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Divorce as Liberation: Marital Expectations Among the Working-Class in the 1950s

by

Kristin Maria Catrone

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## I. Setting the Scene: Marriage & Divorce in the 1950s

*The Opposite Sex*, the 1956 film adaptation of Clare Boothe Luce's play *The Women*,<sup>1</sup> reveals much about contemporary attitudes towards gender roles, marriage, and divorce. In the film, Kay Hilliard seeks a divorce from her husband Steven, a New York City theater producer, after discovering that Steven has had an affair with one of his showgirls, Crystal. At several points in the film, Kay's best friend Amanda offers some advice. Upon hearing the news, Amanda was unsurprised: "It happens to most wives, he's been married for ten years." The best thing for Kay to do would be to ignore Steven's indiscretion; it is the "only sacrifice an overprivileged wife has to make to keep her man." Nonetheless, Kay spends six weeks in Reno in a boarding house for divorcees—the required amount of time to establish residency so that she could be entitled to a divorce under Nevada's notoriously lenient legislation. Amanda goes to Reno to travel home with Kay after the divorce has been finalized. She encourages Kay to fight to get Steven back from Crystal, whom he will imminently marry. Here, Amanda's statements about marital expectations are even more telling: "What do you think marriage is anyway—something safe and comfortable you can take for granted? This is a rough world Kay, and marriage has to live in it. It has to be won over and over again, as many times as necessary and against all challenges." Initially, Kay lets Steven and Crystal alone. But when she learns of Steven's continued feelings for her and Crystal's own infidelity, she concocts a plan to expose Crystal and win Steven back.<sup>2</sup>

Although both characters were depicted in the film as well-to-do, Kay and Amanda represented two divergent attitudes towards marital difficulties that abounded among real

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<sup>1</sup> The play was adapted for film for the first time in 1939. A modern remake of the film was released in 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *The Opposite Sex*, directed by David Miller (1956; Culver City, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios), Amazon Prime Video.

Americans in the 1950s. On the one hand, Amanda expressed the perspective of the upper-class. Unhappy or unsafe marriages needed to be tolerated so as not to lose one's wealth and station in life. On the other hand, Kay displayed a more working-class sensibility—leave a marriage in which contentment and trust have been broken. Indeed, as my study of Lebanon, Pennsylvania demonstrates, divorce was a remedy employed by working-class Americans in the 1950s when their marital expectations went unmet. Small town husbands and wives left spouses who engaged in emotional and sexual affairs. Wives especially left husbands who were verbally, physically, or sexually abusive. Further, expectations for marriage in this period centered around a set of assumptions based on gender. Women's duties focused on the home, while men worked outside of the home for wages. While this gendered ideal was established by the middle and upper classes, the working-class also aspired to it in their marriages. However, by seeking divorces when marital expectations went unmet, it was the working-class who so profoundly challenged and reordered the institution that upper-class couples simply endured. Working-class women showed how divorce could be used as a tool of liberation and empowerment—a strategy that was later embraced by middle- and upper-class women during the Women's Liberation Movement.

In American history, no era seems to represent the interplay between marital expectations and gender roles more than the 1950s, an era which continues to be celebrated as the pinnacle of American family life. In *Marriage, A History*, Stephanie Coontz explains that the gendered expectations within marriage that became ubiquitous in the 1950s began in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries with the emergence of separate spheres for women and men. Under the burgeoning market economy, men worked outside the home for wages while women labored in the home. Coontz argues that this division of labor emerged from a combination of egalitarian yet patriarchal values in which women and men were seen as having different

characters. While this arrangement was not originally intended to create an uneven power dynamic within marriage, women's labor inside the home became radically undervalued in the world of cash transactions. Thus, women became financially dependent on men, and the gendered roles of homemaker and breadwinner continued to perpetuate.<sup>3</sup> Coontz demonstrates that the marriages of the past were primarily political or economic relationships; but beginning in the nineteenth century, people entered into marriage for personal fulfillment. Coontz contends that the deprivation of World War II led to a renewed, romantic vision of family life. Thus, the golden age of marriage was the long 50s, which she defines as 1947 to the early 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

Other historians have both echoed and challenged these assumptions about gender roles within marriage in the mid-twentieth century. In particular, the arguments made by Elaine Tyler May in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* continue to persist in interpretations of gender and marriage in the 1950s. May argues that "peace and affluence alone are inadequate to explain the many complexities of the post-World War II domestic explosion."<sup>5</sup> Rather, she contends it was the onset of the Cold War that gave Americans the impetus for the widespread embrace of domesticity that occurred in the 1950s. What women and men both sought in this decade was security and personal fulfillment; many believed that marriage would provide them with both. Key to May's argument is her conception of "domestic containment." In Cold War politics, containment refers to the policy by which the United States sought to curb the spread of communism by allowing the Soviet Union to control an established sphere of influence. May explains that, "in the domestic version of containment, the 'sphere of influence' was the home. Within its walls, potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be

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<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 156.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 5.

tamed, so they could contribute to the secure and fulfilling life to which postwar women and men aspired.”<sup>6</sup>

Further, May asserts that inherent in this embrace of domesticity was the ubiquitous acceptance of traditional gender roles in marriage: the wife as the homemaker and the husband as the breadwinner. For May, the Cold War once again provides an explanation. On the home front, the 1950s was the era of McCarthyism. Anticommunist zealots were alert to internal dangers and sought to eradicate any subversive influence that might pose a threat to national security. They believed that “deviations from the norms of appropriate sexual and familial behavior might lead to social disorder and national vulnerability.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, May claims that the acceptance of traditional gender norms in marriage was necessary in order to conform to the Cold War consensus. “In the postwar years,” she argues, “Americans found that viable alternatives to the prevailing family norm were virtually unavailable.”<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the homemaker role has offered a compelling narrative for understanding American women in the 1950s. As Joanne Meyerowitz points out, “Most of us are familiar with a well-entrenched stereotype of American women in the post-World War II years. Domestic and quiescent, they moved to the suburbs, created the baby boom, and forged family togetherness.”<sup>9</sup> Images of such women permeated American popular culture in the 1950s and still persist today in both cultural and academic recollections of this era. Yet Meyerowitz asserts that such an interpretation flattens the multiplicity of women’s experiences in the postwar period. Meyerowitz contends that: “While no serious historian can deny the conservatism of the postwar era or the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>9</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 1.

myriad constraints that women encountered, an unrelenting focus on women's subordination erases much of the history of the postwar years. It tends to downplay women's agency and to portray women primarily as victims. It obscures the complexity of postwar culture and the significant social and economic changes of the postwar era."<sup>10</sup> Seeking a divorce was one way in which women had and employed agency in the 1950s. For Meyerowitz, this scholarly misstep is caused by too much emphasis on the white middle-class suburban ideal.

Yet it is the white and affluent that May focuses on in her analysis. One of the main sources that May utilizes to gain insight into marital expectations in the 1950s is the Kelly Longitudinal Study (KLS), a series of surveys in which 300 couples responded to questions about their perceptions of married life over time, from the late 1930s to the mid-1950s. To locate participants, psychologist E. Lowell Kelly contacted couples who announced their engagements in New England in local newspapers. Thus, the women and men who took part in this study were primarily white, upper-middle class, and educated. May acknowledges the limitations of her own sources. Yet she insists that it was members of this group of Americans who shaped the culture; the rest of society conformed to these standards. May contends that, "these norms represented the ideal toward which upwardly mobile Americans strove and reflected the standard against which nonconforming individuals were judged."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is essential to examine other groups in the 1950s to test May's assertions—to explore whether the lived experiences of all Americans matched the ideal set by affluent whites.

