We Belong to Nobody:
Representations of the Feminine in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*

BY MARGARET FOX

It was supposed to have been Marilyn Monroe.

How different might the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* have been, had it been Truman Capote's choice which filled the iconic leading role of Holly Golightly? For those who now know the film as a classic, it is difficult to picture anyone but Audrey Hepburn in those oversized shades and that black sheath dress, but she bears little resemblance to the bottle blonde protagonist of Capote's novella. Nonetheless, Hepburn's Holly has become one of the most memorable female characters in Hollywood's history.

We ought, however, to remember her for more than her fashion sense and character quirks. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was released in 1961, a fascinating turning point in women's history, when the conformist culture of the 1950's was ending and the second wave feminist movement was about to begin. Upon closer examination, Holly can be studied as a representation of the feminine from an era in which conceptions of womanhood were being questioned, debated, and reshaped.

In 1963, women throughout the United States picked up a blue-covered book and discovered they were not alone. They had left college and given up on careers to rule a tiny domestic universe. They looked around and saw families and picket fences, and set about building their own. Coiffed, busy housewives smiled out of the television screen at them, so they took out their strollers and baby formula and smiled back. But if ever, as they put in yet

another load of laundry, they suddenly felt discontented with their repetitive, mind-numbing housework, they hid those thoughts away. Surely none of their smiling neighbors entertained such notions of societal blasphemy.[1] "Is this all there is?" they asked themselves. "Of course it is," they told their friends. When women honestly confessed the "dullness of the domestic life," as some did in a 1949 *New York Times* article on female college graduates, their admission would be hurriedly followed by a disclaimer: they really had no regrets, they insisted, about sacrificing their careers for the superior blessings of marriage.[2]

But with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, more and more women came to identify with what Betty Friedan called "the problem that has no name."[3] Though pressured to find fulfillment solely in their children, some American women felt their identity was being swallowed up in that of their family. They needed a purpose beyond the home, a definition of self which transcended their relationships.[4] As Friedan put it, "We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.'"[5]

Friedan's bestseller helped to create the sense of solidarity among educated, middle-class American housewives which was necessary to forge the Second Wave Feminist Movement.[6] She later founded the National Organization for Women (N.O.W.), which proved

[1] Eve Merriam, *After Nora Closed the Door* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1964), 27.

[2] John Willig, "Class of '34 (Female) Fifteen Years Later," *New York Times*, June 12, 1949, in Elizabeth Janeway, ed., *Women: Their Changing Roles* (Manchester, NH: Ayer Company Publishers, 1973), 287.

[3] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 57.

[4] Cassandra L. Langer, *A Feminist Critique: How feminism has changed American society, culture, and how we live from the 1940's to the present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 29.

[5] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 78.

[6] Langer, *A Feminist Critique*, 14.

to be one of the first significant steps toward equal gender rights reform in the United States.[7] Caught up in the spirit of the civil rights movement, yet eager to maintain its own agenda, the women's rights movement set off with determination and the increasing momentum of a steam engine, as a swath of feminist literature sparked the introduction of women's history courses in educational institutions.[8] Simultaneously, independent feminist groups arose across the country; as the years passed, such organizations adopted colorful names, such as W.I.T.C.H. and Redstockings, along with more radical platforms.[9] Though the zealous nature of the movement often drew ridicule, it could not fail to draw attention as well.[10] Radical feminism wound down after 1972,[11] but it had carved out a path for the women's movement to follow up to the present day. Contemporary women's vast opportunities in American society trace their source to the beginnings of this movement in the 1960's.

Many view the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* as the beginning of the Second Wave Feminist Movement.[12] And it is certainly true that Friedan's book played an immensely significant role. However, if her book was the spark, the tinder of tension, questions, and frustration about gender roles in the United States had been building up for many years before its publication. The salience of gender issues was such that, as early as 1939, the *New York Times*

[7] Jerry L. Rodnitzky, Feminist Phoenix: The Rise and Fall of a Feminist Counterculture (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 25.

[8] Langer, *A Feminine Critique*, 14; and Ibid., 17.

[9] Rodnitzky, *Feminist Phoenix*, 27.

