹ Shaw, “The Eighty-Yard Run”, 32.

²² Charles Beaumont, “A Classic Affair”, *Playboy* (December, 1955), 9.

to Hank some time next week, [...] and then Ruth and I will take up where we left off,” but not before he has tested “if the Duesie [sic] actually does an honest hundred and thirty mph.”²³

One of the things that stand out is the relative ease with which Dave takes out a loan for the car. He has practical difficulties, but the idea of taking out a loan to buy consumer goods does not strike him as a bad idea. “I had a rough time with the loan, but there are ways. People like Hank don’t know that. If I’d asked for five hundred they’d have tossed me out on my ear: getting eight thousand was a different story.”²⁴ It mirrors the developments of consumer values during the post-war years; thrift was thrown out the window, while the outstanding consumer credit increased by billions of dollars.²⁵ Dave implies that it was easier to get a large loan than a smaller one. This might be because proponents of credit opined that it “could no longer really be viewed as ‘consumptive’ credit, but should rather be seen as ‘productive’ credit, because households acquired durable goods that improved their productivity.”²⁶ While a five hundred dollar loan could be used for frivolities, a large loan (even if it was for a car) was construed as an investment. Of course, the interest on larger loans was more interesting from the lender’s point of view.

A lot of emphasis is placed on the aesthetics of the car. The discourse on the aesthetics of the car is coupled (or, perhaps, compensated) with discussions of the car’s technical features:

He pointed to a small lever on the dash – there were dozens of them. ‘This gadget is your brake adjustment,’ he murmured. ‘See? You can adjust the brakes for any road condition, no matter what. This here is the altimeter. Tell you how high up you are. And this little thing –’²⁷

The dual focus on technology and aesthetics is part of a discourse that makes consumption masculine. Dave does not call the car *beautiful* or *pretty*, he calls it *handsome*, a decidedly masculine word. But constantly, the form has to be validated by function. The great thing about the car is that it not only looks good, but that it works well, too – and these two things are presented as inseparable. Though the car is discussed using a masculine language, the car is compared to a woman as well: “You used to say it happened to you: kind of hurting, the way you feel when you see a beautiful girl that you don’t really want, but you do, too.”²⁸ This comparison of woman and car gained currency in the 1950s, when the “design template is set by sculptural, female form often voluptuous and sensuous, in which the curves of streamlined and Dynaflo design were, in fact, akin to an exoskeleton for the beautiful women who might be [...] in the car [...]”²⁹ The car was thus simultaneously female and male, an aesthetic appearance with a technical (or functional) interior.

²³ Beaumont, “A Classic Affair”, 47.

²⁴ Ibidem, 46.

²⁵ Jezer, *The Dark Ages*, 126.

²⁶ Logemann, 537.

²⁷ Beaumont, “A Classic Affair”, 14.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Richard Martin, “Fashion and the Car in the 1950s”, *Journal of American Culture* 20 (1997), 56.

The Duesenberg is described as a thing of beauty, but a kind of feminine beauty that is married to a masculine efficiency: “the paint glistened, because of the sun; it was a rich, dark blue. I hadn’t actually seen the thing before, and you had to admit it was a handsome job. Every part of it seemed to be made of cast iron. There was a lot of chrome, but somehow it managed to look good, for once, not gaudy and useless.”³⁰ This reference to chromed details is reminiscent of ‘populuxe’ style that was popular at the time. The excessive use of chrome details was typical of the style, forgoing restrained design in favour of shining ornamentation. As Shelley Nickles notes, a “more is better” aesthetic formed under influence new working class prosperity.³¹ Dave’s mention of the chrome details has a disparaging aspect to it: *normally* it is gaudy, useless even, but on this particular vehicle the chrome looks good.

The obsessive consumerism that Ruth’s husband displays in the story is derided by Dave, who thinks it is absurd that someone could love a car over Ruth, who he refers to as “a beautiful and desirable woman, and I’m in love with her. Not with a hunk of machinery...”³² Through Dave’s derision, the husband’s consumerism is portrayed as something effeminate. He does not love his woman like a real man. Instead, he prefers a consumer article over her. *A Classic Affair* thus portrays consumerism as feminine, by juxtaposing it with male-female love.

