

# The Threat of the Spinster:

## An Analysis of the Single Childless Woman in a Modern Capitalist State

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## **Introduction**

The goal of this paper is to formally introduce an archetype that has, for the most part, been largely ignored in present discourse. Using Thomas Højrup's theory of Life Mode Analysis and Michel Foucault's definition of power as illustrated in his essays "The Subject and Power", "Objective and Method", and "Panopticism", I will attempt to show how she breaks away from the ideal and resists many of the methods used to control women. Accountable to neither man nor child and loosely tied to state structures, she is an escapee of the great Panopticon and, I believe, largely viewed as a threat to the modern capitalist state. The character to which I am referring is the Single Childless Woman (SCW).

At present time, there are no words in the English language that describes a woman who, by choice, remains unmarried and without child. The closest word one can use, spinster, implies that the woman is prudish, physically unattractive, or old. She is undesirable. Similar terms like "old maid" or "bachelor girl" are equally negative or awkward. They all imply that the woman who remains unattached tried and failed miserably in the game of love. Harsher criticisms imply that she was negligent in her duties as a woman in society.

The Women's Movement in both the United States and Europe did much in expanding the number of roles women can occupy outside the home. However, in spite of the many advances made since the nineteenth century, it is my theory that collectively we still define women in binary terms, based on familial bonds with individuals who have the ability to control her actions (i.e., those who have power over her). The primary relationships that this discussion focuses on is the husband / wife and child / mother bonds. Struggles form when a woman takes advantage of the opportunities now available and attempt to define herself separate from men or children. The omission of the SCW from discourse is one way we can view the conflict that is born from a state's attempt to control a growing population that is, as I will demonstrate shortly, largely uncontrollable.

## **What is Woman?**

If, according to Milton Singer in his essay "Signs of Self" that "there is no such thing as a sign in isolation, that every sign is a constituent of a sequential set of signs," (Singer, 1984 p.67) then it is necessary to first examine the definition of woman before we can discuss the SCW. We need to know what qualities she must possess to be considered the ideal. Only when we see what the SCW is not can we see what she truly is.

In one of the most popular texts, the Judeo-Christian bible, woman is described as man's subordinate. Formed from his rib, the first woman, Eve was created as a companion to the first man, Adam. When she separates from Adam, she is seduced by Satan in the Garden of Eden and introduced to sin. This religious allegory is still used to today, even by many who do not identify as Christian, to justify the impetus for women to marry. If Eve, the original woman, could not exist without Adam, then how can an ordinary woman, who is so much weaker than she, survive without a male protector?

In modern capitalist societies, women are still largely defined as supporters of men in the family unit. “Within the unit of production the head of the household was husband, father [...] their superior”(Højrup, 2003 p.44). If these are the roles men play in the capitalist state structure, then we must assume that the roles of woman is first wife, then mother, inferior to her male counterpart. In Thomas Højrup’s Life Mode Analysis, she either supplies and reproduces necessary labor (in the form of children) to the self-employed male occupying Life Mode 1, supplies additional income and “mans the home front” to the wage-earning male occupying Life Mode 2, or is an accessory that promotes her career professional husband in Life Mode 3. For each of the Life Modes, the self-employed, the wage-earner, and the career professional, women make it possible for the men to exist in their particular grouping.

#### For the Self-Employed:

According to Højrup, the goal of the self-employed is to sustain the family business and remain self-employed. As I stated earlier, women assist the self-employed man by reproducing children who will most likely become self-employed and continue the family business. While the definition of family for this particular Life Mode includes individuals who may or may not be blood relatives, the woman’s place as mother and manager of the home is unchanged. Today, she can be the head of the household, but this possibility did not exist until changes in property and inheritances laws gave women the legal right to own and inherit property. Additionally, even if she is the principal manager of the family enterprise, because of her unique physical capabilities and man’s inability to reproduce, the wife’s position as a mother or potential mother will always keep her tied to the home.