Part of the doubt comes from the fact that May herself highlights how often the expectations of marriage were not met by the same group of Americans who allegedly set the standard. She notes that participants' responses to survey questions "reveal a strong undercurrent

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>11</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 15.

of discontent; their hopes for domestic happiness often remained unfulfilled.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the participants themselves felt disappointed that their lived experiences of marriage did not measure up to their anticipated marital bliss. In order to cope with these dissatisfying unions, May contends that the respondents to the KLS accepted the security of marriage at the expense of true personal fulfillment. She argues that “few were willing to give up the rewards of conforming for the risks of resisting the domestic path.”<sup>13</sup> May asserts that Americans in the 1950s believed in marriage, and were determined to stay in unhappy unions rather than risk the economic and social consequences of dissolving them.<sup>14</sup> Simply put, divorce was not considered as an alternative to weathering troubled marriages. May is adamant time and again that divorce was not a viable option for the women and men who participated in the KLS. She maintains that “those who divorced faced a powerful stigma that cast their personal virtue and even their status as mature adults into question.”<sup>15</sup> In May’s analysis, the husbands and wives in the KLS chose to endure bad marriages rather than jeopardize the security these arrangements provided.

But just like the cultural assumptions presented in *The Opposite Sex*, May’s data was skewed in favor of a white, upper-middle class elite. If alternative sources are considered, we find that divorce was much more of a reasonable option for wives and husbands in the 1950s than May acknowledges. Divorce records can be quite illuminating and are overall useful in reconstructing the expectations of marriage in a particular historical moment.<sup>16</sup> In *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, Nancy Cott contends that it has been public authorities who have set the terms of marriage and outlined its consequent obligations through the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 176-177.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>16</sup> See also Elaine Tyler May’s *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America*.

regulation of marriage itself—and also divorce. In discussing the widespread reform of divorce laws by state legislatures in the first half of the nineteenth century, Cott contends that, “By declaring what behavior broke the bargain of marriage, states were reiterating what composed it.”<sup>17</sup> She maintains that, “Rather than inviting husbands and wives to pursue marital freedom, the states in allowing divorce were perfecting the script for marriage, instructing spouses to enact the script more exactly.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, it is crucial to examine divorce records in order to ascertain why marriages were permitted to end to fully comprehend the expectations both the state and spouses themselves had of marriage in any given period.

In pursuit of this inquiry, I have consulted divorce records from Lebanon County, Pennsylvania—a more working-class pool of sources. For my study, I pulled a random sample of 40 cases from across the 1950s—ten cases each from 1950, 1953, 1956, and 1959 to get a sense of the decade as a whole. These rich sources reveal the expectations both women and men had about marriage and how they responded when these expectations went unmet. They give voice to working-class husbands and wives who were married at the same time as the respondents to the KLS. Further, these legal proceedings provided an arena in which marital expectations were negotiated and enforced. In each of these cases, a divorce was approved by the Lebanon County Court of Common Pleas. Thus, these sources are significant in that they demonstrate the role played by the state in determining and implementing the myriad responsibilities of marriage as understood in the 1950s, including those regulated by gender.

According to Pennsylvania law in the 1950s, county courts had jurisdiction over cases of divorce and annulment. Once a complaint was filed and then served to the defendant spouse, the court would appoint a master to the case. The master would obtain testimony from the plaintiff

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<sup>17</sup> Nany Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 52.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

spouse and any witnesses, who generally supported the plaintiff, then issue a legal opinion as to whether or not a divorce should be granted.<sup>19</sup> Section 10 of the Divorce Law of Pennsylvania provided for nine grounds for divorce: adultery; bigamy; conviction of certain crimes; cruelty; desertion; fraud, force or coercion; impotence; incestuous marriages; and indignities to the person.<sup>20</sup> Most of the divorces in my sample were granted on the ground of indignities. As defined by a contemporary article in the *Temple Law Quarterly*, the “fundamental characteristic of indignities is that it must consist of a course of conduct or treatment which, by its continuity, renders the condition of the innocent party intolerable and his or her life burdensome.” More specifically, “Indignities may consist of vulgarity, unmerited reproach, studied neglect, intentional uncivility, manifest disdain, abusive language, malignant ridicule, and every other plain manifestation of settled hate and estrangement.”<sup>21</sup> This definition is essential to understanding arguments made by plaintiff spouses in order to be granted a divorce on this ground, as it is the key to unlocking the expectations of marriage in this particular setting.

On the whole, the women and men in Lebanon County agreed with the participants in the KLS that security and fulfillment were their objectives for marrying in the 1950s. However, if these expectations were not met, divorce was a recourse that was available, and which aggrieved spouses utilized. Divorce was less stigmatized in this community than in the well-to-do neighborhoods of New England from which the respondents to the KLS hailed. This is evident in the ways in which plaintiff spouses, witnesses, and masters spoke about why marriages failed and the consequent need for a divorce. Although the wives and husbands in central Pennsylvania echoed the KLS participants about a deep belief in marriage, many plaintiff spouses explained in

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<sup>19</sup> Maurice H. Brown and Armand Della Porta, “A Survey of the Law of Marriage and Divorce in Pennsylvania,” *Temple Law Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (January 1950): 203-204.

<sup>20</sup> Gilbert Abramson, “Grounds for Divorce,” *Temple Law Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (Winter 1959): 220.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

their testimonies how they concluded a divorce was the only solution to their marital troubles. Indeed, the Lebanon spouses were so committed to their assumptions about marital fulfillment that they were more willing to divorce than settle into unhappy, disappointing marriages.

In Lebanon County, women and men had less to lose and more to gain by seeking an end to marriages that did not offer security and fulfillment. This can be explained by the different socio-economic makeup of central Pennsylvania.<sup>22</sup> Compared to the educated and affluent couples in the KLS, the husbands and wives of Lebanon County were predominantly working-class, many laboring in industrial, manual, or service jobs. Amongst KLS couples, 29.7% of husbands and 21.7% of wives completed four years of college. Another 28.4% of husbands pursued education beyond a bachelor's degree and 23.6% of wives attended some college.<sup>23</sup> By comparison, the median number of school years completed by persons twenty-five years-old and over in Lebanon County was 8.9.<sup>24</sup> Further, the KLS data shows that the average yearly income was between \$5,000-\$7,500 for 29.21% of families and between \$7,500-\$10,000 for another 22.77%.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, the median family income in Lebanon County was \$2,838, with 30.7% of families earning yearly incomes less than \$2,000.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, what is striking about the Lebanon sample is how many wives worked while married: only 31% of the Lebanon wives were recorded as unemployed at the time of their divorce, versus the 48.6% of KLS wives who did not work at all while married.<sup>27</sup> While the

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<sup>22</sup> What the KLS and Lebanon County do have in common is racial composition. According to the 1950 Census, only 0.3% of the population of the county was non-white. In all 40 cases in my sample, both spouses were white.

<sup>23</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 232. "Education Level," Deck 10, column 26, KLS.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Table 12.—Summary of Population Characteristics, For Counties: 1950," *U.S. Census of Population: 1950, Vol. II, Characteristics of the Population, Part 38, Pennsylvania* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952), 38-70.

<sup>25</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 232. "Average Yearly Income of Family Over the Last Three Years (1952-1955)," Deck 43, column 61, KLS. Amounts given are in 1955 dollars.

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Table 12.—Summary of Population Characteristics, For Counties: 1950," 38-70. Amounts given are in 1949 dollars.

<sup>27</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 234. "Years During Marriage that Wife Worked for Pay," Deck 45, column 29, KLS.

wives who participated in the KLS might have worried about losing the security offered by their husband's wealth and status had they sought a divorce, many wives in Lebanon County already had their own economic resources to fall back on. Census data reveals the extent to which Lebanon women worked outside of the home. In 1950, 33.6% of Lebanon females over the age of fourteen participated in the labor force. This statistic is especially significant when compared to the rest of Pennsylvania, as Lebanon saw the fifth highest concentration of female workers amongst all 67 counties in the state.<sup>28</sup> In addition, manufacturing jobs were readily available, as central Pennsylvania was an industrial center in this period. In 1950, 44% of all those employed in Lebanon County engaged in manufacturing.<sup>29</sup> Taken together, this data signifies that Lebanon women did not fear for their future financial security after obtaining a divorce.