Suburban Troubles: The Distributor

Richard Matheson’s *The Distributor*, published in March 1958, tells how a single man is able to disrupt life on an entire suburban street. At the start of the story, we see Theodore Gordon move into a small suburban home. He visits the neighbours to introduce himself and he comes across as a nice, polite man. The neighbourhood is introduced to us as a typical suburb: the people are white and middle-class; one of his neighbours is an elderly gentleman, another is the lonely wife of a travelling salesman, there are several families with children, and an unattractive Baptist spinster who lives with her strict father. One woman is part of the National Council of Christians and Jews (NCCCJ) – an association with the goal of reconciling Christian-Jewish relations after the Holocaust, “a worthy cause.”³³ While this last example is not a typical suburban association, it shows how suburban life could be quite involved with national issues. Some criticized the suburbs as being detrimental to national political participation. Research by Robyn Muncy, for instance, has shown that this was not the case and that suburban life did not shy away from issues like social or racial justice.³⁴ The

³⁰ Beaumont, “A Classic Affair”, 46.

³¹ Nickles, “More Is Better”, 590-1.

³² Beaumont, “A Classic Affair”, 46.

³³ Richard Matheson, “The Distributor”, *Playboy* (March, 1958), 18.

³⁴ Muncy, “Cooperative Motherhood”, 299.

character's membership of the NCCCJ thus appears to corroborate Muncy's conclusions. Throughout the story, she reminds the people around her to be tolerant. This tolerance is abused by Gordon when he lies about his religion after she accused him of being the cause of misery on the street: "my name isn't Gordon,' he said. 'It's Gottlieb. I'm a Jew. I spent a year at Dachau.'"³⁵ There is no reason to believe Theodore, since he previously told the Baptist spinster and her father that he was a life-long Baptist himself. In the end, the woman's tolerance fails her when it concerns her child and a family feud erupts with a neighbouring family.

This feud, along with other terrible events in the neighbourhood (including suicide and attempted murder) are the result of Theodore's work. When asked what he does for a living, Theodore answers that he is in "distribution."³⁶ What exactly he distributes remains open for debate, but he certainly does not distribute goods. He seems to distribute suffering, chaos, and discord. The story suggests that he is actually hired by a company to do his disturbing work. This work starts out with minor misdemeanours: he ruins a garden, he puts a lawnmower in a different yard, he prank calls a repairman for one of his neighbours and puts another neighbour's car up for sale at a ridiculously low price. Quickly, however, his actions get more grim and disturbing. He poisons one dog and shoots another with a BB gun; he paints racial slurs on a garage door and puts the paint under a neighbour's porch, and so on.

The distressing thing about *The Distributor* is how easy the neighbours' friendships collapse. The petty nature of the suburban inhabitants is revealed by Theodore's meddling. Mr. Putnam quickly turns against Mr. Jefferson, when he is led to think that he is a Negro. It does not take much convincing before the elderly Mr. Alston accuses the Putnam's children of shooting his dog and uprooting his ivy plants. Matheson's depiction of the suburbs seems to support the criticism that the suburbs were in a way inauthentic. While the critique of inauthenticity was usually directed against the physical characteristics of the suburbs – a constructed artefact instead of a naturally arisen phenomenon – the lack of authenticity in *The Distributor* is found in the residents themselves.³⁷ The residents of Sylmar Street appear to be friendly towards each other, but underlying tensions soon reveal themselves and ultimately the community is not at all as decent as it appeared to be.

The depiction of the men in the story might serve as a critique of the suburban male. Of course, Theodore Gordon is a person without any compassion, but he is so blatantly devoid of character that he serves more as a symbol of suburban discord. The inhabitants of the suburbs are mostly petty. Mr. Putnam's attitude towards Mr. Jefferson is partly caused by his racism, but another issue is that the

³⁵ Matheson, "The Distributor", 24.

³⁶ Ibidem, 18.

³⁷ Cf. Muzzio and Halper, "Pleasantville?", 556.

value of all the houses on the street will go down.³⁸ In a way, these men are feminized by the suburban focus on the neighbours, an expression of Riesman's other-directed personality. Instead of being individual-minded men, who are primarily concerned with themselves, they concern themselves with others; they need to defend their own little parcel on the street from others. Ultimately, the conclusion of the story seems to be that the people on Sylmar Street are not as suited for the suburban community as they would be for a more fragmented social life – perhaps in the city.

Juvenile Delinquency: Drop Dead

The home situation of the main character Bob Hannesen in *Drop Dead*, by Fred McMorrow, appears to be a recipe for disaster. It is a slight deviation from the 'blame mom'-scenario that, according to several critics, kept boys from turning into decent American men.³⁹ Here an abusive stepfather is the main cause of young Bob's troubles. He sees Bob as a "punk [who] won't never be nothing but a bum."⁴⁰ Unlike the 'evil stepmother' archetype, which is typically coupled with virtuous children, the influence of this 'evil stepfather' instead results in a juvenile delinquent. His mother is not a bad influence, but not necessarily a good one either – she seems to dote on him, but is far from a role model; the fact that she seems to stand for the stepfather's abuse does not sit well with Bob. Hannesen moves from job to job, but his problems with authority make it impossible for him to stay for very long. Eventually, he joins a violent gang and at the end of the story he murders his stepfather and mother in an alcohol-induced delirium.

