

The Stepford Wives: a Jewish American Novel

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The Stepford Wives presents a disturbing vision of America as a country where men destroy women and replace them with robots in order to simulate a non-existent past lifestyle. The novel eerily recalls the Nazis' annihilation of Jews in order to simulate Germany's imagined past glory. Jewish American writer Ira Levin places women in the role of "aliens" in American society which corresponds to the historical role of Jews in Gentile societies. Joanna Eberhart's realization that she is marked for extinction evokes terror similar to that of Jews targeted by Nazis. References to Nazis in the novel reinforce this connection. Levin adheres to the tradition of Jewish writers when he prophesies of the danger of a violent response to the women's liberation movement and portrays Joanna's dark humor as a means of resistance to oppression.

In the 1972 novel, Joanna and Walter Eberhart and their children move from New York City to a home in Stepford, Connecticut, where most of the women in the town are uninterested in the Women's Liberation Movement and are solely interested in household chores and pleasing their husbands. Joanna slowly realizes that members of the all-male Stepford Men's Association are surreptitiously replacing the members' wives one at a time with robots who look like their murdered wives.

In *The Stepford Wives*, the powerful patriarchy targets women because the men are threatened by women's demands for equality. Similarly, Nazis

destroyed Jews because they felt threatened by non-Aryans. The novel takes place during the battle of the sexes in America in the 1970s. Levin's association of women with Jews draws on the stereotype of the Jewish man as effeminate. As Jacques Derrida notes: "'the figure of the Jew and the figure of the woman have often been associated . . . the Jew is the feminization or femininity of society, the threat to all the virile values that govern a community'" (qtd. in Weber 48–49). The epigraph of *The Stepford Wives*, from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* warns that men may react negatively to a woman trying to escape from the prison of her position as property in society: "'it is with a bad grace that the man lets her go'" (qtd. in Epigraph). Beauvoir notes in her treatise that a married woman "fails to find complete security in her home" because it is surrounded by a male-dominated society: "she feels anxious; lying half asleep at night" (570). *The Stepford Wives* warns women that challenging the patriarchy may provoke a reaction similar to that of the Nazis toward Jews.

The connection between the Stepford Men's Association and Nazis is established early in the novel, when on a tour of Stepford, Joanna's son, Pete Eberhart, sees the Association's house and says: "'Boy they've got a great big fence! . . . Like in *Hogan's Heroes!*'" (12). The reference to the comedy about a Nazi prison camp evokes a sense of danger, connects the Association with Nazis, and highlights how Americans minimize the horrors of Nazi prison camps in media representations. During the same tour of the town, Joanna notices "the you'd-never-guess-what-it-is-from-the-outside non-polluting incinerator

plant” (10). Later in the novel, when Joanna realizes that the men are replacing women with robots, she asks Walter, ““what happens to the real [wives]? The incinerator?’” (105). This recalls the Nazi crematoria which efficiently burned the corpses of millions of murdered Jews.

Like the Nazi Party, the Stepford Men's Association consists of a relatively small group of men who destroy alien non-conformists through the sinister use of technology. They use audio-animation technology developed by Disneyland to create robots that act and speak remarkably “lifelike” (94) and which kill the real women they replicate. When Joanna tries to escape and is trapped by the men of Stepford, one of them suggests, ““Suppose one of these women you think is a robot . . . was to cut herself on the finger, and bleed. Would *that* convince you she was a real person?’” (114). Joanna goes to her friend Bobbie's house so Bobbie can cut herself. The robot Bobbie beckons Joanna to come closer. Joanna observes that Bobbie is “so real-looking—skin, eyes, hair, hands, rising-falling aproned bosom—that she *couldn't* be a robot, she simply *couldn't* be, and that was all there was to it” (118). Until this point in the novel, the story is told through Joanna's point of view. After this chilling scene, the narrator changes to another woman's point of view, signaling that Joanna has been killed by the robot Bobbie. This malevolent use of technology is similar to the Nazis' use of technology like gas chambers and crematoria to murder millions of Jews.

As Joanna discovers the truth about the men in her community, her

behavior and thoughts are similar to the thoughts of Jews who see danger everywhere and yet question their feelings of fear. The Men's Association is closed to women, which is vaguely threatening to Joanna. She attempts to photograph what is happening in the Association's house at night through open lit windows and is distracted by a policeman. She concludes the policeman must have "radioed a message about her, and then he had stalled her with his questions while the message was acted on, the shades pulled down" (46). She immediately questions her sanity, thinking, "*Oh come on, girl, you're getting nutty!*" (46). Throughout the novel, Joanna struggles with conflicting emotions: a fear of the men and a sense that it is crazy to think the men are a danger. Similarly, Jews stayed in Germany prior to the Holocaust despite warning signs because they did not believe the severity of the threat posed by the Nazis. Joanna becomes uneasy with members of the Men's Association when the New Projects Committee members meet at her home and invite Joanna to join them. As the reader comes to realize later in the novel, the new project the men are working on is replacing Joanna with a robot. Although she is unaware of their intentions, the men's demeanor makes Joanna feel uncomfortable and objectified. As association member and famous illustrator, Ike Mazzard, draws sketches of her, she thinks, "Try being Gloria Steinem when Ike Mazzard is drawing you!" yet she feels "as if she were naked, as if Mazzard were drawing her in obscene poses" (28–29). The drawings by Ike Mazzard are presumably

depictions of what the robot that replaces Joanna will look like. This robot is similar to Joanna but more sexually provocative. Jane Elliott observes that, although Freud interpreted uncanny doubling as a threat of castration for men, this novel presents the uncanny robot double as a “gendered threat to the autonomy of women” (40).

