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Paper 3

The environment that surrounds one along with the cultures they have been exposed to shape who they are as they move through the world. What one sees in magazines, media, and others form their values and identity. When examining individuality and holism in *Ethical Studies*, F.H. Bradley states that a “being is so far common to him with to others; he is not a mere ‘individual’” (Bradley 153). This ‘individual’ associates him or herself with others who are associating themselves with a particular culture or trend, becoming a piece in a system. In Kurt Vonnegut’s short story *More Stately Mansions*, Grace McClellan presents herself in a specific way upon meeting her new next door neighbors. While remaining friendly, Grace bustles around the house giving suggestions on how the couple can improve their interior decor. She frequently mentions “*Better House and Garden*”, “*Good Homelife*”, “*Home Beautiful*”, and various magazines that focus on interior design directed towards women. Grace is able to find her identity through these magazines, just as many other women have throughout the 1950s. This development of one’s identity has been taken advantage of by advertisers, creating a world for (in this case) an “ideal” woman to live in. This creates a mass of *identical* human beings living by a trend or culture, taking away individuality. Individuality leads to creativity and originality and separates one from another, something that is hard to achieve if one is simply striving to be somebody else that has been created by media in order to fit into a social group.

Vonnegut gives a sense of who Grace McClellan is within the first few paragraphs of the story. When introduced to her new neighbors, (the narrator and his wife Anne) Grace immediately begins to discuss the state of the house aesthetically. She speaks in a sophisticated manner, detecting fraudulent antiques and enthusiastically suggesting where they should add a cobbler's benches and carpets. After this one interaction, the narrator and Anne get a clear idea of who Grace is and how she lives her life. "To hear that woman talk, you'd think money was nothing! Without batting an eyelash, she talks about ten-dollar-a-yard floor-to-ceiling draperies, says fixing up the kitchen shouldn't cost more than a lousy fifteen hundred dollars--without the fieldstone fireplace, of course" (Vonnegut 139). By putting a monetary value on the furniture and renovations, Grace is further projecting herself as a member of this wealthy, trendy community. Grace McClellan is well endowed, with exquisite taste, living in an flawlessly decorated house.

The magazines that Grace frequently references to cater themselves to a female audience. In order for their products to appeal to women, it is necessary to create or follow a stereotypical, "ideal" image for women to desire modeling themselves after. Prior to the fifties, where this story is based, World War II gave women more opportunities to take action and enter the workforce. However, after the war, traditional concepts of femininity were once again reinforced by employers and media. In her essay "The Ideal Woman," Jennifer Holt analyzes different media, specifically magazine advertisements, and how they shaped the conception of the "ideal" woman during the fifties. When looking at this media, Holt includes images of advertisements targeting women in various magazines, including *Better Homes and Gardens*, one that Grace prides herself off of. The two advertisements are both focused on how a woman can please a

man, appealing to the reinforced value of domesticity in women. Women's magazines like *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Good Housekeeping* were extremely popular in the 1950s, with millions of subscribers. With this image in place, magazines and advertisements could successfully convince women that they need a special face cream or a stunning, spotless kitchen in order to be one of these "ideal" women. Holt states that "the oppressive qualities of the domestic ideal of the 1950s" were "harmful to the construction of women's identities" (Holt). With this domestic ideal being reinforced by all types of media, it was almost impossible for women not to be influenced by it. After Grace initially looks around the house with Anne, she pokes fun at their husbands, stating that "they just don't understand what interests women" (Vonnegut 137). Home magazines have taught her to conform with the stereotype that *women* are primarily interested in this domestic trend of home decorating. She attempts to find companionship with Anne through this common thread of gender, sharing something with her that men do not "understand." Grace has created a new identity for herself based off of these articles and advertisements, one that wouldn't have existed if she wasn't exposed to them.

Upon entering the McClellan's home, their neighbors realize that the life Grace had planted in their heads does not exist. What they expected to be a beautifully decorated palace had turned out to be a shabby, messy home. "The couch springs had burst through the bottom ... The chief illumination came from a single light bulb in a cob webbed chandelier with sockets for six ... Dust and cobwebs were everywhere" (Vonnegut 140). The ideal home is often portrayed as a spotless environment with bright, cheery lighting, polished chandeliers, and stylish furniture. When Grace speaks of interior decorating, she mentions "knotty pine" panels, "bottle-green curtains," "cobbler's benches," along with various other tasteful sounding decor. While Grace

believes a nice carpet can tie the room together, the only one to be found in their house is “ a small throw rug, the type generally seen in bathrooms” (Vonnegut 140). The stark contrast that this depiction creates shows the reality that Grace refuses to surround herself with, one that she no longer personally identifies with.