Instead of resisting the abusive behaviour of the stepfather, he seems to emulate or reproduce it; the lack of a father figure and a role model is presented as the main reason for Bob turning to a life of crime. Joe McGee, a rewrite man at the newspaper where Bob had a job as a copy boy for a while, is meant to be a surrogate father figure. He is a gruff man and often bad-tempered, but he does want to see Bob end up in a good place. When Bob is fired, Joe both tells him off and gives him money for rent: "Here, take this, maybe it'll pay for rent or something. Look. Take care of yourself, you dumb, dumb little – ah, get out, get out, get out..."⁴¹ This ambiguous attitude towards Bob is ultimately what makes Joe incapable of being a surrogate father figure. He does want to see him end up well, but he is not able to communicate on an emotional level. In this respect, he is what Balswick and Peek call the 'cowboy type' of the inexpressive male. This type is based on man-woman interaction, but it can be translated to man-child relations as well: the *cowboy type's*

mark of a real man is that he does not show any tenderness or affection toward girls because his culturally-acquired male image dictates that such a show of emotions would be distinctly

³⁸ Richard Matheson, "The Distributor", 68.

³⁹ Kafka, "Disciplining Youth", 201.

⁴⁰ Fred McMorrow, "Drop Dead", *Playboy* (August, 1958), 52.

⁴¹ McMorrow, "Drop Dead", 52.

unmanly. If he does have anything to do with girls, it is on a “man to man” basis: the girl is treated roughly (but not sadistically), with little hint of gentleness or affection.⁴²

Substitute the word *girl* with *child* and we recognize Joe McGee’s attitude towards Bob. When Bob, now The Turk, is in his cell waiting to be executed, McGee visits him. He is of the opinion that “everybody ought to have somebody when they need them,” but he could not do it unless he was drunk.⁴³ When he starts to cry, The Turk for the first time begins to feel scared – the breakdown of the hard exterior inexpressive male reveals his underlying emotions. The Turk has not been in contact with this kind of emotion in a man; he is not used to it and he cannot really deal with it either. And perhaps things would have turned out better for The Turk if he had seen a little more emotion.

Ultimately, we are left with the suggestion that juvenile delinquency is caused by a lack of a strong male role model. But this man cannot be the gruff *cowboy type* of the inexpressive male, nor can it be the non-feeling *playboy type*.⁴⁴ Instead, a father figure needs to show understanding, compassion and interest. As Joe McGee says:

We never any of us really grow up, we always got to have somebody else telling us listen, you’re a Big Man [...]. And that’s what it is with these punk kids getting in trouble. You think they do it for kicks like they say [...]? No, no, they do it for recognition. Nobody gives them a second look until they get in some big trouble [...].⁴⁵

Unfortunately, McGee is not able to sufficiently deliver either, and Bob Hannesen’s transformation into The Turk is the tragic result.

The Cold War: Walk To The Station

In a 1950 speech, writer William Faulkner expressed the fear that young writers were “preoccupied with the pressing question of ‘when will I be blown up?’”⁴⁶ This tension ran through the literary culture of the 1950s.

Stanley Cooperman’s *Walk To The Station* (which appeared in *Playboy* in August, 1956) starts with a man saying “those are not people.”⁴⁷ He and his partner, Peter, are walking towards the station with two black bags, while discussing the people around them and the nature of their work. Apparently, their job is simply to place the bags in a locker at the station. Though it is never made explicit, it is implied that they carry nuclear devices – *Playboy*’s tagline of the story is “doomsday can

⁴² Balswick and Peek, “The Inexpressive Male”, 364.

⁴³ McMorrow, “Drop Dead”, 66.

⁴⁴ Balswick and Peek, “The Inexpressive Male”, 364-5.

⁴⁵ McMorrow, “Drop Dead”, 52.

⁴⁶ Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s*, 51.