Marital expectations in the 1950s centered around security and fulfilment; yet these two categories need to be broken down further in order to comprehend what this meant in the lived experiences of marriage in this decade. Three key issues appeared repeatedly in this sample of divorce cases. One aspect was sexuality within marriage. Plaintiff wives and husbands alike in Lebanon County disclosed the pain and humiliation caused by their spouse's sexual and emotional infidelity. In addition, a handful of wives complained about what they perceived as their husband's excessive sexual demands and described the toll this took on their health. Second, women and men expected to feel safe with their spouse. An issue that does not come up in May's analysis of the KLS is domestic violence. Whether this was something that KLS couples did not experience, or merely was not captured in the types of questions Kelly asked remains unclear. But many wives—and also husbands—in Lebanon County recounted their

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<sup>28</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Table 12.—Summary of Population Characteristics, For Counties: 1950," 38-70. The county with the highest percentage of females in the labor force was Cameron County at 38.2 %. Berks, Lehigh, and Philadelphia Counties all tied at 33.9%.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

experiences with violence at the hands of their spouse. Nothing broke one's sense of security in marriage more so than mental and physical harm caused by a partner in whom such great expectations had been placed.

Third, if a husband or wife acted outside of the proscribed gender roles of this period the marriage would be considered a failure. Men needed to be breadwinners, to work outside of the home for wages that would be used to provide his family with the basic necessities of life. Meanwhile, women needed to assume the duties of homemaker—keeping the house clean, preparing meals, taking care of the children, and overall supporting her husband in his role as the breadwinner. When a spouse violated gendered expectations, both women and men described these grievances as part of the reason why they were seeking a divorce. However, this also meant that in reality gender norms were often broken. The aggrieved spouse took on the opposite role in addition to their own to compensate for their spouse's failings. Women had to work outside of the home to provide basic necessities for their families when husbands could not or would not. When a wife did not clean the house or care for the children, men had to take on these duties in their hours off from work. These women and men combined homemaking and breadwinning in order to provide for themselves and their families when their spouse failed to meet their expectations in marriage. But according to the Lebanon sources, spouses resented these failures and saw them as a pretext for pursuing divorce.

Unlike the participants in the KLS, divorce was used as a tool of liberation and empowerment for those faced with difficult, disappointing, or abusive marriages in Lebanon County. In their testimonies, men and women alike expressed relief at being freed from the bonds of marriages that were unfulfilling, unhealthy, and unsafe. Women in particular articulated a sense of regained power in response to their marriages ending. The upper-middle class

respondents in the KLS might have lowered their expectations and settled into their marriages, but the women and men of central Pennsylvania believed that they had choices, and they used divorce to regain independence and control in their lives.

## II. Sexuality Within Marriage

The divorcing women and men of Lebanon County agreed with those surveyed in the KLS about the importance of monogamy in marriage, as allegations of adultery came up frequently in the testimonies of both wives and husbands filing for divorce. May contends that most people stayed in marriages despite sexual dissatisfaction and frustration. For the participants in the KLS, “most of them were inclined to make the best of their situation, rather than turn to divorce or extramarital affairs for the magic that was missing at home.”<sup>30</sup> Yet the data from Pennsylvania shows that many sought divorces because their spouse could not adhere to sexual containment. In their testimonies, both husbands and wives revealed the impact of their spouse’s infidelity on their mental and physical health and explain the positive effects of liberation from these harmful marriages. While the testimonies from Lebanon County are mostly silent about sexual fulfillment within marriage,<sup>31</sup> a handful of aggrieved wives instead related their husband’s sexual needs and preferences, which the wives found excessive and perverted. For these plaintiff spouses, ending their marriages was the best recourse in the face of their partner’s infidelity or inordinate sexual demands.

When a spouse did not adhere to faithfulness within marriage, husbands and wives utilized divorce to free themselves—to sever ties with a partner who only brought pain and humiliation to the relationship. One such husband was James, who married his wife Ruth in

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<sup>30</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 127.

<sup>31</sup> Sexual fulfillment is only mentioned in one case. See Case 250, Lebanon County, 1956.

December of 1950. In James' estimation, their marriage began to break down in April of 1952 when Ruth "started finding all kinds of fault with [him] and fought with [him] for no reason whatsoever." Ruth left James in March of 1953 without an explanation. Yet James doubted the paternity of Ruth's baby, born one month later, and suspected that this was the reason why she left him. Ruth did home typing for a trucking company, and James believed that Ruth might have been having an affair with her boss. People whom James did not even know well saw this man going in and out of the couples' apartment all day while James was at work; this continued against James' wishes. On one occasion in July of 1952, Ruth and her boss asked James to go swimming with them, although they already knew that James had another engagement. James took them swimming and when he returned in the evening to pick them up, he found them under the same blanket. In his testimony, James recounted what happened next: "When we got home, we had a heated argument when I discovered that the lower part of her bathing suit was on backwards, which had not been the case when I left them off to go swimming. There also was other evidence on her bathing suit of improper relations with this man on this day." After this episode, neighbors and friends still reported seeing this man come to the house while James was at work. James would try to call home to Ruth during the day, but the line was always busy.<sup>32</sup>

In explaining the reasons that he sought this divorce, James described both the mental and physical toll of his wife's infidelity. He stated that, "Because of this affair, which she was carrying on in my own apartment, life became almost unbearable, because I know she was continuously carrying on with this man behind my back and we had many fights."<sup>33</sup> The sense of betrayal that James felt came across clearly. This was exacerbated by the fact that he knew that

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<sup>32</sup> Case 284, 1953, Lebanon County Prothonotary NARRS Files. All subsequent cases are located in the archives at the Lebanon County Prothonotary's Office in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Surnames have been omitted to protect the privacy of individuals and their families.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Ruth was continuing to be unfaithful and dishonest. Thus, the couple quarreled often, adding to James' unhappiness in the marriage. James explained that Ruth's conduct contributed to his poor health: "I worried all the time, became nervous and lost weight. I lost twenty-six pounds in thirty-two days, suffered from insomnia and on the advise [sic] of my doctor I was required to leave my job at the [Indiantown] Gap [Military Reservation]." Since filing for divorce, James reported that he was no longer losing weight and was generally regaining management of his emotions.<sup>34</sup> James' testimony reveals the profound harm caused by Ruth's infidelity.

Emotionally, James felt humiliated by Ruth's conduct and disrespected that she continued to engage with her boss, despite her husband's wishes. This was exacerbated by the fact that the affair continued in the apartment James provided for his wife in his role as the breadwinner. Physically, the stress caused by Ruth's duplicity caused James to lose weight and compelled him to give up his job. James emphasized that life with Ruth was intolerable—he was unable to endure being married to her under these conditions. Thus, James used divorce as a tool to free himself from Ruth and recover control over his own life. That divorce was the best solution for James is demonstrated by his recovery, both mentally and physically, since formally ending his marriage.

Several plaintiff wives also recounted the pain and embarrassment caused by their husbands' unfaithfulness, and their sense of empowerment and liberation upon separating from such a spouse. For Emma, her marriage to husband John was fraught with many difficulties, including repeated instances of physical abuse. A year before the couple separated, John began an affair with a woman named Ellen, who was a co-worker at the restaurant where John worked as a waiter and short order cook. In her testimony, Emma explained that, "It was about this time

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

things began to get real [sic] rough around our house. He took it out on me and on the children.” Because the restaurant was in Reading—about an hour away from where the couple lived—John kept a hotel room there and would return home some weekends. Emma learned of John’s infidelity over the course of several visits to his Reading hotel. On one occasion, Emma found a woman’s handkerchief in John’s room. When Emma asked John about it, he accused her of having a boyfriend. Emma related what happened next:

A little later on I went down, and the night clerk told me not [to] go up to the room, or there would be trouble. I asked him why, and he told me that the “young waitress” was up in the room. I knew what he meant and I went back to Lebanon. A little later on, I caught them together in a cocktail lounge in Reading. I asked her at that time to stop breaking up our home, but she said she didn’t know what I was talking about. It was about this time that I left him and got a room on Ninth Street. I really wanted to go back to him, so that when he did ask me to go back, around Christmas Eve of 1947, I was willing and decided to go back to him. I recall getting to the house on Christmas Eve, 1947. When I got inside the house, I found out that Ellen...was upstairs hiding in the bedroom. We had a big argument, and my husband ordered me out. I left, and I have never lived with him as his wife since.

