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## Limiting womens abilities to household chores

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* created a social revolution in the 1960s by addressing the role of women in society and its effects on their emotional and mental health. Her words opened the eyes of many American housewives who felt incomplete and lost. Friedan helped these women empathize and associate with what she called "the problem that has no name," and the only way to resolve this problem was to work or live a "meaningful" life. Often, this problem comes from a yearning for something more than being a mother or a wife. For some women, this means a purposeful career or making a mark in this world: women at the time felt trapped and suffocated by life in the home. This problem in many ways is similar to the conditions diagnosed in Gwendolyn Brooks's *kitchenette building* in that the realities of life contradict the dream of finding something more fulfilling. Brooks's poem relates to this problem as it too deals with the struggle of carrying an empty dream, particularly among those stuck in the domestic or social system. However, the specific audience each text targets within domestic life is different, so that although the concepts being brought up are similar, the realities of wanting something more complicate the relationship between these two works. The two audiences for these authors face different living conditions and have different backgrounds which prove important to understanding the depths and significance of their dreams. Although similar in ideology, the "giddy sound, not strong" of a dream evokes more of a helpless feeling while, in contrast, "the problem that has no name" offers tangible solutions that evoke a sense of real control and optimism.

Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* deals with the internal conflict between the typical white woman's realities of daily life and the dream of a more purposeful or meaningful life. She calls this phenomenon "the problem that has no name" and interviews many women who feel this type of emotional emptiness. This famous phrase recalls Brooks's ideas of the condition of people living in kitchenette buildings; they are also trapped, just like the suburban women of Friedan's book. The theme of dreaming of something more is consistent between these two texts, as Brooks's people long for a vision of better living conditions. Although they have accepted their state of life, there is always that lingering feeling of hoping that something better will come. One woman Friedan interviewed said, "The problem is always being the children's mommy, or the minister's wife, and never being myself" (Friedan 28). This relates back to Brooks's poem in that specific women are stuck in a system society placed them in, and are having a tough time breaking out of it and overcoming important social or economic barriers.

Brooks' poem *kitchenette building* brings to mind some of the concepts presented in *The Feminine Mystique* in that the poem talks about people with no clear path in life or little control over their lives. The poem by Brooks starts with the words, "We are things of dry hours and the

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involuntary plan, grayed in, and gray” (Brooks 1). The use of the word “we” sets a more inclusive tone and makes the reader wonder why Brooks is saying these humans are things and not people. It gives the reader a hint that these people must be undervalued in society. This narrative voice further sets a gloomy and eerie tone to the poem. The use of “gray,” “dry hours,” and “involuntary plan” implies that Brooks's people are feeling weary about their lives and maybe even about their potential dreams, an idea that directly relates to Friedan's perspective on the problem that has no name. Friedan writes, “We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.’” (Friedan 32). Here, Friedan is also talking about people who feel trapped by home life. The difference is that Brooks is talking about kitchenettes, which were cramped series of small rooms, while Friedan is talking about the typical white suburban home. This leads us to the question of whether these two texts can be compared any further due to their completely different audiences and distinct perspectives on the dangers of domesticity.

Arguably, the realities of daily life cannot really be compared between African Americans living in kitchenettes and privileged middle- to upper-class white women of American suburbia. Brooks writes, “Dream” makes a giddy sound, not strong” (Brooks 2). She suggests that dreams for the people she is writing about are far fetched and far away, not strong enough to create something real. The state of dreaming is fruitless because living under such adverse real conditions is complicated, as there are more crucial things to overcome and think about than passing dreams. Instead of dreams, the smell of “yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall” pervades the air (Brooks 6). Brooks implies that dreams cannot be easily fulfilled in a kitchenette building, or even survive amid racism, poverty, and unsanitary living conditions. Yet Friedan's tone is much more optimistic. She gives a solution to the problem and is sure that women can conquer it if they do certain things. For example, her solution is to break out of “the domestic routine of the housewife.” (Friedan 30). The act of being a wife, a mother, a caregiver puts strain on these women and creates tiredness. Her solutions are somewhat absolute in nature. Women should focus on their careers, put marriage and children second, and feel empowered. In contrast, Brooks offers no solution and no happy ending. The events of Brooks's poem are much more vague in this regard, and her tone can be described as one of hopelessness. There is no solution other than living roughly the same day over and over again. She even ends the poem by depicting an unsettling image of person number five hoping to get into “the lukewarm communal bathwater” (Brooks 13).

*The Feminine Mystique*, therefore, has many racist and classist undertones and refuses to acknowledge the future and hardships of the non-white women living in the “kitchenette buildings.” Friedan targets a completely different, less marginalized audience. She writes of the dreams of women who live in pleasant homes and who, most importantly, have the ability and leisure to dream. For these women, social and creative dreams are much more realistic, much easier to attain. The people in Brooks's poem are too busy worrying about paying their bills and

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keeping their children clothed and fed to spend time nourishing their dreams and thinking about all that is missing from their lives. Their attention is needed elsewhere because of their economic state and role in society. Friedan's solution to the "problem that has no name" is very much one size fits all. She only focuses on the conditions of white, college educated, upper and middle class married American women living in suburban homes, while completely ignoring those who are not nearly as privileged. Friedan, thus, fails to advocate for all women. She avoids discussing the consequences of her solution and how it would affect other groups of women struggling with systematic oppression. For example, what would happen when privileged white women decide to focus on their careers? Who would be called in to be a nanny for the kids or a maid for the house? How would this create new problems for those other care-giving women? These questions address the needs of women who don't have children, a college education, a career, a husband to depend on, or a sanitary living environment.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Brooks's *kitchenette building* focus on the idea that the voices of some groups in society are not being heard and, thus, that these people are trapped by societal constraints. The problem that has no name is a real issue among women homemakers: they want more out of life than simply taking care of kids and husbands. This sense of longing is also described in Brooks's poem. The main difference is that this longing is more of a pleasant and distant afterthought for the people living in the kitchenette building. The dream is just a far-off "giddy sound," a hopeless vision for a better reality. For the white women in Friedan's piece, the dream is "a hunger that food cannot fulfill," something that can be achieved if women try hard enough. For Brooks's people living in the horrid and inescapable environment of a kitchenette building, "the giddy sound" of a dream is just that, a dream. The unfortunate reality is that to dream of something more has different consequences for different populations.

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