⁴⁷ Stanley Cooperman, “Walk To The Station”, *Playboy* (August, 1956), 17.

come in a little black bag.”⁴⁸ Peter appears to be having trouble with the ethics of his work; he keeps seeing the individuals who are about to die. His partner, only referred to as ‘the fat man,’ tries to make him see the people as a faceless crowd – that way it will be less hard for him to do his job. “Peter looked down into the busy space before them. ‘A goldfish bowl,’ he said.”⁴⁹ The citizens of New York City (where the two men are walking) are not pictured anymore as a collection of individuals, but as an anonymous mass, perhaps as much the result of modern society as it is the result of the two men’s thoughts. Still, a few times Peter comes into contact with an individual pair of eyes, and at those moments doubts arise. The whole way of portraying these people suggests that they are not just a faceless mass, nor only a collection of individuals. Rather, there are individuals who in some way got stuck together in a mass. It is perhaps the result of the city, or civilization. In the end, there is a large, anonymous crowd, and in that crowd are two enemies – practically indistinguishable from the rest, but intent on destroying them. The fact that the city that is about to be destroyed is New York is no surprise. As Lori Maguire notes, New York City is the city most frequently laid to ruin in Cold War fiction. New York was the largest city, the seat of economic power, and the relationship of the city to export, import and immigration made it *the* American city in the public imagination.⁵⁰ Another reason was that in New York, both positive and negative sides to American society can be found: “New York is both monster and machine,” a city that moves on relentlessly, destroying for the sake of progress, but also a melting pot of people, a “microcosm of America itself” and a symbol of the nation’s freedom.⁵¹

The story gives a negative representation of men. The two men walking to the station are – despite Peter’s internal struggles – heartless. They do not have any true character; instead, they are defined by violence (war experiences and acts of cruelty). The other male character, a middle-aged policeman, is helpful to the two men, directing them to lockers to drop off their bags. His failure to protect the city against this threat will result in its destruction. In a way, the crowd prohibits men to act like men; it prevents the policeman from carrying out his duty, to protect the citizens.

In *Walk To The Station*, the city is not destroyed by a full-scale attack; it is not destroyed by missiles or natural disasters or by aliens (as New York often has been). Rather, it is destroyed by two inconspicuous men. If McCarthyism in politics ended with a 1953 court case, the effects of its message lingered on.⁵² In *Walk To The Station*, the two men with their black bags represent the fear of internal threats – destruction from the inside out.

⁴⁸ Cooperman, “Walk To The Station”, 17

⁴⁹ Ibidem, 66.

⁵⁰ Lori Maguire, “The Destruction of New York City: A Recurrent Nightmare of American Cold War Cinema”, *Cold War History* 9 (2009), 514.

⁵¹ Maguire, “The Destruction of New York City”, 515.

⁵² Jezer, *The Dark Ages*, 99.

The Cold War: The World of Heart's Desire

A different approach to nuclear holocaust is taken in Robert Sheckley's *The World of Heart's Desire*, which appeared in September 1959. In this story, a man called Mr. Wayne enlisted the services of a Mr. Tompkins, a scientist who is able to let your consciousness travel to alternate worlds. The process is expensive – Tompkins asks for all of Wayne's worldly possessions and the strain of the procedure takes ten years off his life. The world he ends up in depends on his *desire*. If he desires power, he will end up in a world where he is an emperor. If he desires violence, he will end up in a world where he can murder people. In the end it becomes clear that he ended up in a world where his wife and children were still alive – his own world has been destroyed by a nuclear holocaust.

The approach of *The World of Heart's Desire* is individualist. Instead of crowds, we have one man and his desire to be reunited with his family. Wayne lives his suburban life, taking his sloop out with his son, going to the office, fixing broken shingles. Meanwhile, in the background – newspapers, television reports – the political situation is steadily destabilizing, with increasing talk of missiles and bombs penetrating family life. The home figures as a shelter in the story.⁵³ Before the bombings, it is a way to ignore the destabilizing politics. The threat of attack is confined by family life: "The intercontinental missiles, the atom bombs, the Sputniks... Mr. Wayne spent long days at the office, and sometimes evenings, too. Tommy caught the mumps. A part of the roof had to be resingled."⁵⁴ After the bombings, it becomes a temporary refuge for Wayne's difficult past, a shelter for the mind, separate from the bomb shelter he appears to be living in. Ultimately, Wayne has to revert back to an individualist, inner-directed man: "[...] He had to put away all thought of Janet and the children. [...] Now he had to think about his own survival."⁵⁵ Mr. Wayne, in contrast to the men in *Walk To The Station*, is a positive example of a man. When married, he puts family first; he takes care of his children, provides for them and protects them to the best of his ability. When his family is gone, he becomes something akin to a frontier man – surviving in an unknown, hostile land. It might be presented as an ideal image of the American male temperament – tough, adaptable, keen on living a certain kind of affluent life, but willing to make sacrifices to achieve it.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, the stories of *Playboy* deal with the crisis of masculinity in all its varieties. The short stories mostly take a part of the issue and highlight it. For instance, *A Very Good Sidewalk Story* places a lot of emphasis on Paul's discomfort with Kate's career, while Paul's

⁵³ Cf. May, *Homeward Bound*, 88.