This last incident took place about nine years prior to Emma filing for divorce, and she stated that John had been living with Ellen since that night.<sup>35</sup>

Just like James, the plaintiff in the previous case, Emma described the mental and physical suffering caused by her spouse’s treacherous actions. Emma explained that, “As a result of the nervous strain, I’ve been under these many years, I have developed a speech defect and when I get excited, I can barely [sic] talk and be understood. My Doctor attributes it all to the strain of my marriage situation.”<sup>36</sup> The maltreatment Emma experienced at the hands of her husband caused her to develop a full-blown nervous condition, as diagnosed by a medical professional. Emma closed her testimony by explaining that “my husband’s living openly with a woman not his wife has been a constant source of embarrassment to [my children] as it had been

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<sup>35</sup> Case 269, Lebanon County, 1956.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

to me. It is for this reason that I have decided to get the divorce now and be free from him forever.”<sup>37</sup> After nine years of facing such humiliation, Emma finally resolved to legally separate from John. Like James, Emma could no longer tolerate such an emotionally and physically taxing marriage. Emma’s concluding statement demonstrates the sense of liberation she felt upon ending the marriage. Thus, Emma utilized divorce as a tool to regain power and respect in her life. Both of the above cases demonstrate that divorce was utilized as a solution—not all husbands and wives endured painful and embarrassing marriages in the 1950s.

In *Homeward Bound*, May explores the connections between Cold War anxieties and emergent fears of rampant sexuality. “Much of the anxiety focused on women, whose economic and sexual behavior seemed to have changed dramatically” during the Great Depression and World War II.<sup>38</sup> Once again, containment was the prescription: female sexuality could not pose a threat to American morality and national security if it was contained within the home.<sup>39</sup> Within the confines of marriage, the husbands of Lebanon County did not express concerns over the unrestrained sexuality of their wives. Instead, a handful of wives noted the sexual brutality and aggression of their husbands as a primary reason why they sought a divorce. Just like the women faced with infidelity in their marriages, these wives desired emancipation from spouses who were callous and profane in their sexual demands.

In the summer of 1956, Joyce sought a divorce from her husband Carl, to whom she had only been married since the previous spring. In her testimony, Joyce recounted the series of abuse Carl inflicted upon her, such as his refusal to give her money for groceries so that she

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 90.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 94.

depended on the neighbors for enough food to eat. Significantly, Joyce closed her testimony by describing Carl's sexual brutality:

The only interest Carl seemed to have in me was as a means of gratifying his inordinate sex demands. To induce me to yield he resorted to all sorts of schemes. Beyond sex he had no interest in me whatever. His sex demands were of a kind that were indecent and repulsive, and I could not yield to them without losing my self respect....The indecent sex demands that I have referred to were in the nature of sodomy and came when he was drunk, which was frequent.<sup>40</sup>

The strong language Joyce used to detail her sexual life with Carl reveals her perception of the indignities she experienced during the intimate moments of her marriage. She felt disrespected by the fact that Carl did not invest himself into any other aspect of their married life together. In Joyce's estimation, Carl demanded too much from her sexually—he compelled Joyce to engage in sex when she did not want to, and to take part in sexual acts she viewed as unnatural and degrading. Moreover, Joyce feared physical impairment from Carl's aggressive sex habits: "In every phase of his sex demands he was a beast and nothing less. I was in continuous danger of being seriously and probably permanently injured by his rowdyism in connection with sex indulgence."<sup>41</sup> Thus, Joyce believed divorce was necessary in order to prevent Carl from harming her during sex. Further, like the aggrieved spouses who suffered as a result of their partner's infidelity, Joyce also faced nervous collapse as a result of Carl's conduct. "Coupled with the continuous incivilities that he was heaping upon me," she stated in her testimony, "I found it impossible to live with him any longer without suffering a complete emotional and nervous collapse."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, Joyce sought a divorce as an escape from what she discerned as her husband's savage treatment. With Carl out of her life, Joyce could regain autonomy over her body and her self-respect.

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<sup>40</sup> Case 174, Lebanon County, 1956.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Other wives also explained that their husband's sexual brutality pushed them to seek a divorce. One couple with serious differences in respect to their sexual relations was Barbara and Francis. The couple married in 1952 and Barbara filed for divorce in the fall of 1956. After recounting their myriad differences, Barbara described her distress with their sexual life:

There was nothing tender in my husband's approach. As a matter of fact, he gave no consideration to my satisfaction and the whole act seemed merely a means of animal-like gratification for him. His whole approach was so crude that frankly he destroyed all of my desire for sexual relations. During the last year of our married life together, we had no sexual relations at all. This didn't seem to disturb my husband and I was happy just as long as he left me alone.<sup>43</sup>

Just like Joyce, Barbara also characterized her husband's sexuality as beastlike. This demonstrates that the wives in Lebanon County had a clear idea of what sex was supposed to be like; expressing one's sexuality in a way that deviated from this was considered something that only "animals" would do. It is significant to note that this is the only case in the Lebanon sample in which a plaintiff discusses his or her own sexual fulfillment in marriage. This suggests that sexual gratification was not a widespread expectation the Lebanon spouses had, or one which the court generally acknowledged as creating the conditions for a burdensome, intolerable marriage. But for Barbara, the fact that Francis did not satisfy her and did not care to try contributed to why she sought to divorce him. Finally, the couple stopped having sex altogether, which Barbara preferred over Francis' indelicacy. Barbara closed her testimony by stating that, "As it was, he simply made no effort to save our marriage and under the circumstances, while I do not believe in divorce, nevertheless, I feel it is the only proper solution to this unhappy marriage. I have been miserable and unhappy for several years."<sup>44</sup> Although Barbara might have had some ideological qualms about divorce, she nonetheless utilized it as a mechanism to free herself from an injurious

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<sup>43</sup> Case 250, Lebanon County, 1956.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

and sexually disappointing marriage. Without Francis to debase her, Barbara could recapture independence and happiness in her life.

Catherine, who divorced her husband Charles in 1959, included this towards the end of her testimony: "Although I do not wish to speak of it at all, my attorney has told me that I must mention, and that is that my husband began insisting on indulging in perversion. I refused and he has since shown this tendency elsewhere."<sup>45</sup> While it is unclear what Catherine meant by "perversion," it is evident that Charles wished to engage in sex acts which Catherine viewed as unnatural. The fact that Catherine only spoke about her sex life with Charles on the advice of her attorney demonstrates how humiliating and demeaning she viewed Charles' sexual demands. Catherine also complained that what she perceived as Charles' ill-treatment caused her health to fail. She stated, "Needless to say, all this conduct had a deleterious effect upon my health, particularly my nerves, and I doctored repeatedly with Dr. Moeschlin. The chief complaint was a spastic colon which my doctor said is entirely the result of nervous tension. Since I left my husband on January 7, 1959 I have had only one violent attack of pain and I feel like a new woman."<sup>46</sup> Aside from reporting an improvement in her physical ailments, Catherine expressed liberation upon leaving Charles. For Catherine, divorce was a tool that she utilized to free herself from Charles' sexual demands, which she understood as being unreasonable and deviant.

### **III. Domestic Violence**

A topic that receives silence from May is the domestic violence that took place in the 1950s. This is due to the fact that Kelly's questions do not touch on cruel treatment inflicted by a

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<sup>45</sup> Case 142, Lebanon County, 1959.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

spouse.<sup>47</sup> Yet, what could alter one's sense of security in the home more than enduring verbal and physical abuse at the hands of their partner? It is no wonder that the survivors of such violence cited these instances as primary reasons why they were seeking a divorce. While men did experience domestic abuse, women in particular were the targets of such brutality. They experienced both physical injury and feelings of humiliation and worthlessness caused by husbands' harsh words. In addition, many arguments, threats, and beatings were fueled by alcohol use, and couples fought about the husband's excessive drinking. Thus, wives were caught in the vicious cycle of their husband's alcoholism and abuse. Like the women who faced infidelity and sexual aggression in their marriages, wives who experienced domestic violence relied on divorce as a tool of emancipation and empowerment. Telling their stories is crucial to understanding the complexity of the experience of the 1950s housewife.

