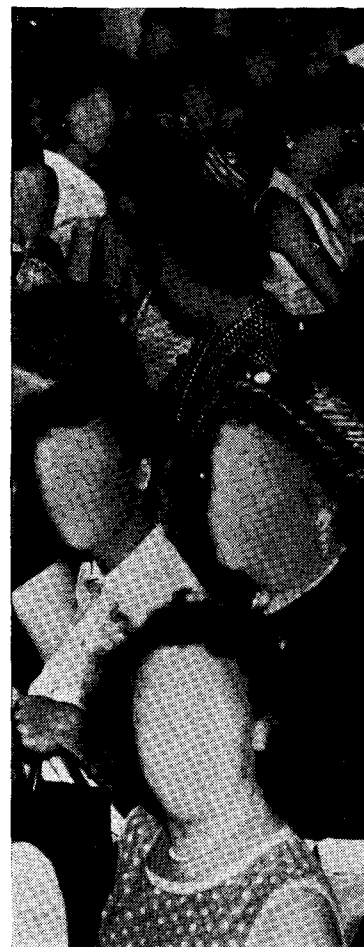


THE ORDEAL OF THE AMERICAN WOMAN

Who says, in the first place, that the overprivileged, overactive, and overdieted Miss (or Mrs.) Faceless on the right suffers an ordeal? Everyone agrees that women wave the baton in America: there's "Mom," who, according to Philip Wylie, clings to Sonny and gives him neuroses; there's Mrs. Club, who is accused of bullying mayors and ministers; there's Mrs. Money, who is supposed to outthink and/or outsurvive her self-sacrificing husband to dominate the nation's economy; and there's Miss Bright-Eyes, who compels promising young men to fall in love, to the confusion of their morals and careers. But Max Lerner, the political-science lecturer and author, claims that if the American Woman is a dictator, she has few of the privileges and powers associated with that station. She makes huge psychological and physical demands on herself in attempting to satisfy her own strenuous self-image. Mr. Lerner's article is drawn from his forthcoming book "America As a Civilization" (Simon and Schuster, \$10). Copyright 1957 by Max Lerner.



By MAX LERNER

RARELY in historic civilizations have women been as free, expressive, and powerful as in America. Yet rarely has the burden of being a woman, and trying to be a fulfilled one, been as heavy to carry.

Everything in American life seems to conspire to make the American woman a glittering, bedecked, and pampered creature, yet also one bedeviled by a dilemma that reflects the split both within herself and her culture. She is torn between trying to vie with men in jobs, careers, business, and government, and at the same time find her identity as wife, mother, and woman. The tussle between them accounts in great measure for the ambiguous place she holds in American society and for the frustrations and neuroses commonly associated with her.

The growing-up years of the girl differ from those of the boy. She is

welcomed less enthusiastically: to the low-income families she brings consuming rather than earning power, to the middle-class families she presents the problem of being married off. She is more closely watched than her brother by the family of which she is part, by the community outside, and by the censor inside her. Since she is considered the frailer vessel, she must be shielded; since she is to marry well, she must be marriageable; she must be careful not to cheapen herself, not be "talked about," to encase herself in the triple armor of inaccessibility. A small town or suburb, where everyone knows everyone and where the Puritan heritage in morals still lingers, is especially stifling for her. As a result, many a small-town girl seeks the blessed anonymity of the big city. Yet even there she is plagued by her dilemma: with one side of her she wants an adventurous and exciting life, but another voice tells her that she lives in a culture where few wom-

en can make a go of it on their own, and where therefore she must find the marriageable male who will invest her with security and status.

All the same, America's greatest work of art may turn out to be the American woman, from sixteen to fifty, whether stenographer or society belle, shopgirl or movie queen. She is known the world over for her pertness, her spirit, and her looks, for the contours of her figure, the smartness of her clothes, and the vitality of her person. Some of this derives from the image left by the spread of American movies, but mostly it is the deposit left by her place in her culture. Simone de Beauvoir has said, "One is not born a woman. One becomes it . . . by the ensemble of civilization."