⁵⁴ Robert Sheckley, "The World of Heart's Desire", *Playboy* (September, 1959), 123.

⁵⁵ Sheckley, "The World of Heart's Desire", 123.

discomfort with his office job is less extensively discussed. The stories in this chapter thus most likely do not constitute the totality of the ways the short stories of *Playboy* deal with these issues. It suffices to say here that the crisis of masculinity is written into these stories.

The men that deal with these issues are presented in two ways. On the one hand, they are used as positive examples. The way Paul Conway deals with the plot's main problem is written as a positive solution; Mr. Wayne's tough attitude is seen as admirable as well. On the other hand, there are the men who are seen to be bad examples, or men who are flawed. The men in *The Distributor's* suburbs are petty; Joe McGee is a flawed father figure, who is not strong or wise enough to give The Turk the kind of support he needs; Ruth's husband (and, it is implied, Dave as well) in *A Classic Affair* falls prey to an excessive consumerism that is in a way feminizing by making him love a car over a woman. While these men are not examples of what a man should be, their flaws do. It is through their flaws that the ideal masculinity can be constructed. Christian Darling, on the other hand, is a special case. His character is more well-rounded, he is seen to be a decent individual, he wants to work and support his wife. His tragedy is that he is not adapted to changing times. It is perhaps this that epitomizes the *Playboy* man: he is a man who is able to adapt to a changing time. A time of affluence, of looser sexual morals, of cold war, of juvenile delinquents and suburban peace.

CONCLUSION

This thesis started from a broad perspective, American society and culture in the 1950s. It moved to the specific, from the magazine industry and *Playboy* magazine, first to the collection of short stories and ending at selected individual stories. This chapter will provide a summary and evaluation of the research results. Furthermore, I will attempt to provide a tentative conclusion regarding *Playboy*, the short stories, and male identity.

History and Masculinity

The first chapter discussed the perceived crisis of masculinity in the 1950s, which was formed out of varying developments in society. I say perceived crisis because it is arguable whether or not the social position of men was actually under attack. But this would not affect the real power of these perceptions. To begin with, the rise of a service economy facilitated the rise of the white-collar worker, who instead of producing actual products, dealt more in terms of non-material services. This rise went hand-in-hand with the development of a managerial system, which in turn resulted in changes in power relations: the white-collar worker was managed, he was a man not truly in charge at his work. This loss of power made white-collar workers turn to prestige as the prime source of social standing – as well as a new source of anxiety.

The white-collar workplace was perceived as feminized. The emphasis on team-work, other-directedness, the preference of cooperation over competition, these were values that were perceived as feminine. Combined with the steadily growing percentage of women joining the workplace, the workplace could be perceived as a place that was unwelcoming or even hostile to men as they were traditionally defined.

This white-collar economy was the result of economic developments: in the 1950s a mass consumer society came to fruition, which was in itself a source of unease. Consumption was considered a feminine activity (while production was masculine). Increased affluence and leisure time engendered fears of men becoming decadent, soft and lazy. Furthermore, the breakaway success of credit spending tore down traditional ethics of thrift.

Another development in the 1950s was the increasing popularity of the suburbs. A variety of criticisms was directed against suburbia: they were not authentic, they were places to hide from important national issues, places where life was frivolous. Perhaps more importantly, the emphasis on family life redefined the conventional definition of the domestic sphere. They were feminine environments; women and children shaped the suburbs while men worked in their white-collar offices. But at home, they needed to actively participate in, and shape, family life as a 'dad.' Suburban men were not merely breadwinners, but partly homemakers as well.

The offspring was cause for apprehension as well. During the decade, juvenile delinquency was a cause of major national unrest. While the father was relegated to the role of 'dad,' overbearing mothers caused boys to turn into delinquents and sexual deviants. Additionally, a new generation gap – perhaps created by popular culture and exacerbated by shared experiences like high school – was perceived as a struggle between two value systems: a traditional, individualist and entrepreneurial attitude versus a new community-minded attitude that was fixated with early security.

This search for security was possibly guided by Cold War anxieties, which loomed over American lives, though in differing ways. On the one hand, there was a fear of internal dissidents, as well as anxieties over the strength of the nation's men – the notion was prevalent that consumer society had bred soft men who would be unable to fight off Communism. On the other hand, fears of external threats such as nuclear bombs and fallout were reflected by national readiness campaigns, evacuation plans, and mass bomb-shelter building, among other things.