Wives were not the only survivors of domestic violence in the 1950s. Some husbands also recounted the abuse they experienced at their wife's hands as reasons why they were seeking a divorce. A primary example of this comes from the divorce of John and Elizabeth in 1953. The couple married in 1939, but their married life was interrupted when John was drafted into the United States Army in 1945 and deployed to the Philippines. John admitted to being "rather a nervous wreck" upon returning home from World War Two and stated that his condition was exacerbated by Elizabeth's maltreatment. In his testimony, John reported that Elizabeth was "given to fits of temper. She likes to domineer. When opposed or not obeyed, she breaks loose into torrents of abuse and profanity against whomever she does not like at the time." She accused John of infidelity often when was merely working overtime or engaging in one of his favorite pastimes, fishing. Elizabeth threw John's belongings out of the house and threatened

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<sup>47</sup> See *Homeward Bound* Appendix II.

to kill him more than once. Elizabeth would corner John and threatened to “kick the living s—t out of [him].” On one occasion, she grabbed him by the neck, threw him on the floor, and beat his head against the arm of a parlor chair. To further explain the abuse he was subjected to, John described Elizabeth’s physical characteristics. He asserted that Elizabeth was “remarkably husky,” weighing 205 pounds, and characterized her as an “Amazon of a woman, a female titan.” John made it clear that “It is somewhat of a humiliation to me to have to talk about my wife’s physical prowess, but I am not exaggerating.” Elizabeth “was a completely domineering female and unreasonably jealous.”<sup>48</sup>

John explained that the “whole situation was ugly and constant and hopeless. I just felt that I had tried to make it a go long enough. She helped me make up my mind...by attempting to physically evict me, throwing my clothes out, demanding a divorce, etc. etc.” Unlike the respondents to the KLS, John could not endure his wife’s mistreatment any longer. Indeed, Elizabeth’s harmful actions pushed John away, compelling him to legally dissolve their marriage. In his testimony, John reported that he was so afraid of returning home to Elizabeth that he would sleep in his car some nights.<sup>49</sup> John sought liberation from his abusive marriage. He could not withstand Elizabeth’s physical violence and emotional distance; to him, this was no longer a marriage. After being granted a divorce, John was free of Elizabeth’s threats and assaults—and the psychological toll these took on him.

Yet it was women who bore the brunt of domestic violence in this decade. In 1950, Grace sought a divorce from her husband Paul, whom she had married in January of 1948. Paul was not only abusive to Grace, but also to their young son, Dennis. Grace described one occasion during which she heard the baby crying and screaming from the other room, only to find Paul “beating

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<sup>48</sup> Case 287, Lebanon County, 1953.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

the baby on the back with his fist.” Grace grabbed the child and ran to a neighbors’ house. Upon examination, Dennis had welts on his body and Grace feared he had broken bones. Later that night, Grace returned home with the neighbor. Paul acted remorseful, but once the neighbor left, he threatened to hit Grace for going to get help. Grace recounted another incident which took place in December of 1949: “One night, shortly before Christmas, 1949, my sister and her husband came to visit us. My husband refused to let me see them and shoved me into the house. He was in a rage for the rest of the night. He threatened to kill me and began looking around the house for an ice-pick. I got the baby and locked myself in the bedroom. Later I went out and found the ice-pick and hid it.” Sometime later, on Christmas Eve, Paul came home—drunk—with a friend. Grace stated that, “My husband began to get mad and say dirty things about me.” Paul stepped outside briefly and when he came back in, he accused Grace of being unfaithful with this friend. Paul punched Grace in the face, knocking her down, and then left the house. When he returned later that night, Grace reported that he was so drunk he was almost unconscious.<sup>50</sup>

Paul’s abuse was multi-faceted, and it is no wonder that Grace sought to be free from him. Paul isolated Grace from family and neighbors to control her and hide his maltreatment. He humiliated Grace by acting crudely to her sister and brother-in-law, and by making sexual comments about her to his friend. The master in his case reported that Paul drank "constantly and intemperately," and his assaults were fueled by alcohol use.<sup>51</sup> Grace lived in a never-ending state of dread: “He has threatened my life many times as well as the baby. When he is mad he loses all his senses. I am in constant fear of what he might do to me or the baby. After one of his rages I

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<sup>50</sup> Case 137, Lebanon County, 1950.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

am usually so sick that I vomit.”<sup>52</sup> Like the women profiled earlier, Grace became physically ill from the anxiety and misery caused by Paul’s outbursts. For Grace, divorce was a matter of life and death. It was a recourse to escape a physically and emotionally abusive marriage. By seeking a divorce, Grace regained control over her life and true security for herself and her son.

Another woman who had a similar experience was Adaline, who sought a divorce from her husband Fred in 1953. Fred was both physically and verbally abusive to Adaline throughout their twenty-four-year marriage. When they were first married, Fred worked repairing and selling electrical appliances. Although this naturally kept him away from home, Adaline was concerned when he would return later than he had said he would—reeking of alcohol. When Adaline confronted Fred about this, arguments would ensue. In her testimony, she reported that, “Often, he would strike me with his fists and many times gave me black eyes or black-and-blue marks.” Fred quit working in 1945 or 1946 due to poor health. Yet, “he continued drinking regularly though, and, of course, this was the cause of many more arguments because I had taken over full responsibility of supporting the home.” Even so, Fred expected that Adaline retain her role as homemaker: “Even though I was working in a factory every day and doing the housework too, when I failed to do some work around the house which my husband considered necessary, he would become very insulting and tell me that I was just ‘too damn lazy’ to do the work.” One particularly violent incident of abuse occurred when Adaline accused Fred of being unfaithful to her:

Some time [sic] in October of 1951 my husband and I had an argument over the woman who lived next door. I had reason to believe that the woman had been seeing my husband while I was at work because he was home all day and when I mentioned this to my husband he became angry and accused me of being jealous and surmising things. Then he picked up the smoking stand, which was close by him, and slung it at me, hitting me on the forehead with the base of the smoking stand. The cut required twelve stitches to close it.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Fred was emotionally abusive to Adaline as well:

I was too embarrassed by him to go out in public with him for the last years that we lived together. I remember on one occasion we went to a supper in Richland and we met two men who had worked with my husband at the Levino Furnaces and in introducing me to the two men he said, 'What do you think of my fat slob?' He insulted me on several other occasions when we were out with people about my being stout.

Fred threatened to hit Adaline constantly, and she stated in several places in her testimony how afraid she was of her husband. In her closing, Adaline declared that she had "held out for twenty-four years of cruelty and embarrassment, which I feel is quite long enough. I just don't want to take it any longer—having to support him while he runs around and gets drunk. I am even afraid to live with him any longer because of the threats he has made against me and the treatment he has given me."<sup>53</sup>

Faced with such abuse, Adaline ultimately sought to divorce Fred. Not only did he cause Adaline great physical harm, but he humiliated her by insulting her in front of others. Adaline's refusal to go out with him in public for the last several years of their marriage demonstrates how deeply Fred damaged her self-esteem. Like Paul in the previous case, Fred's assaults were also accompanied by excessive alcohol use. When Adaline attempted to confront Fred about this, his violence towards her only intensified; the couple was caught in a cycle of alcoholism and abuse. Adaline's closing remarks reveal her vexation and her profound desire to be liberated from Fred. Otherwise, she feared what might happen to her if his physical abuse continued to escalate. Divorce was Adaline's only recourse to escape such a cruel and demeaning marriage.

Yet Adaline's testimony exposes another key facet of Lebanon marriage in the 1950s: the expectation that the gendered roles of breadwinner and homemaker would be upheld by each spouse. Adaline was upset that Fred no longer worked and provided for the family, while Fred

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<sup>53</sup> Case 279, Lebanon County, 1953.

insulted Adaline when he felt that she was not properly maintaining the home. This case exhibits, however, that gendered norms were often broken in the lived experiences of 1950s marriages. Significantly, Fred's inability to work compelled Adaline to take on the role of breadwinner in addition to her homemaking duties. Her comments show that she resented supporting Fred financially—in addition to taking care of the home—while he did not fulfill his responsibilities in return.

#### **IV. Gender Expectations**

But why did Americans embrace traditional gender roles with such enthusiasm in the postwar years? May contends that Cold War anxieties pressed Americans to seek security and stability somewhere in their lives. Thus, they turned to domesticity and highly structured roles for women and men within the home. May explains that, “As the chill of the cold war settled across the nation, Americans looked toward the uncertain future with visions of carefully planned and secure homes, complete with skilled homemakers and successful breadwinners. The fruits of prosperity could make the family strong; the family, in turn, could protect the nation by containing the frightening potentials of postwar life.”<sup>54</sup> The home provided safety from the perils of the cold war, and women and men found immense purpose in their domestic roles in this period.