The American woman, who must accept the assumptions of romantic love and also those of the merchandising economy in which the sale depends on the packaging, channels her pent-up energies largely into dress

and decoration. She finds here an expressiveness and feeling of power that are not balked as they are in other channels. She finds available in the economy around her an array of fabrics, colors, furs, jewels, cosmetics, and even in the middle and lower income groups she finds copies of expensive items scaled down (almost) to her ability to pay.

Out of this arises what the advertising copywriters call the "American look," on the premise that the American woman does have a *different* total look from that of the Roman woman, Chinese, British, Latin, or Russian. In some ways the image is almost a Petty or Varga caricature, with shapelessly silk-clad legs longer than the torso, with small waist, narrow hips, long neck, swollen breasts, pert features, dilated and inviting eyes, blonde or red hair, sinuous body, and an expression at once vacuous and sophisticated, helpless and predatory. In actual statistical measurement and look the average American woman falls short of this dream, as the range of motley sizes and shapes in women's clothing testifies. Yet the cultural ideal is often approximated in height and slenderness, ankles and legs and contours, and even where it is not its hold is tyrannous.

The effort to approximate it has absorbed generations of skill and concentration, the suiting of techniques to taste and to the prevailing modes and moods. Shifting codes of fashion have governed the cycles of American taste in women's dress and profile from the crinoline-and-stays period, to the Gibson girl, to the inter-war flapper, to the current norm. Within these larger and baffling cycles there are whims and tyranny of the short-run changes in fashion on which whole industries may be built and by which they may be ruined. For the Goddess of the Right Thing is an exacting one. On the level of the Big Money this Byzantine profusion is, of course, achieved without much difficulty. Where it hurts is in the middle and low income groups, but even there—by smart buying of low-priced "copies"—one manages to respond to the unrelenting demands.

The arts of advertising and salesmanship lose no chance for encouraging this response. If the American woman were in danger of forgetting a moment about clothes and cosmetics, lingerie and nylons and "foundation garments," deodorants and perfumes, the advertisers make sure the lapse is brief. "It is our job," said the head of a trade association of women's retail stores, "to make women unhappy with what they have in the way of apparel and to make them think it is obsolete." Yet for all the

tyrannies and blandishments with which she is surrounded, the American woman remains the center of the constellation.

The miracle is that with all this world of make-believe she has not succumbed wholly to its tyrannies. She has kept a measure of independence, wrecking many a big investment built on the premise that she would follow the command decrees of the great designers and clothes manufacturers. Even in the elite arts of dress and decoration, steeped in the vocabulary of exclusiveness, the democratic note has been sounded ever more insistently. The language of the fashion magazines and the advertising copy has increasingly become that of a democratic snobbery—an exclusiveness that includes shopgirl and stenographer along with debutante and young Park Avenue matron. Mail-order fashions, patterns for those who do their own clothes, mass-production models that are a triumph of cheapness and taste, "home permanents" that have cut into the role of the beauty shops—these are part of the great paradox of the American woman as artist and artifact.

THE most continuous American revolutionary is the American woman. First there was the *suffrage revolution*, as part of the long, hard-fought movement for equal rights in which a succession of strong-minded women, in the face of jeers and humiliation, broke into previously barred professions and won the right to an equal education with men, to speak in public, to vote for and hold office. Second, there was the *sexual revolution*, directed against the double standard of morality and aimed to gain for women some of the same privileges of sexual expressiveness as the men had. Coming in the wake of the equal-rights movement, it was a phase at once of the revolt against Puritanism and of the dislocations caused by the first World War. Related to the revolution of morals was, third, the *revolution of manners*, with women shedding their cumbersome garments and adopting form-fitting clothes and revealing swim suits and shorts, taking part in sports, driving cars and even piloting planes, serving in wartime as Wacs and Waves, smoking cigarettes and drinking in public. Fourth, there was the *kitchen revolution*, with mechanized kitchens and canned and prepared foods giving some women greater leisure and enabling others to get industrial and clerical jobs. Finally there was the *job revolution*, which transformed the American working force as it also transformed women's role in the economy. In 1920 there were 8 million women holding jobs; in

1955 there were more than 27 million, comprising over 30 per cent of the labor force. For the first time in American history, married women outnumbered single women in paying jobs, although most of the women in clerical and professional jobs are single.