These anxieties conflicted with the hegemonic masculinity that was established in earlier times. According to this masculinity, a man was not a consumer but a producer. He made things with his own hands. He supported his family and functioned as a *pater familias*. In many ways, however, society started to invert the desired traits of masculinity: a man who did not make things, but dealt in abstract services, a man who was a consumer, and who did not rule over the family as patriarch but was a cog in the family wheel, a suburban 'dad.' Moreover, the threat of Cold War made a man unable to protect his family directly – he could not fight off a nuclear missile like he could actual soldiers. In this respect, suburban homes with backyard bomb shelters became the little domains of security, where at least the family was together.

The second chapter explored the more immediate historical context in which *Playboy* appeared. First, the nature of the magazine industry provided an opportunity for anyone with a relatively small amount of capital to launch a new magazine. The industry could prove to be hugely profitable on the condition that a magazine was able to appeal to readers. The magazine industry itself was firmly entrenched in consumer society – in general, a magazine's profits primarily came from advertising.

Hugh Hefner founded the magazine to provide men with entertainment, but also to define a new kind of man. The *Playboy* bachelor was, like Hefner, disillusioned with early marriage and suburban security, and opted for a high-end urban lifestyle characterized by luxury consumption and casual sexual affairs. *Playboy* was to a degree modelled after *Esquire*, which already in the 1930s advocated a male consumer identity, though it did not quite present the urban bachelor of *Playboy*. Moreover, sex occupied a different place in the two magazines. While *Esquire* featured pinups, they had a peripheral position, while in *Playboy* the pinups were quite literally at the centre of the magazine.

Hefner's magazine stressed the link between consumption and 'having fun,' be it a high-stakes poker game or an adventure with a beautiful woman – for *Playboy* they were two sides of the same coin. It was a hedonistic take on life, though Hefner himself always coupled 'play' with hard work. As Christopher Forth notes, "The same culture that encouraged men to adopt the role of domestic provider was also quick to disparage that role as a form of entrapment."¹ *Playboy* acted on this sentiment by providing an alternative conception of man's place in this culture. Nothing came for free. But by emphasising hard work and by presenting consumption as the reward of that labour, consumerism was masculinised. Moreover, it was presented in a language that carefully disassociated certain types of consumer goods with notions of femininity: "[men] could follow fashion trends. They could stock their bars. They could buy sporty two-seaters just big enough for the bachelor and his date."²

Society and Playboy

The connection between the short stories of *Playboy* and society warrants some further discussion. In the following paragraphs I will discuss the relationship between fiction and history.

The white-collar workplace was featured often in the short stories, though never as the primary setting. The office is more frequently on the periphery of the plot, like in *A Very Good Sidewalk Story*. The unease with the workplace is expressed by the unhappiness of the character, the lack of fulfilment the work provides. The loss of power related to the growth of the managerial hierarchy is not addressed specifically. The discomfort, however, is noticeable implicitly in some stories – when the main character in *The Eighty-Yard Run* loses his managerial position and ends up with a low-status job, the ensuing loss of standing becomes part of the character's internal struggle. To be low in the hierarchy was written as a lack of success, or prestige. Prestige could be redefined in ways other than power, like when the main character in *The Eighty-Yard Run* stresses the decent salary of his new sales job. The Duesenberg features in *A Classic Affair* partly as a source of prestige, a token of affluence and taste.

As the work-place does not feature as the primary setting, the feminization of the workplace likewise does not feature as a major topic of discussion. But remember the worries of the character Jean Martin in *No Down Payment*: "nine out of ten of [men's] careers could easily be filled by women [...]"³ This is reflected in the depreciation of sales jobs that is present in short stories (the main character in *The Eighty-Yard Run* stresses the money he will make with his new sales job, while the nature of his work is avoided).

¹ Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West*, 209.

² Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 79.

³ Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 194.

What is emphasised more is the relation between women and work. The message that the stories communicate is that while it is not a problem per se, it becomes a problem when the woman assumes the role of breadwinner, or when it offers her a great degree of independence from her partner. Notions about working women in the stories thus closely mirror society – it was alright for women to work as long as it did not upset the breadwinner/homemaker paradigm and left men in control.

Consumer society was not criticized in general. What was criticized were the excesses – the cases where a man would trade his wife for a sports car. Likewise, the deterioration of the value thrift was not criticized per se – credit was useful, but there was a general aversion to excessive debt.

The ways in which consumer society influenced the roles of men in the suburbs was not addressed either. Outdoor grilling, home improvement, and other activities to promote ‘togetherness’ were absent. This can perhaps be explained by the specific brand of consumerism *Playboy* promoted: “*Playboy* did not expect men to focus on the traditional domestic acquisition of lawn mowers, barbecues, station wagons, and dinettes,” but advocated an individual-minded luxury consumerism.⁴ In general the variety of criticism against the suburbs was reflected in the short stories: inauthentic places where life was petty or frivolous. The feminizing influence of suburbs on men was, however, not present – perhaps due to the fact that characters more often than not lived in the city. The stories’ solution to avoiding the feminization of men in the suburbs was to keep them in the city.