The dichotomy of homemaker and breadwinner also established clear expectations within marriage. Men anticipated that their wives would tend to the home and children, while women counted on their husbands to work outside of the home for wages that would provide the family with the basic necessities of life. These expectations were so ingrained in them that when these

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<sup>54</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 88.

norms were broken by a spouse, the predominantly working-class women and men of central Pennsylvania felt justified in seeking an end to their marriages. In these examples, the legal authorities within the county agreed that such violations of gender roles constituted grounds for divorce. However, when one spouse violated gender norms, this necessitated a reconfiguration of roles and responsibilities within the marriage. When faced with a spouse who did not fulfill his or her marital responsibilities, the women and men of Lebanon County combined breadwinning and homemaking in order to take care of themselves and their families. Thus, while homemaking for women and breadwinning for men remained the ideal, these two roles were often amalgamated by spouses in the lived experiences of 1950s marriages.

When women did not adequately fulfill their role as homemaker, men in Lebanon County listed these transgressions as some of the reasons why they were seeking a divorce. Moreover, husbands had to take on the responsibilities of the home when these went neglected by wives. Men in this situation expressed resentment and the frustrations of pulling double duty—working outside of the home and tending to chores and children within the home. One example comes from a divorce that was granted in 1950. Starting in the summer of 1948, Victor noticed a change in his wife Betty's behavior after four years of marriage. In his testimony, he stated, "my wife was not keeping the house as clean as she formerly had nor was she taking care of the children the way she used to." On several occasions when Victor asked Betty to change the baby's dirty diaper, "she became very much annoyed and after taking the wet diaper off would throw it at me scoring a bull's eye right in the face, as I was not expecting it." Victor was ashamed to invite company over because of the mess, and embarrassed when friends and family called unannounced. Finally, the house and children got so filthy that Victor had to take on the duties of the homemaker role. This included cleaning the house, doing the laundry, and bathing the

children.<sup>55</sup> For Victor, taking on the responsibilities of caring for the home and children due to his wife's dereliction constituted indignities to his person. It was part of the reason why he sought a divorce.

Victor's sister Marian and brother-in-law Paul echoed Victor's concerns about Betty's neglected duties. Paul agreed that Betty stopped looking after the house or the children. He stated that Betty "was very dissatisfied and definitely not interested in her home, her husband and the children." Paul made it clear that Victor "supported her properly and got nothing in return."<sup>56</sup> Thus, Victor held up his end of the marital bargain by fulfilling his role as the breadwinner—yet Betty did not conform to her role in return. Victor's sister Marian described the deplorable conditions of the house and children in her witness statement. She affirmed that the house was so dirty that it smelled, and the children were often sick. In portraying Betty, Marian declared that, "Any person who acts the way she did, has nothing but hatred in her heart for the man she is supposed to love and obey."<sup>57</sup> Paul and Marian defined what Betty's function should be in her marriage: to take care of the home and accept whatever Victor wanted. Because Betty did not conform to this, both Paul and Marian agreed that Victor should be permitted to end the marriage. The master assigned to the case concurred and Victor was granted the divorce.

A similar example comes from a case in 1959, proving that these gendered expectations of marriage lasted throughout the 1950s. Herbert and Mary Jane were first married in August of 1947. This case is interesting in that the couple was granted a divorce in 1952 yet decided to remarry in 1956. Herbert's complaint outlined the reasons they needed a second divorce. Herbert requested another divorce from Mary Jane in part because she neglected her duties as a

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<sup>55</sup> Case 26, Lebanon County, 1950.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

homemaker. Herbert was an Aviation Boatswain's Mate, 3<sup>rd</sup> Class, in the United States Navy. For a time, he was stationed in Philadelphia; he would stay there during the week and come home to his wife in central Pennsylvania on the weekends. Herbert would return only to find that Mary Jane had ignored her responsibilities around the home. He explained that, "I spent a large portion of every weekend cleaning up the house so that it would not be too filthy. In addition to which, on many occasions, I did the washing and ironing when I came home on weekends; otherwise it never would have gotten done." Herbert claimed that, "My wife had no desire to make a home for me. She was deliberately negligent in her housekeeping."<sup>58</sup> For Herbert, pulling the double duty of working outside of the home all week and within the home all weekend was too much to bear, and signified that he was better off divorced than married to Mary Jane.

The testimony of Herbert's sister-in-law, Julia, affirmed Mary Jane's indifference to her domestic role. Julia corroborated that the home was always filthy, and that Herbert would have to do the cleaning and laundry when he was home on the weekends from Philadelphia. Herbert was then sent to Guam in June of 1957. Mary Jane refused to go live with him there, despite the Navy providing Herbert with family housing overseas. Julia and her husband tried to call on Mary Jane in Pennsylvania while Herbert was in Guam. But Mary Jane was never home, and the children were filthy and left in the care of a 12- or 13-year-old boy. Julia stated that, "From June until September of 1957 I know that Herbert sent her \$545.00 in addition to her Navy allotment from his pay. I have seen the money order receipts for this. In spite of this, the children were ill kept." Thus, Julia was explicit that Herbert went above and beyond to carry out his responsibilities as the breadwinner, even while stationed overseas. Even though he kept up his end of the marital bargain by providing for his family, Mary Jane still refused to perform her

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<sup>58</sup> Case 116, Lebanon County, 1959.

domestic duties, demonstrated by her lack of care of the children. In addition, Julia affirmed that Herbert was a good husband and father.<sup>59</sup> Once again, marital roles were defined not only by the participants in the marriage, but by outsiders as well. This signifies how ubiquitous gendered expectations of marriage were in the 1950s. Because Herbert upheld the breadwinner role while Mary Jane spurned the homemaker one, Julia believed Herbert should be able to end his martial relationship with Mary Jane once and for all.

Although Kelly asked about a spouse's excessive alcohol use in his study, this data did not appear significant to May, as she does not mention it in her analysis. But for the women and men of Lebanon County, many plaintiffs seeking a divorce point to the ways in which the excessive use of alcohol influenced their spouse's behavior and prevented success in marriage. While alcohol fueled instances of domestic violence in men, as shown above, many plaintiff husbands claimed that their wives neglected their duties as homemaker when they drank to excess. Taken together, these behaviors were intolerable and constituted indignities to the person. An example of such a case is the divorce of Carl and Eunice. Eunice's excessive alcohol use started early on in their marriage—on their wedding day, to be exact. According to Carl, Eunice drank to the point of blackout on their wedding night, picking a fight with Carl and then remembering nothing she said or did the next morning. Carl would find empty beer cans under the bed and in the closet of their home, and he alleged that Eunice spent her Army wife allotment check on drinking parties while he was at work. Carl declared that Eunice's exorbitant alcohol use interfered with her ability to be a homemaker. She did not clean, make the bed, or cook any meals for Carl. Eventually, he confronted her: "I asked her to stop having the drinking parties and help make the house a home, but she just laughed at me and called me names. I saw that she

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

would never change so I moved back to the [Army] base where I could at least have a clean bed and regular meals.”<sup>60</sup> From Carl’s perspective, Eunice chose drinking and partying over her expected duties as a homemaker. Moreover, she was irresponsible in spending the money Carl made as the breadwinner on alcohol.

In addition to completing the myriad tasks involved with taking care of the home and children, wives were expected to play a deeper role in supporting their husbands. As May explains, the respondents to the KLS “believed that a successful marriage depended on a committed partnership between a successful breadwinner and his helpmate.”<sup>61</sup> May defines the notion of the wife as helpmate by explaining that “most of the KLS respondents believed that the success of their marriages would rest largely on the ability of the husband to provide for his wife and children, and for the wife to help the breadwinner establish himself.”<sup>62</sup> What was good for the husband was good for the entire family, as husbands must succeed in the working world to be able to provide for their wives and children. Thus, wives needed to support their husbands’ endeavors outside of the home, even at the cost of their own feelings and ambitions. The ideal of the wife as helpmate was deeply ingrained in contemporary understandings of the homemaker role, as demonstrated in both plaintiff testimonies and master’s reports from the Lebanon County divorce cases. When wives impeded their husband’s professional success, this signified a breach of domestic obligations and was considered grounds for divorce—by husbands and the law. Husbands expressed frustration and regret surrounding missed opportunities. Further, the family’s financial situation could be put in peril, as such behavior interfered with the husband’s ability to carry out his role as the breadwinner.