#### For the Wage-Earner:

Højrup states that the goal of the wage-earner is free time. Wage-earning work is the vehicle through which leisure time is achieved. If this is our starting point and, as I have shown earlier, the role of woman is wife, than it is reasonable to infer that a wage-earning woman should assist her husband in enjoying “the good life”. This means that she either labors in the job market so that the family has enough income to take time off from work or maintains the home so that her husband can enjoy it when he is not working. Children are less important since they are not needed for labor in the family business. But if they are present, she will most likely be the one attending to their needs so that her husband can enjoy them, not manage them. Indeed, Højrup states that,

“Women’s demands for reduced working hours, their low wages and many other inequalities, distortions, and unreasonable conditions on the labour market are indications that the *housewife life mode dominates* the women’s intricately composed life in the wage-earning population” (Højrup, 2003 p.44).

Let us assume that a woman who occupies the housewife life mode has her work and free time centered around the home, meaning that she works to make the home comfortable so that she and her family can enjoy being together. Unpaid housework, as opposed to participation in the labor market, is the means through which leisure time is achieved. If Højrup's assertion is true, that the conflicts women experience in the work force is due to the incompatibility of housewives working as wage-earners, then we see that the accepted norm is for women to remain in the home.

#### For the Career Professional:

For the self-employed and the wage-earner, women are expected to help their husbands in either continuing the family business or make the most of their free time. However, for the career professional, she is not only expected to stay in the home, but is required to do so for the sake of her husband's career. Similar to Life Mode 1, the career professional does not distinguish between work and leisure time for the time spent outside the place of employment is used to acquire additional skills and trades which will make them a valuable asset and improve their chances for advancement. Everything about the career professional, his wardrobe, language, and family, are pieces in his professional toolkit, used to establish himself as an irreplaceable employee. For this Life Mode, the wife works to present an impressionable home-front for her husband. "In families where the husband is on a career trajectory, the wife seems at first to be only a means for the career of the husband. From this point of view, she plays the role of a domestic servant" (Højrup, 2003 p.49).

From Højrup's discussion, we see that in a modern capitalist state structure, a woman's place is in the home, married to and supporting a man who labors in the workforce and producing children who grow up and become laborers themselves. The ideal woman can and often does enter the workforce, but according to the Life Mode Analysis, it is not to earn income for herself. Her paid work outside the home is a means to either sustain the family business or ensure leisure time with her husband and children. Her role as an employee should not supersede her roles as wife or mother, especially if she is married to a career professional since his livelihood is dependent upon the coordination of his work outside and her work within the home.

#### **What is the Single Childless Woman (SCW)?**

Now that we know what a woman is supposed to be, we can examine the SCW and see how she differs from the ideal.

I define the SCW as the end result of the Women's Movement, which began roughly in the early nineteenth century and secured for women, entrance to institutions of higher education, the right to vote and own property, equal pay, and access to reliable birth control. Because so many opportunities are available to her, men are no longer needed for financial security, and she can engage in sexual activity without fear of pregnancy, the SCW chooses to pursue personal and professional interests instead of those centered around men (finding and keeping a husband) or

children (birthing and rearing). Choice in this archetype is important since women who tried and failed to marry or have children have internalized their own controlling methods and at least attempted to live up to the established ideal. The SCW has outright rejected them and attempts to define herself in new and foreign ways. Most importantly, the SCW's choice to shun the traditional women's roles plays a large role in why the state views her as a threat.

### **Why is a married woman ideal?**

#### The ability to control

To understand why married mothers are revered and SCW's are scorned, we must now discuss power, its definition, and how it is applied to women in a modern state.

In his essay "The Subject and Power", Michel Foucault states, "The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between "partners" individual or collective; it is a way in which some act on the actions of others" (2002 p.340). Power is exerted through power relations, which can be defined as "the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in the latter, and conversely they are the internal conditions of these differentiations." (Foucault, Objective and Method, 1978 p.94). In other words, we can define power as the ability to control the actions of others, while allowing room for freedom of choice. This ability to control is exercised through relationships of inequality where this inequality is exploited to produce the desired behavior in the person who is a subject in the power relation.

Through this lens, we see that married women are prized because they are so easily controlled, not just by her husband, but also by the state through her husband. Before she is married she is expected to conduct herself in a manner that will demonstrate she is a good mate. Afterward, a woman is accountable to her husband and her actions are limited by what her husband deems acceptable behavior.