While ‘momism’ featured in *Playboy*’s articles on occasion, it was absent in the short stories. The combination of overbearing mothers and weak-minded fathers did not appear. The only story that actually dealt with the family life of a juvenile delinquent provided an inversion of ‘momism’ and featured an abusive father and a loving, but subservient mother. Furthermore, the generational conflict between an individualist, more entrepreneurial mindset and a newer mindset that was focused on early security did not feature as clearly.

Lastly, the different aspects of Cold War anxiety all appeared in short stories: threats of destruction from the inside out, the fear of a nuclear apocalypse, family life as a bulwark against nuclear anxieties, et cetera. These different aspects were never found together but always fragmented, in different stories.

Bethan Benwell argues that “whether wittingly symptomatic of a crisis discourse or not, men’s magazines’ nostalgic retreat seems rather to evade the position of ‘subject-in-crisis’ than to revel in it.”⁵ The examination of the short stories in *Playboy* offers a different perspective: the short stories

⁴ Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 79.

⁵ Bethan Benwell, “Introduction: masculinity and men’s lifestyle magazines”, in: Bethan Benwell (ed.), *Masculinity and Men’s Lifestyle Magazines* (Oxford, 2003), 15.

not only reflect contemporary issues in society, they feature characters who are affected by these issues.

The fourth chapter looked in more detail at a selection of short stories to see how the men acted and if (and how) they dealt with the societal issues that were outlined in the first chapter. Though of course the seven stories discussed in this chapter make up only a fraction of the 193 stories that appeared over the decade, they serve to show that the crisis of masculinity was indeed present in the pages of *Playboy* magazine, even in its fiction. Generally, the stories dealt with these issues in two ways by depicting the male characters either as negative or positive examples of masculinity. Negative examples were portrayed as flawed or evil, while positive examples arguably conveyed a sense of admiration. Whether one male character was positive or negative was noticeable in context and tone – the way in which the character dealt with events and how these actions were evaluated in the story. In this fashion, these stories did not only deal with male identity, but also with a variety of social issues. The results of the fourth chapter imply that society can be read from the stories – a ‘touch of the real.’ Parallels between contemporary society and the short stories of *Playboy* were fragmentary – typically, there was only one issue that was dealt with and its treatment was not always elaborate. Nonetheless, the anecdotal evidence that these stories make up hint at the value of the school of new historicism and its approach to understand works of literature through their historical context.

After analyzing the stories and discovering parallels between fiction and reality it can be easy to take a thick description of fictional texts too far. As literary critic Brook Thomas notes,

“there is a tendency to transform the chiasmatic relationship from one of difference into one of identity [which is] illustrated by [literary critic Michael] Warner’s transformation of [literary theorist Louis] Montrose’s formulation ‘the historicity of texts and the textuality of history,’ into the assertion that ‘the text is historical; and history is textual.’”⁶

While there are parallels, fictional texts cannot be treated as historical sources without complication. Of course, that was never quite the goal of this research. The exploration of the short stories served to see if and how issues in society were *reflected*. What has become clear is that this reflection of social issues was partial. Some were emphasised – like working women or the Cold War – while others got little attention or were not found at all – like the feminization of the workplace or the generation gap. At the hand of these emphases and omissions, it becomes possible to formulate *Playboy*’s alternative masculinity.

⁶ Brook Thomas, *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics* (Oxford, 1991), 10.

Playboy and Masculinity

How these men acted on the issues mentioned above in a way constitutes their masculinity. As Judith Butler notes, “the performance of gender was precisely that which produced retroactively the illusion that there was an inner core.”⁷ The acts of men do not reveal a stable gender core, but they are themselves constitutive of gender identity.

Besides this performative aspect, the short stories communicated masculinity in other ways. The third chapter elaborated on the general characteristics of the *Playboy* man by analyzing the male characters in the magazine’s short stories. The results were generally in line with *Playboy*’s vision of the bachelor. The composite male character was single, had no children and was fashionable or at least well-dressed. He lived in the city, preferably in an apartment. He was of middle-class standing. He could be a clerk, an accountant, or a top manager – it did not matter. Ideally, however, the *Playboy* man had a career, instead of merely a job. Education was not often explicitly addressed. When it was, the male character was at least college-educated. He travelled, he played sports, but he was more often found in social environments like bars and restaurants. Lastly, he was generally average-looking. He was appealing enough so that many men would like to be him, but he was average-looking enough so that many men *could* be him. Though not every man could live the hedonistic, luxurious life that was presented in the magazine’s pages, they could at least aspire to be like the men to some degree.