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<sup>60</sup> Case 32, Lebanon County, 1950.

<sup>61</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 55.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

Echoing the sentiments of the upper-middle class respondents to the KLS, the concept of wife as helpmate was clearly articulated by Robert in 1953. Robert was a salesman whose work was severely impacted by his wife Emma's jealousy. Due to the nature of his career in sales, Robert would often have to entertain at home. In his testimony Robert explained that "while my wife never complained that it was extra work, etc., she nevertheless started to become very jealous of other men's wives if I paid even the slightest attention to them. It got to the point that she would ignore them and seem to crawl into her own shell, and yet, didn't like this either, because she would frequently express her jealousy and on one occasion, she deliberately broke a case in their presence in a display of jealousy and dislike." Because of Emma's behavior, Robert was ostracized by his friends and colleagues and compelled to take a position at a different company. Yet Emma's pattern kept repeating itself regardless of what firm Robert worked for. Emma's conduct made Robert so upset and nervous that it impacted the quality of his work; his superiors noticed this and threatened to fire him if his performance did not improve. After much humiliation, Robert realized that he could never have a job in sales that required that level of social interaction with co-workers and clients. For Robert, all of his disquiet was a direct result of Emma's actions:

It now became quite clear to me that my wife was a millstone rather than a helpmate and I felt that I certainly did more than my share in attempting to salvage and approve our marriage. After reviewing our marriage, I realized that there could be no hope of change in my wife's attitude and conduct, even though my livelihood was at stake, and I, therefore, decided that the break had to be made at this time, before I got the reputation of being unable to hold a job.<sup>63</sup>

That Emma had interfered so robustly in Robert's ability perform, let alone flourish, in his work constituted the major reason why he sought a divorce.

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<sup>63</sup> Case 338, Lebanon County, 1953.

Not only was Robert granted the divorce on the grounds of indignities to the person, but the master assigned to the case cited Emma's failure to act as a helpmate in the justification for his decision. In his report, the master stated that the "Defendant appeared to be totally incapable of adjusting her life to the demands of the plaintiff's life and career."<sup>64</sup> In order to fulfill her role as helpmate, Emma was expected to subvert any feelings of jealousy or inadequacy to support Robert's business interests. Beyond hindering Robert's career aspirations, Emma interfered with his role as the economic provider and thus threatened the family as an economic system. The master's statement here is significant because it represents marital responsibilities as understood by the legal authority of Lebanon County. It signifies that a wife who engaged in such conduct created an intolerable and burdensome life for her husband. In the eyes of both Robert and the law, Emma's complete disregard for her husband's role as the breadwinner represented a flouting of a key aspect of the homemaker role, and thus an accepted reason why Robert could dissolve his marriage.

Another husband whose career was obstructed by his wife was Victor, who filed for divorce in 1950. Victor, who took pride in his work as a veterinarian, married his wife Reba in 1926. He began to notice a change in her behavior in 1932 after the couple moved to Jonestown, Pennsylvania. At this point, she stopped attending to her duties as a homemaker. Reba no longer kept the house or prepared any meals. Nor did she seem interested in Victor's work. Victor reported that Reba was seldom at home when he was there. His friends told him that they had seen her out with other men, and these rumors hurt Victor's reputation within the community. Because Reba was often away from home, she missed important phone calls from clients. Sometimes she was careless in relaying messages to Victor. Moreover, Victor was embarrassed

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

when he discovered that Reba had been billing clients on her own and keeping the money for herself. Some customers became quite angry, thinking that Victor was attempting to double charge them. This debacle hurt Victor's business considerably. It is significant that Victor concluded his testimony by drawing the correlation between the satisfaction of his clients to his own personal happiness: "Since she has been gone my business has picked up, my clients are happy and I am certainly happier."<sup>65</sup> This demonstrates that Victor's happiness was deeply connected to his success at work; Reba's impediment to this caused a deep dissatisfaction with the marriage. Victor sought the divorce from Reba because of the myriad ways in which she hindered his ability to advance in his profession. She obstructed his ability to make money and damaged both his personal and professional reputation. With Reba out of his life, Victor was able to focus on rebuilding his business and his life.

Victor was granted the divorce. The master used the language of wife as helpmate in order to explain his legal recommendation. In his report, the master stated that Victor needed "a real helpmate" given his profession as a veterinarian, but Reba "defiantly ignored her duties as a faithful and affectionate wife, helpmate, and housekeeper." Although the grounds for divorce in this case was Reba's eventual desertion, the master explained that "these numerous affronts and indignities" strengthened Victor's claim.<sup>66</sup> According to the ideal of the helpmate wife, Reba was expected to devote all of her energies to support her husband's career. In reality, she did the opposite, undermining Victor's business interests and tarnishing his reputation in the community. Thus, Reba did not fulfill her obligations as a wife—not only in her husband's estimation, but according to the legal codes of central Pennsylvania as well.

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<sup>65</sup> Case 13, Lebanon County, 1950

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Another man who relished his work outside the home was Frank. Frank married his wife June after he had been discharged from the Army in 1946. Early on in their marriage, Frank owned a soda fountain, which June helped him to run. However, June's attitude towards the business changed rather abruptly in the early 1950s. She complained that the soda fountain took up too much of her time. Frank sold it for a loss in March of 1952, but this did not prevent June from leaving him that same month. In his testimony, Frank stated that he always upheld his role as the breadwinner, giving June no cause to treat him as she did. "I always worked hard," Frank explained, "probably too hard to suit her, because I did put a lot of time in our business."<sup>67</sup> In June's estimation, Frank was overly enthusiastic about this venture and dedicated too much time to his breadwinning role. Yet it is evident that Frank cared deeply about his business and wanted it to succeed. He had hoped that June would be his helpmate in running the soda fountain. But her caprice compelled Frank to sell the business at a loss and take a less profitable job as a gas station attendant. In the end, Frank lost both the employment that gave him meaning and the partner he had intended to share his triumphs with.

But just as husbands had great expectations for their wives, so too did wives count on men to fulfill their role as breadwinners. In many ways, marriage was still at its core an economic institution, despite all of the new expectations for personal fulfillment that abounded in the 1950s. When husbands did not work, their wives could be propelled into destitution. Wives who found themselves in this situation faced difficult choices. Some women flew in the face of prescribed gender roles in order to provide for themselves and their children. But when women took on work outside the home to support their families, they often found that they could not count on their husbands to pick up the slack in caring for the home and children.

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<sup>67</sup> Case 307, Lebanon County, 1953.

One such woman was Ethel, who sought a divorce from her husband Robert in 1950. The couple met when Robert was stationed at the Indiantown Gap Army Base in 1943 and were married in the spring of 1944. After leaving the Army, Robert could not hold down a job for more than a few months at a time. When Ethel was let go from her waitressing job because Robert refused to let her work the night shift, the couple took a position helping to run the Testa vacation cabins. However, Ethel declared in her testimony that Robert had “never taken kindly to work” and the couple was fired after three months. At this point, Robert moved his wife and two small children into an unused streetcar. To make ends meet, Ethel took a job at the Hershey Chocolate Factory. Robert stopped looking for work altogether. Ethel entrusted Robert to “baby-sit” the children, but she would often come home to find them alone or in the care of neighbors. Most of her wages went to babysitters or for Robert’s streetcar trips, as he insisted that Ethel could not travel into Hershey by herself. Robert also spent Ethel’s money to go to the movies or out drinking. During this period, the family frequently did not have enough to eat, and neighbors helped out with groceries and other necessary household items.<sup>68</sup> In neglecting his role as breadwinner, Robert plunged his family into poverty and homelessness. Consequently, Ethel was compelled to take on the position of breadwinner. This was a difficult choice to make; it left her two young children in a precarious situation, as Robert proved incapable of caring for them on his own.