As the cost of living increases, a two-income family is ever more desirable for maintaining a comfortable lifestyle. While a husband can be dependent on her wages, because of income discrepancies, she is usually more dependent on his. Due to this inequality, it is in the woman's best interest to conduct herself in a manner that will preserve the security of the marriage. The typical married woman will not engage in illicit drug use, sleep with random strangers, gamble away her life savings, or roam the countryside as a transient, in part because her husband will not be her husband for very long. True, these are extreme examples, but even more innocuous behavior becomes taboo for a married woman such as frequenting nightclubs, wearing overtly sexual clothing, and binge drinking. The power that men exert over women through the power relation of marriage will help to ensure that women conduct themselves as productive, law abiding members of society even before the engagement.

Add children to the equation and we see even more power relations. I argue that in a mother / child relationship, it is the child that has power over the mother, not always the other way around. Pregnancy turns a woman into a womb and all her actions are determined by the child inside her. Limitations on her diet (abstaining from wine, shellfish, sushi, raw milk,) leisure activities (no strenuous exercise, hot tubs, or alcohol), and sometimes even people (any friends

that smoke are strictly forbidden) are everywhere, demonstrating that her desires and well being are less important than the child's. And if the mother-to-be forgets one of the many new rules placed on her, there are books, advertisements, friends, and even strangers that will quickly remind her of her duty to nurture and protect the precious fetus.

Once the child is born, the power relation between the new mother and father is further skewed in the father's favor. The dissolution of the marriage can and often does spell financial disaster for mothers and their children so she needs him more than ever to provide for her and the new child.

### Her place in the Panopticon

Foucault's Panopticon "is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form" (Foucault, Panopticism, 1979 p.205). To be in it is to know that someone is watching you, analyzing your behavior, and comparing you to other prisoners. When and for how long you are under the watchman's gaze is undeterminable, so the prisoner must always conduct him or herself in an appropriate fashion. A married mother is the ideal subject in part because the many layers of surveillance she is subjected to keep her firmly integrated into the state structure and a prisoner of the great Panopticon. If "surveillance is based on a system of permanent registration"(Foucault, Panopticism, 1979 p.196) then we see how the many activities that married mothers engage in keep them in full view of the watchtower. Marriage licenses, parent-teacher meetings, pediatrician's appointments, bridal registries, baby showers, joint tax returns, mortgages, all of these events document and control her actions. Husband, doctors, teachers, and other parents all act as watchmen, observing and judging her.

### **Why is the SCW a threat to the state?**

Instead of participating in production processes by supporting men in their capital earning activities and reproducing future laborers, the SCW establishes herself as an independent, non-reproducing production unit.

While unmarried childless women have always existed, the SCW is a relatively new phenomenon. Western society's transition from an agricultural economy to an industrialized one laid the initial groundwork for the SCW's inception. The appearance of modern technology for housecleaning and food production allowed more women to leave the home sphere and removed the first layer of surveillance, the family home, from her prison.

Next, changes in inheritance and property laws placed more economic capital in the hands of women. Further achievements of the Women's Movement such as inclusion in trade guilds and access to higher education further loosened the bond of dependence men had over women, in theory if not in practice (Bader Ginsburg, 1972) (Bruzelius Heffermehl, 1972) (Wallin, 1972). Technically speaking, by the end of the nineteenth century, men (husbands) were no longer needed for financial security for a woman had the ability to establish her own household and means to acquire the capital to sustain it. At this point in history, the strongest forces that kept a woman in the roles of wife and mother were her inability to control when or if

to bear children (birth control in the form of either abstinence or condoms was still a man's prerogative) and social mores.

The introduction of the birth control pill in 1960 removed the last wall of the Panopticon and the SCW was born. She is loosely tied to the state structure, primarily through non-familial or extended family bonds. Because she does not have children, she has more disposable income and can leave jobs, even countries more easily. She is only dependent on the labor market and her professional skills for financial security, which means that she is subjected to fewer power relations.

If the goal of the Panopticon is to "dissipate compact groupings of individuals wondering about the country in unpredictable ways" (Foucault, p. 219) then the SCW must be eliminated. A fully recognized citizen with all the legal rights and privileges of men, economic independence, and freed from the burden of motherhood, the SCW is exactly what the Panopticon tries to reduce. And this leads us back to my original question of why positive or even neutral words to describe the SCW have been omitted from current discourse.