The American woman has not had to struggle for her economic position. While there are no hard figures, the usual estimates are that women control up to 70 per cent of America's wealth, that they have 60 per cent of the savings accounts and are the beneficiaries of 70 per cent of the insurance policies, that they represent more than half the stockholders in the big gilt-edge corporations, that they own close to half of the nation's homes, and that at least three quarters of the nation's purchasing power is funneled through them. The catch is that women hold their purchasing power largely as wives and have acquired their wealth mainly as widows: economically they are disbursing agents, not principals. Or as one unmarried woman has put it with some acerbity: women have trust funds, stocks, and real estate, mainly "because their husbands die early, of overwork for these economic parasites." Not only do American women live longer than men, but many rich Americans who marry for a second time marry younger women who outlive them by a number of years.

But it does not follow, as some would have it, that this has turned America into a matriarchate, or that the American women are idlers who spend their husbands' salaries or clip interest coupons. The real control even of the wealth of wealthy women is in the hands of male trustees, lawyers, and bankers. Few women are directors of big corporations, just as there are few who form government policies. As for the women in industry, most of them work for a living or to supplement a family income too low for decency. Thus, American women, like men, are divided between an elite arrayed in glory and a majority who must work for what they get; and even the minority of women who are powerful in their ownership of wealth are functionless with respect to their wealth, because they lack the strategic control of it.

DURING the first quarter of the present century the American woman strove for equal rights with men: having achieved them, she has spent the second quarter wondering about the result. The struggle for the vote, for the right to hold and transfer property in her own name and to have legal control of her income, to go to the same colleges and professional

schools as men, engaged the stubborn and persistent energies of a succession of woman leaders, from Emma Willard, Mary Lyon, Fanny Wright, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Stanton, Catherine Beecher, Lydia Child, Jane Swisshelm, to Jane Addams, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Eleanor Roosevelt. There were career women all through the nineteenth century, but the gap was great; in the twentieth it was narrowed. The boos and cheers that greeted the suffrage parades in the early Twenties seem quaint now, when there have been women mayors and Senators, UN delegates, and even Cabinet officers, along with judges, doctors, scientists, novelists, playwrights, war correspondents.

To be sure, a few of the "equal-rights" militants still resent the protective social legislation for women, on the ground that to single them out for protection is to doom them to a subordinate role. But there can be no question of the glowing victories won in the successive cycles of emancipation. That is her dilemma. What disturbs her most is a doubt that what she wants most is her rights. However important the legal and economic struggle, it has brought no ease to her unquiet spirit and her turmoil of mind, and so her heart is not in it.

I do not mean to underplay her effect in humanizing the rigors of a society bent on power and acquisitiveness. The great achievements in the history of American reform movements—in civil service, prison reform, labor and social-security legislation, temperance, social case work, settlement houses, slum clearance and housing, public health and movements for international organization—have owed their patience, passion, and compassion to women. No small part of the great role Eleanor Roosevelt played in history was to help keep the power aspects of the New Deal in perspective within the human aspects. Kept out of the full stream of American power expression, the women often had a capacity few men develop to insulate themselves against the ruthlessness of an expanding young nation. Although Hawthorne was contemptuous of the "damned mob of scribbling women," Henry Adams later said grudgingly, "I suspect that women are the only readers—five to one—and that one's audience must be created among them." It is the view of most American college teachers that the girl students keep alive the flame of the liberal-arts education. American music and literature depend largely upon women for an audience.

In a society tending to grow more
(Continued on page 60)

THE LADY'S CHOICE

There are no purdahs or travois in the American woman's existence. She lives and works in freedom, not only from ancient social taboos but also from the crushing physical labor and the exhaustion of overfrequent childbirths that were so long her sex's lot.



The young filly starts out in curlers and blue-jeans, jargon and dance-steps and Elvis.



After college she settles down with husband and babies in a suburb or a small town.



Sometimes, when children and mate are gone, she keeps house alone somewhere in Florida.



Or she makes a career of her sex . . .

Or she marries a modern farmer.



Or she takes a secretarial job, and then waits.

Or a poor city dweller in a worn, old tenement.



Or she prefers executive duty. . . .

Or she divorces a rich one, and carries on in high style.