[10] Ibid., 28.

[11] Ibid., 38.

[12] Ibid., 24.

published articles with titles such as "Girl Graduates Are Heartened In Job Outlook" and "Shall Wives Work?"[13]

In 1961, the same year Paramount Pictures released *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women was established with the stated purpose of investigating prejudice against women and ensuring the recognition of their basic rights.[14] The formation of this commission reflected the rising tension about the appropriateness of traditional feminine roles and a desire for more equality in the public sphere; the seeds of the feminist movement may well have been apparent in the film, as well.

In many ways Holly appears to be a proto-feminist character in her lifestyle. She epitomizes a break with both stereotypes and traditions; when the ideal of the time was a suburban utopia, a kitchen stocked with modern conveniences, and a steady male provider for the family, Holly is a unique representation of feminine independence. She lives alone in a Manhattan flat, empty of even the most basic furnishings. One of the few domestic appliances present, the phone, is locked away in a suitcase to muffle the sound. It seems that Holly's manner of life is a contradiction to all the most basic expectations of her age, and her role as the champion of progressive values goes even further. She ran away from a rural, domestic existence in her marriage to the Doc (Buddy Ebsen), symbolically leaving vestiges of the past behind. Holly, the stylish New York socialite, is a far cry from the pigtailed farm girl in Doc's picture; thus, the film empowers her to recreate herself, to change circumstances rather than

[13] Anne Petersen, "Girl Graduates Are Heartened In Job Outlook," *New York Times*, May 14, 1939, in Elizabeth Janeway, ed., *Women: Their Changing Roles* (Manchester, NH: Ayer Company Publishers, 1973), 194; and Kathleen McLaughlin, "Shall Wives Work?" *New York Times*, July 23, 1939, in Susan Ware, *Modern American Women: A Documentary History* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997), 195.

[14] Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 18.

accept them. Feminist activists of the latter half of the decade would call for a similar attitude among American women. Liberation, rather than the suffragettes' more passive-sounding *emancipation*, would become the motto of the movement in 1968.[15] Seven years before, Holly Golightly had already embodied the phrase by taking charge of her own life in her search for freedom.

This theme of liberation extends even to Holly's sexual identity. In the late 1950's and early 1960's, the increasing availability of contraception was enough to cause considerable controversy.[16] The Supreme Court would not rule against birth control restrictions until 1965.[17] Clearly, the sexual mores of the period remained rather conservative, especially when it came to women. And those who did embrace a more liberal sexual ethic did so on the man's terms. According to Jerry L. Rodnitzky, a professor of women's studies, rock and roll counter culture promoted a "macho sexuality" that encouraged young men to "wear leather jackets, treat women rough, and make it in the back seats of cars."[18] Women in the 1950's were hemmed in from both sides: they were supposed to be either demure virgins or men's play things.

Holly, however, embodies a new feminine sexual ethic. From the moment she makes her first appearance onscreen, she is openly flirtatious with men. She seems unconcerned with modesty; at her party, she appears among her guests in nothing but a towel, and climbs into Paul's bedroom wearing a bathrobe. She unashamedly goes to a strip club with Paul. And she appears to have an extensive circle of male acquaintances, with whom her relationship is

[15] Rodnitzky, *Feminist Phoenix*, 25.

[16] Edith Evans Asbury, "Birth Control Ban Ended by City's Hospital Board," *New York Times*, September 18, 1958, in Susan Ware, *Modern American Women: A Documentary History* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997), 371.

[17] Susan Ware, Introduction to Chapter 12, in *Modern American Women: A Documentary History* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997), 348.

[18] Rodnitzky, *Feminist Phoenix*, 151.

decidedly more than platonic. As director Blake Edwards commented in a 1961 *New York Times* article, "If you are adult and willing to accept the facts of life, you will certainly see that she is far from virginal, though this is never stated or shown."[19]

Not only does Holly have an unusual amount of sexual freedom, but she also appears to be the dominant player in her relationships. This apparent position of power is most obvious in her manipulation of men to get what she wants. In one of the first scenes of the film, she shuts the door on a man with whom she has just returned home. He has given her fifty dollars as a sign of his intentions. But at her door, Holly refuses the indignant suitor. "I worship you, Mr. Arbuck," she says insincerely, "Good night."[20] He goes home angry, while Holly goes to sleep fifty dollars richer. Her sex appeal seems to be her weapon to make her own way in the world.