The master assigned to the case granted Ethel the divorce. In his report, the master uses the homemaker/breadwinner dichotomy as a framework for his legal opinion. He stated that Robert was “completely oblivious and indifferent to the responsibilities of a breadwinner, father and husband.” Meanwhile, throughout the marriage Ethel “showed unfailing devotion and

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<sup>68</sup> Case 114, Lebanon County, 1950.

energy, based on her firm determination as a loving mother and wife.”<sup>69</sup> Here, the master made explicit that Ethel was entitled to a divorce because she upheld her domestic duties while Robert skirted his. This demonstrates that prescribed gender roles in marriage were so ingrained in the 1950s that they were embedded into the legal structure of Pennsylvania. Although Ethel was obliged to take on the breadwinner role, she was permitted to terminate her marriage because of Robert’s disregard for his familial obligations.

A similar example is the 1959 divorce of Doris and Anthony. Doris stated in her testimony that Anthony “was continuously swearing and he worked when he felt like it. I always worked except when I was carrying the children.” Doris explained that Anthony would often go out with his friends during the week, so if he was still drunk the next morning, he simply would not go into work that day. In the last year of their marriage, Doris worked in the evenings and Anthony was supposed to watch the couple’s two daughters. Anthony would let the children run in the street or place them in the care of his sister. Doris expressed frustration that she supported Anthony financially while he simply caroused around. She declared that Anthony “didn’t accept any responsibilities in the household and he would ignore me and the children.” Finally, Doris left Anthony in October of 1957 “because it was just impossible to live with him anymore.”<sup>70</sup> Like Ethel in the previous case, Doris took on the breadwinning role in her marriage while leaving her children in the careless hands of her husband. Doris was granted the divorce, with the master citing Anthony’s “lack of steady support” as part of the reason for his legal recommendation.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Case 130, Lebanon County, 1959.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Like the women profiled earlier, both women in the above cases expressed relief at being emancipated from the bonds of matrimony. Ethel reflected, “As I look back on my life, I am unable to understand how I could live under the circumstances as long as I did.”<sup>72</sup> In her testimony, Doris was more explicit about the toll of her husband’s neglect on her sense of self: “All his late hours and missing work made me work to help the household. I wanted to better myself but he was content to live from day to day....I have never felt so good as when I left him.”<sup>73</sup> Ethel and Doris’ expressions of liberation demonstrate that not all 1950s housewives were content with lowering their expectations and living a lifetime of subordination. These women did their best to adhere to the prescribed gender roles they thought would provide security in the postwar world. But when their husbands failed to fulfill their duty as provider, these wives sought redress by ending their marriages. Unlike the upper-middle class respondents in the KLS survey, women like Ethel and Doris had more to gain and less to lose by seeking a divorce. Because of the legal framework of divorce in Pennsylvania, women could exert power over their own lives by exiting abusive marriages.

In *Homeward Bound*, May stresses that divorce was not considered a viable option for many respondents of the KLS who were less than satisfied with their marriages. She points to the social pressures placed on individuals by the media: “These were years when countless articles in the popular press warned of the evils of divorce. Those whose marriages ended in divorce were deemed ‘selfish,’ ‘irresponsible,’ and ‘immature.’”<sup>74</sup> Yet it was for these exact reasons that several women in Lebanon County sought a divorce from their husbands. These women claimed that their husbands were selfish, irresponsible, and immature within marriage. Such husbands

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<sup>72</sup> Case 114, Lebanon County, 1950.

<sup>73</sup> Case 130, Lebanon County, 1959.

<sup>74</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 193.

made decisions that rendered life intolerable for their wives; consequently, these wives looked to the county to end their marriages. In many cases, the legal authorities agreed that a husband's reckless actions constituted indignities to the person and granted plaintiff wives the divorce.

One such case was the divorce of Adelene and William. The couple was married in 1947, and Adelene filed for divorce in 1956. After they were married, William would not get out of bed to go to work, sometimes for several days in a week. When William did not go to work, he did not earn any wages; thus, the couple did not have enough money to pay their bills. One day, William came home saying he had quit his job in Harrisburg, but Adelene suspected that he had been fired for not showing up. After that, William bounced around to many different jobs. He moved the family to St. Louis so that he could attend diesel engineering school. But the stresses of attending school while working proved to be too much for William, and he dropped out of the program. The couple went back to Lebanon to live with Adelene's parents, who supported the young family. William then decided he would enlist in the Army, but he did so as a single man. Because he did not tell the Army that he had a wife and child, there was no allotment set up for Adelene. When William told the Army about his family, he was dishonorably discharged. Then, William decided he would use his mustering out pay from the Army to enroll in race driver's school. Finally, in December of 1955, William borrowed \$400 from a finance company and skipped town. He had been living in Florida ever since.<sup>75</sup>

Adelene's testimony reveals an ambivalent attitude towards her situation. She explained that, "I do not like the idea of getting a divorce but I am convinced that my husband will never change and that being married to him would mean that I would only have to support him in addition to his children."<sup>76</sup> This highlights the decisions wives were faced with in the 1950s

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<sup>75</sup> Case 326, Lebanon County, 1956.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

when their marriages did not provide fulfillment and security. She tired of taking on William's responsibilities in the marriage in addition to her own. Unlike the respondents in the KLS, Adelene could no longer lower her expectations and settle into a bad marriage. Although she might have been ideologically opposed to divorce, Adelene recognized that dissolving her marriage would provide her with more freedom and opportunity. Thus, she pursued a divorce.

Beyond failing to fulfill his breadwinning role, William made some profoundly irresponsible choices. Adelene was granted the divorce, and the master explained in his report how William's carelessness led him to make this recommendation. In regard to William pursuing race driving school, he stated that, "This hardly seems to your Master to be the type of education a husband and father should pursue." And even in this frivolous pursuit, William was unsuccessful. The master continued: "As a matter of fact, the Defendant husband here seems to have done just about everything a husband should not do."<sup>77</sup> Here, William's actions went beyond a mere lack of support. There was a demonstrable pattern to his behavior: he constantly pursued choices that appealed to him while disregarding what was best for Adelene and the children. William's selfish and irresponsible decisions proved to be sufficient grounds for divorce according to the legal authorities of Lebanon County.

## **V. Conclusion**

Divorce was a recourse employed by the working-class community of Lebanon County, Pennsylvania when the expectations of marriage went unmet. In the 1950s, divorce was used as a tool of empowerment and liberation, especially for women. Both women and men left marriages where there was emotional and sexual infidelity. Women in particular sought a divorce when a

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

husband was verbally, physically, or sexually abusive. The women and men in the Lebanon County sample also sought a divorce when their spouse did not live up to gendered expectations within marriage, which centered around a division of labor based on biological sex. Women were expected to be the homemakers, caring for the home and the children, while men were expected to be breadwinners, working outside of the home for wages in order to provide basic economic necessities for the family. However, the reality of working-class gender norms within marriage often did not live up to the upper-middle class ideal. This is further demonstrated by the fact that the women and men in Lebanon County often had to combine homemaking and breadwinning to support themselves and their families when their spouse failed to fulfill their obligations. Through its regulation of marriage and divorce, the state outlined and reinforced the expectations of marriage—including and especially gender roles and responsibilities. This is demonstrated in the reports of masters who sympathized with plaintiffs' concerns and issued divorces in these cases.

In the Introduction to *Not June Cleaver*, Joanne Meyerowitz raises an essential historical question for scholars of women in the 1950s. According to the dominant narrative, “postwar conservatism shaped women’s identities, weakened their limited protests, and contained their activities within traditional bounds.”<sup>78</sup> However, a reinterpretation of this period highlights the undercurrents of change that began to emerge and culminated in the Women’s Liberation Movement. So, was the 1950s a decade of repression or transformation for American women? In the Lebanon sample, women in particular voiced their concerns about the “traditional” marriage arrangement. Further, the spouses in Lebanon County rehearsed new ways in which marital roles and responsibilities might be divided. Although the sharing of homemaking and breadwinning

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<sup>78</sup> Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver*, 3.

might have been born out of necessity, these experiments paved the way for how responsibilities are delegated in modern marriages. Thus, through all of the ways in which women critiqued their marriages and fashioned new expectations for marital fulfillment outside of the homemaker/breadwinner dichotomy, we can see that the 1950s as quite transformational for women.

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