According to Foucault, "we should view the state [...] as a very sophisticated structure in which individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form, and submitted to a set of very specific patterns" (Foucault, *The Subject and Power*, 2002 p.334). Our place in the modern state structure is only guaranteed if we take on pre-constructed roles deemed ideal by power relations and often determined by our social status, environment, etc. To create new roles or patterns is to operate outside the matrix. Therefore, the SCW has no place in our language because she has no place in the state.

To formally name the SCW is to signal that she is an acceptable, alternate role for women to occupy. But a state that does so, especially one that depends on a large capital earning younger generation to support an aging populous, will have to face many economic and social conflicts as fewer women have fewer children. Collectively, we haven't named her because we do not want her. We try earnestly to dissuade women from taking on the role of a SCW because she subverts many of the existing power relations.

### **How has the state responded to her appearance?**

Societies have responded to the SCW in several ways. In the United States, the ongoing debate about reproductive choice is one method a state employs to secure the free agent to the state structure. The birth control pill is too much of a cash cow to pull from the markets, so access to it is extremely limited. It is cost prohibitive and needs the permission of a doctor to obtain. At the other end, access to abortions is even more limited and there are several areas in the American mid-west that have no abortion providers, forcing women to travel great distances to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Additionally, the choice to use birth control is often framed in terms of morality. If a woman was a proper God fearing woman, she would not need birth control since her Christian duty is to go forth and reproduce.

In Scandinavia and much of Europe, states do not limit access to birth control. Instead, they have introduced social policies which attempt to reduce the burden of child birth and child

care to make motherhood more attractive. Ample maternity leave and the introduction of paternity leave are particularly helpful to career professional women. It gives them the luxury of leaving the job market without fearing irreparable damage to one's career or not leaving the job market at all and allowing the father to take a more active role in the child's young life.

Another less obvious, yet much more persuasive method is the SCW's depiction in popular culture. The "Sex and the City" franchise, which follows the lives of four former SCW's (by the second movie, three of them are married, two of whom are mothers), is hugely successful among young women most likely to become SCW's. But the characters serve as a warning against such a lifestyle instead of a celebration. Carrie Bradshaw, Miranda Hobbes, Charlotte York, and Samantha Jones are all beautiful, successful, and fashionable. They live in New York, attend the most exclusive parties, and have wardrobes that would make any fashion editor green with envy. But instead of relishing the luxuries available to them, they each bemoan the fact that they cannot find husbands. Charlotte changes her religion and adopts a child from China in the pursuit of a perfect family. Carrie forsakes her career, travels around the world, and settles for a man that stood her up at the altar so that she can be a wife. Miranda, who is a partner of a reputable law firm, conceives a child with an immature bartender and convinces herself (and the world) that she really is happy being mother to both her husband and child. The only one who is happy to remain single and unattached is Samantha, who also has the morals of an alley cat and describes herself as "try-sexual" meaning that she will try anything once. Women are left with the message that if you become too successful, you will end up alone and miserable or forced to settle for men that can only be described as less than perfect. Or worst yet, you'll become a Samantha, a menopausal cougar discussing your latest sexual escapade over brunch while your happily married friends shake their heads in quiet judgment.

## **Conclusion**

The single childless woman is here to stay and if current trends in college enrollment continue (Miners, 2009), she will be more skilled and better educated which should translate into better career opportunities than her male counterparts. Additionally, women will be reluctant to give up the hard won victories of the Women's Movement in regards to reproductive and social rights. Instead of ignoring or attempting to suppress her, states need to devise ways to use her unique position to their advantage. Anecdotal evidence suggests that she is a valuable asset to companies since she can supply necessary labor when men and women temporarily leave the job force during maternity and paternity leave.

The SCW is a threat to the state because she is outside of the state structure. But she is outside of the state structure because the state refuses to appropriately acknowledge her presence. By allowing the single childless woman into discourse, the state will be able to study, understand, and ultimately control her. But this process cannot begin until she is formally recognized for until she is recognized by language, she does not exist.

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