However, Holly has does not quite play the role of the menacing seductress, who leads men on just for the fun of turning them down. She does not fit neatly into what Rodnitzky calls the "virgin-whore dichotomy," a set of stereotypical female roles which had dominated the movie screen since the beginning of the industry. The concept was simple. Define female stars almost exclusively in the context of sex. Divide them into two categories: pure, good girls versus provocative temptresses, virgins versus vamps.[21] These stereotypes pervaded Hollywood productions throughout the 1950's and even into the 1960's, yet the character of Holly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* transcends them. Holly is no ingénue, yet neither does she bear any true ill will toward men, except toward the ones who have already disappointed her. Rather, she

[19] Blake Edwards, quoted in Murray Schumach, "Film Men Adjust Story By Capote," *New York Times* January 6, 1961.

[20] *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, DVD, directed by Blake Edwards (1961; Hollywood: Paramount, 2001).

[21] Rodnitzky, *Feminist Phoenix*, 84–5, 88.

simply wants a share of their prosperity, and goes about getting it in the best way she knows how.

The progressive nature of Holly's lifestyle in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is apparent in Truman Capote's novella of the same name, upon which the film is based. However, the film version of the story makes Holly's independence even more poignant by its contrast to Paul Varjak's (George Peppard). The novella's narrator is merely the lens through which the reader observes and appreciates Holly. In the film, however, Paul has a more nuanced character which is juxtaposed against Holly's. While Holly lives independently, Paul is living in an apartment paid for by an older, married woman, who visits when occasion allows for romantic trysts with her young writer. He is a kept man; everything from the décor of his apartment to the money in his pocket is from his patroness. And while the narrator of Capote's novella is a well-adjusted, productive writer, Paul is deep in the grip of writer's block. His work could be his one source of independence, but he cannot even produce stories that belong to him. He owns nothing; he is the one who is owned.

By placing Paul's narrative alongside Holly's, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* explores gender roles in a manner which is entirely absent in the original novella. A reader of Capote's work can view Holly's idiosyncrasies and lifestyle as confined to Holly as an individual, not a comment on women in general. But by introducing a romantic relationship between Paul and Holly, the film makes the gender issue unavoidable; wherever there is a sexual relationship, gender roles will inevitably arise, colored by all the perceptions and prejudices of the society within which they exist. Marian Meyers, a faculty member of Georgia State University's Women's Studies Institute, writes that, "media texts—that is, mediated cultural commodities—are molded by and

are a product of the dominant ideology" (8). The film both reflects and challenges that ideology, and thus contains aspects that do not fit Meyers' straightforward explanation of art as a mirror of society's values. However, examining the representation of masculine and feminine roles in the *Breakfast at Tiffany's* love story can still give us a better understanding of the "dominant ideology" of gender in 1960's America. And if we understand that ideological environment, we can better appreciate the feminist movement which grew out of it.

If Holly's character were as simple as she first appears, the ideology we might draw from this film would be decidedly forward thinking. In 1961, the feminist backlash against conservative sexual mores and gender roles of the previous decade was fast approaching, and Holly's unconventional way of life would be a clear precursor to appeals for women's liberation in the late sixties.

However, despite all her progressive attributes, Holly is portrayed as the victim of her own story, not the heroine. Escape from conventional roles, sexual liberation, and the pursuit of independence may be prominent themes, but the film does not affirm them. Instead, it strips them of their appeal; Holly, the champion of these progressive ideals, ultimately finds them unfulfilling. Unhappiness and fear motivate her actions throughout the story. She describes what she calls "the mean reds" to Paul: "Suddenly you're afraid, and you don't know what you're afraid of."[22]

As the film progresses, the Holly who seemed to be a strong woman is gradually revealed to be as vulnerable as a child. The empty, unfurnished apartment may, at first, have seemed to be a conscious rejection of convention. But soon the audience recognizes it as the