One of the finest painters alive is Georgia O'Keeffe, whose austere and decisive work, which has been famous for forty years, stands in the strongest American tradition.



Perhaps the most beloved woman in the world, Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt steadied her husband in his crises, and lives on to steady as much of poor and unhappy mankind as she has time in the day, and personal energy, to work for.



—Erich Hartmann.

James Gould Cozzens.



—Scotnews, Glasgow.

T. S. Eliot.



—Walker Evans.

James Agee.

A Bookseller's Fall Forecast

By LILLIAN H. FRIEDMAN,
buyer, *Brentano's Inc.*

IT will be no problem to find a new book this Fall. Paper and ink are still being manufactured. The binderies and the publishers still operate. Authors continue to scribble. The result: thousands of books will come out in the next twelve weeks. There will be books for you and books for the man next door, books you'll love and books you'd hate if you read them, books you'll start and never finish and books in which you'll be lost and drowned. There will be books to look at, books to learn from, books you'll never forget, and books you'll never think of again once you finish the last page. Here, then, are small notes about only a few of the many that are coming—notes calculated to help you make your own selections.

There are novels by the big names: "By Love Possessed," by James Gould Cozzens, a story of an honorable man who does dishonorable things but somehow ends up even more honorable, though not righteous; "Atlas Shrugged," by Ayn Rand, author of "The Fountainhead," in which the author's intense and passionate and almost fanatic creed and view of America might well turn out to be the belief of hundreds of thousands of other Americans who are sure to read it; "To America With Love," by Kathleen Winsor, a novel about California and the Depression; and "The Edge of Darkness," by Mary

Ellen Chase, who writes quietly and coolly about a town and its people in Maine. Less serious and full of wit and laughter, as well as irony and joy, are "The Woman of My Life," by Ludwig Bemelmans, in which Paris's richest bachelor seeks his one and only love, and, *voilà*, she turns out to be an American, and "The Secret of Major Thompson," another from Pierre Daninos, wherein Her Majesty's first citizen and his French wife and friends visit England and America. Oh, how we baffle and mystify and bewilder these French and English visitors, and yet charm them too.

There's nothing quite like the excitement of coming upon a book and suddenly having it explode at you and fill you with wonder. Such a book is "A Death in the Family," coming in November. James Agee, who died before the book was entirely finished, has captured (as has not been done for a long time) life and love and death as they impinge upon the world of a child and as they are seen through the eyes of a child. It is a simple, precise story of the sudden death of a father, written with much beauty, truth, and poetry—the kind of poetry that, having the quality of everyday speech and thought, has great beauty and a deep sadness. You will be moved by "A Death in the Family," and in reading it you'll find yourself recalling and remembering a lot of things you didn't even know you had forgotten.

A novel by an unknown is "The

Savage Place," by Leon Arden. This is a first novel and you'll feel a sense of discovery. There is harsh writing that hardly shows any tenderness as it explores the wildness that can exist in a seemingly normal mind. It is bitter, never sweet, and essentially tragic.

There are lots of books to look at and laugh over: "The Esquire Cartoon Album," the fattest collection yet from that magazine which once seemed so young and brash; the "Gluyas Williams Gallery," more cartoons by a master of the simple line, accompanying pieces by top humorists; "Eloise in Paris," by Kay Thompson, another about *l'enfant formidable*; "Night Crawlers," by Charles Addams, whose cartoons can be compared to no one's. There are "Alarms and Diversions," by James Thurber, who himself says, "If my other books are lost or burned, this one will represent well enough what I have been up to since I came of age"; "Holiday in France," selected by Bemelmans, decorated by Bemelmans, and full of love letters to Paris and France by Colette, S. J. Perelman, Andre Maurois, Irwin Shaw, John Steinbeck, and others; and "C'est La Vie," the best of Chaval, France's well known cartoonist whose work appears in *Paris-Match*.

THIS is being written at the end of a week in which 120,000 New Yorkers woke up before 6:30 A.M., not to catch a train, not to do kneebends, not to turn over to the other side and not to pray, but rather to sit in the dark dawn before their TV sets and participate in a Course on Comparative Literature. The first author discussed during the week for a half-hour daily was Stendhal, and the book "The Red