Surprisingly, Grace has no shame about the state of the house. She is so delusional, convinced that she is this perfect domestic woman portrayed in these magazines, that she has left behind who she really is. She continues to blabber on about how she’s going to fix the place up, envisioning in detail how lovely it is going to be. ““Every night, just as George is coming up the walk, I’ll have Martinis ready in a frosty pewter pitcher, and I’ll have a record playing on the phonograph,”” Grace states after describing the future kitchen, reinforcing the domestic values instilled in her through these magazines (Vonnegut 141). She’s specific in her descriptions; she doesn’t have beers or straight whiskey ready, she’s prepared a *cocktail* in a “frosty pewter pitcher” with the phonograph playing in the background. This presents a more elevated, sophisticated scene. Grace also once again displays her materialistic side with descriptions of the pitcher and phonograph. She speaks as if she was sent from a magazine’s headquarters to advertise luxurious wicker chairs and bright colored wallpapers. She has become one of these magazines, regurgitating the information she has read in a desperate attempt to become an ideal woman.

As their night at the McClellan’s house goes on, Grace’s excitement over how the house is going to look never ceases. When talking about the dining room, Grace leads them over to two filing cabinets in the front hallway. Each drawer is “jammed with cloth and wallpaper samples, paint color cards, and pages taken from magazines” and labeled ““Living room,’ ‘Kitchen,’

‘Dining Room,’ and so on” (Vonnegut 142). Grace is not only sold on these ideas of an ideal woman, she’s also sold on the products that she needs to achieve this goal. With each new magazine that comes in the mail, Grace finds more products and samples to cut out and put in drawers. As touched upon earlier, the magazines have created the image of an ideal woman so that women can buy the products advertised in order to achieve this goal. Magazines are trying to sell this idea or goal for a profit, at the expense of an individual’s identity.

Grace is a product of an environment that she has been exposed to and wishes to be a part of. When one grows up in any specific community, being exposed to specific things, “his self-consciousness, is penetrated, infected, characterized by the existence of others” (Bradley 155). This affects a human being’s individuality, depending on what they are exposed to and what community they are a part of. With the prevalence of advertising and pop culture in the 1950s, Grace has been exposed to the lifestyle of an “ideal,” stereotypical housewife. Her individuality has been affected by the existence of polished furniture and paint swatches. In her essay *You Are What You Buy: Postmodern Consumerism and the Construction of Self*, Danielle Todd states that “consumption functions as way for the consumer to communicate with society at large where they fit within the social structure” (Todd 48). If two people are walking in public wearing parkas and one has a Canada Goose label on it, that automatically elevates this individual’s “status” to some. Grace’s desire to be a part of an upper class group of women leads her to be prone to conspicuous consumption, with the exception of her buying the products. By speaking of these expensive products and projecting the view that she is associated with a certain social class, Grace is attempting to recreate her identity so that others see her as somebody she is unable to be.

At the end of the story, Grace falls victim to a viral infection that keeps her in the hospital for two months. While she is away, George inherits funds from a distant relative that leads him to redecorate the entire home. He decorates it exactly the way Grace wants it, even getting it down to the frosty pewter pitcher she envisions having earlier on. When she returns from the hospital, Grace initially seems delighted by the “plum-colored chaise longue” and the “dazzling white kitchen” (Vonnegut 145). However, Grace then states that the home is “clean” and George has “taken wonderful care of it” (145). “Clean” is an unusual word to be describing her own dream home. When Anne asks Grace if the slightly lighter than asked for curtain shade is alright, Grace responds strangely, stating “that material held its color just perfectly for years, and then, poof, it fades like this in a few weeks” (Vonnegut 146). This leads the reader to believe that despite her delighted reaction, Grace thinks the house has been this way the whole time. This shows just how far Grace has rewritten her identity to be based around home decor and the status that comes with it. The reality around her has been the reality in her head all along. At the close of the story, George mentions that a new *Home Beautiful* had arrived that day. Grace responds ““Read one and you’ve read them all ... Happy days, and thanks, darlings, so much for the roses’” (Vonnegut 146). Now that Grace’s reality is physically in front of her, she no longer needs to live vicariously through these magazines and articles. The identity she has created finally fits in with the environment she has wanted to be a part of for years. She’s finally the “ideal” woman, and she has her “ideal” home to prove it.

Today, the prevalence of these publications that Grace models herself off of have increased with the development of modern technology. When looking at the *Better Homes and Gardens* website’s homepage, the color scheme is a quirky purple and white. There are articles

titled “Pom-Pom Projects,” “Celebrate Earth Day with Eco-Friendly Home Ideas,” “Sweet Spring Parties,” and more. There are images of bright, spotless kitchens and colorful, sophisticated looking decor. With a clean, stereotypically feminine aesthetic, publications of this nature still reinforce stereotypical domestic values of femininity today. While Grace needed money to make her dream of having the perfect home become a reality, achieving some other trending goals require more detrimental means for individuals today. Beauty trends that are associated with the status that Grace achieved are being striven for through eating disorders and unnecessary, costly cosmetic procedures. Grace’s identity fell victim to this kind of media; and others’ will too as this system of consumerism and conspicuous consumption continue.

References

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