Joanna and the other women in the novel who seek equality refuse to do housework, dress in ways their husbands find unflattering, and expect their husbands to help with cooking meals and caring for the children. The men of Stepford replace their wives with robots that reflect false commercial advertising representations of women. The robot replacement wives, like women in commercials, are designed for housework, child rearing, caring for their husbands, and sex. The robots are “Pretty actresses, big in the bosom but small in the talent, playing suburban housewives unconvincingly, too nicey-nice to be real” (43). They are simulacra, false copies, of the women they replace. Jean Baudrillard observes: “simulation . . . is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (169). The men regard their wives as commodities. The real wives are imperfect commodities which the Stepford men trade for wives that exhibit more of the features they desire. The advertisers’ portrayals of a mythical American wife induce men to desire wives that are like those depicted on television. The men act on a nostalgic belief that women were once like those depicted in commercials. Baudrillard explains: “when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia

assumes its full meaning” and “myths of origin and signs of reality” proliferate (174). The women in the commercials never existed, so the novel questions the concept of what is “real” and proves that “simulation . . . is still and always the place of a gigantic enterprise of manipulation, of control and of death” (Baudrillard 185). Like the Stepford men who scapegoat the women and destroy them out of a nostalgic desire to return to an idyllic past, Nazis scapegoated Jews and set out to exterminate them in the hopes of returning to a falsely idyllic vision of a prior historic period of German glory. Levin shows how false cultural messages favoring conformity are dangerous for non-conformists.

Joanna is the only woman to figure out what the men are doing and this may be because she is a photographer, i.e. an observer of her community. Joanna plays the role of witness, a traditional role of Jews in society. Elisabeth Weber notes: “If the program of what was called the ‘Final Solution’ had as its aim the extinction of the Jews and of all traces that could keep the memory of them, it was also seeking to abolish the ‘witnesses of witnessing’—a name that, for Jean-François Lyotard, could be given to the Jews” (17). Derrida notes that Jews have “‘a duty to try to understand how [the Holocaust] was possible, without being content with the images and the conventional concepts that circulate on the subject’” (qtd. in Weber 45). This duty to understand the Holocaust drives Jewish American writers like Levin to write novels like *The Stepford Wives* which bear witness to the dangers of xenophobia and examine the social forces that may lead to genocide.

One reason for the Stepford men's actions is that men and women coexist but are foreign to each other, similar to the co-existence of Jews and Gentiles. In *The Stepford Wives*, the men regard their wives as foreign, in part because the women refuse to conform to the advertising messages of how they should behave. Walter and the men of Stepford murder the alien nonconformist wives in order to regain control of their situation. Similarly, Derrida notes that when he taught a class of German Jews and Gentiles long after the Holocaust, he observed: "The Jew remains absolutely foreign, infinitely foreign, to the German" (qtd. in Weber 46). Women and Jews occupy the position of alien or "other" in society.

To further explain the Stepford men's behavior, Levin relies on the theories of anthropologist Lionel Tiger, who published *Men in Groups* in 1969.¹ Tiger argues that all-male secret societies "are relatively pointed and exaggerated examples of human aggressive-cum-male-bonding propensities" and that membership in such groups stimulates "inter-group conflict" which "may be violent" (131). Tiger notes that when secret societies (like the Stepford Men's Association) are supported by the community, they may "emerge to defend a way of life from threats to cultural patterns, values, etc., implied by groups living in the same territory but defined as alien" (132). The police chief and all the prominent men in town are members of the Men's Association. When Joanna realizes what they are doing, she concludes "Every

Man [is] a threat" (109). The men in the Association use their power to exterminate the alien women. Similarly, less than forty years before the novel was published, Nazis exterminated millions of Jews they regarded as alien. The novel uses the specter of the Holocaust to warn Americans that the battle of the sexes may become sinister. Thus, the novel is prophetic, in the Jewish tradition of prophecy dating back to Isaiah and other Biblical prophets.

In addition to writing prophecy, Levin follows the Jewish tradition of using dark humor throughout *The Stepford Wives*. Joanna laughs when she realizes her predicament, which is a form of resistance familiar to the Jews. Laughter for the Jew is "more than gay frivolity," it is dark and a "defiant answer to the world's cruelties" (Ausubel xx). This humor is evident when Joanna reads an archived copy of a local newspaper article about Men's Association President Dale Coba's past work at Disneyland developing audio-animatronics: "Mr. Coba's work here will probably be less attention-getting than his work at Disneyland" (99). Joanna begins to giggle uncontrollably at this sentence, focusing on the word "probably." This newspaper article confirms Joanna's worst fears that the men are a threat to her existence and that they are able to act undetected, yet she cannot stop laughing. Laughter is her way of coping with an absurd situation that defies reason. Joanna displays this humor again when she sees the Christmas crèche display and asks the figures of Mary and Joseph, "'Do you talk too?'" (102). Dark humor is a very Jewish response to

absurdity, a tactic of resistance. Laughter and flippancy in response to the absurd hatred of a powerful oppressor serve to deny the oppressor the satisfaction of controlling the victim's response and to assert the victim's defiant humanity.

The Stepford Wives follows the Jewish writing tradition of witnessing oppression, warning of its danger, and employing humor as a tactic of resistance. The replacement of people with robots provokes questions of how those in power react to non-conformists. The novel asks what is real, what is the effect of simulation on the real, and how we are victims of our cultural myths. The American culture of simulation creates a situation where all Americans fail to match the images produced by our culture. Therefore, all Americans are non-conformists. Thus, the Jewish condition of "otherness" is the modern American condition. Jewish American writers like Ira Levin explore this aspect of American identity through witnessing, prophesying, and dark humor.

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