The results showed that the prevalence of these characteristics developed over time. In the first year of the magazine, results did not show clear preferences for any one characteristic. Starting from 1955 trends developed. For instance, during 1955 the frequency of male characters of modest white-collar economic status (or lower-middle class) shot upwards. It is from these results that the general characteristics of the *Playboy* man can be gleaned.

We have established that there are similarities between the *Playboy* philosophy in general and the characters in the short stories. This does not, however, automatically lead to the conclusion that *Playboy* communicates a coherent ideology in all of the magazine’s constituent elements. Gerson and Lund argue that the works of fiction are a vehicle for indirect socialization:

The process of learning is essentially the same as with other indirect avenues: instruction through identification and imitation on the part of the reader. With works of fiction, however, it is slightly more complex and diverse. The stereotype is generally the same. But works of fiction allow the *Playboy*’s intellectuality and personality to be brought forth and rounded

⁷ Judith Butler, “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification”, in: Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson (eds.), *Constructing Masculinity* (New York/London, 1995), 31.

out. [...] His morality and intellectuality are cool; he is the true individualist making his way towards some sort of secular nirvana.⁸

However, the results of this thesis undermine, or at least problematize this argument. When taken together, the composite of male characters does resemble the *Playboy* stereotype: a middle-class, single urban male, with a penchant for socializing and cultural refinement. But this conclusion ignores the individual stories, the ways in which individual main characters deviate from this stereotype. There were characters who were married and had children, there were those who were not decent middle-class citizens, and there were many characters who did not pursue a sexually liberated life of 'work and play. This is why one cannot read only one story chosen at random and come to the conclusion that "this is what the *Playboy* man looks like and behaves like." The stories originated from a variety of freelance authors, whose stories were perhaps not written expressly for *Playboy*, but were bought by the magazine because the editors made the decision it would fit with the magazine's style. This may explain the lack of the man's pursuit of women: while this was a vital part of Hefner's vision of the playboy, it was not necessarily that of the authors of *Playboy's* short stories.

Elizabeth Fraterrigo concludes that "as the magazine took shape, *Playboy* became a mouthpiece for male liberation, rejecting conventions that saddled men prematurely with familial obligation and confined sex to marriage."⁹ But casual sexuality is far from ubiquitous. A number of stories do indeed promulgate an approach to sex that mirrors the rest of the magazine, but these stories do not constitute a majority. As Carrie Pitzulo concludes, "*Playboy's* gender politics defy easy categorization. Gender antagonism and sophomoric fears of commitment were certainly part of the *Playboy* universe, but there was more to that world than anti-marriage rants and available women."¹⁰

The short stories on their own did not provide explicit role models or ways to deal with certain issues. Rather, framed by *Playboy's* ideology and the many articles that did provide explicit guidelines and advice, the short stories become part of that ideology. The male characters do not represent an ideology of masculinity, but they are examples of rounded male identity: they consist of more than just "being an urban bachelor" or "being middle-class." As characters they can possess a multi-dimensional identity, comprised of bodily aspects, as well as relational and reflective aspects – these aspects do not coincide with the *Playboy* philosophy completely. Instead, they can be considered permutations that incorporate different elements of the *Playboy* philosophy in varying degrees.

As the short stories were incorporated by the magazine, they were incorporated by the *Playboy* philosophy. By virtue of the stories' context it became possible to discover *Playboy's* brand of

⁸ Gerson and Lund, "Playboy Magazine", 223.

⁹ Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life*, 210.

¹⁰ Pitzulo, *Bachelors and Bunnies*, 179.

masculinity in the stories. In more general terms, what this research has shown is that by incorporating fiction in a magazine, its intertextual links are changed, and thus the meaning changes. It is not that because these stories communicate the *Playboy* philosophy that they were published by the magazine. Instead, it is because these stories were published by the magazine that they communicate the *Playboy* philosophy. Because the magazine was published in the 1950s, it became part of the 'crisis of masculinity.'

Stephen Greenblatt says regarding the play *King Lear*: "Does this mean that the aesthetic power of a play [...] is a direct transmission from Shakespeare's time in our own? Certainly not. That play and the circumstances in which it was originally embedded have been continuously, often radically refigured."¹¹ Likewise, the circumstances in which the short stories were embedded in *Playboy* magazine refigured their meaning under influence of the historical context. The time and place in which works of fiction appear, and the different ways in which they appear, allow for different meanings. The interaction between history and fiction is thus a fluid one, and it merits continued attention.

¹¹ Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 6.

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