[22] *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, DVD, directed by Blake Edwards (1961).

home of someone too desperately unhappy to even buy furniture. Holly's outward show of confidence is scratched away when Paul hears her cry and shout for her brother in her sleep. The audience may have thought she was carefree; however, she turns out to be merely irresponsible. She is too scatter-brained to even keep track of her own keys. The way she accidentally lights a party guest's hair on fire, then—just as accidentally—extinguishes it, is an excellent illustration of how it is only luck that keeps her afloat in the midst of chaos, luck which runs out at the end of the film. At the party, O.J. tells the story about how he could have gotten her a movie role, but she ran away to New York before he could make her a Hollywood star. Why? She was unwilling to commit. She was unsure of what she wanted. In a word, she was immature. O.J. calls her "the kid" for a reason.[23]

The childish nature that underlies Holly's identity as a woman is referenced throughout the film. She is too gullible and trusting in her dealings with Sally Tomato, naively getting herself into trouble with the law. She is unable to take care of herself. The men whom she appeared to dominate turn out to be in control. No matter how she attempts to manipulate them, Rusty Trawler and Jose de Silva are equally capable of abandoning her when she is no longer desirable. It turns out she was dependent upon them all along. Audrey Hepburn picked up on this aspect of Holly's character: "Too many people think of Holly as a tramp, when actually she's just putting on an act for shock effect, because she's very young."[24] Even

[23] *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, DVD, directed by Blake Edwards (1961).

[24] Audrey Hepburn, quoted in Eugene Archer, "Playgirl On The Town: 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' Has Audrey Hepburn Moving About Manhattan," *New York Times,* October 9, 1960.

Hepburn's slim figure adds an air of vulnerability to Holly's character. Doc speaks to her like a concerned father: "Don't they feed you up here?"[25]

Holly lives her life with a child's talent for playing pretend. Her chatty, cheerful voice gives a faux lightheartedness to her tragic comments on life. She smiles and shrugs as she tells Paul she has never belonged anywhere. With her stylish wardrobe she plays dress up, hiding under big, beribboned hats and costume pearls. She imagines glamorous futures for herself, such as royal bliss in Brazil, and begins playing house as a knitting, cooking, Portuguese-speaking wife suitable for Jose. Even her love for Tiffany's, a place full of glittering diamonds and important people, is reminiscent of a child's fascination with buried treasure and that far-off, mystical adult world.

The theme of Holly's immaturity is made most explicit when the film draws a connection between her present self and her childhood identity as Lula Mae. She confesses to Paul, "I still am Lula Mae, fourteen years old, stealing turkey eggs. Except now I call it having the mean reds."[26] She is just as afraid and insecure as she was as an orphan.

Far from being the forerunner of feminist role models, Holly is ultimately a troubled little girl searching for fulfillment. In the novella, there is no certainty that she ever finds what she is looking for. Holly disappears, leaving no more evidence of her existence than a postcard and rumors of a trip to Africa. In a sense, the novella poses questions without seeking to answer them. How can an individual reconcile longings for both freedom and security? How does one take control of his or her own life? What does it mean for a woman to find happiness? In the end of the novella, these questions remain unanswered for Holly.

[25] *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, DVD, directed by Blake Edwards (1961).
[26] Ibid.

If the novella poses the questions, then the film steps in eagerly with the answers, primarily by crafting an ending for Holly's story that replaces ambiguity with happily ever after. Two people with dysfunctional and unfulfilling lives find happiness in one another. Paul Varjak falls in love with Holly, and though her stubborn convictions almost drive him away, she chooses to be with him in the end. The memorable final scene depicts a romantic reunion in the rain, as Holly finally gives up her independence to find safety in the arms of the man she loves.

The significance of this new ending is that, because it is completely unfounded in Capote's novella, its solutions to the problems of both Holly and Paul must come solely from popular culture in the early sixties. It was crafted for its audience and tailored to that audience's standards. And the popular standard of happiness in post-war America was intrinsically linked to romance and marriage. According to a statement by Dr. David Riesman to the American Association of University Women in 1957, at least a third of female college students dropped out every year to pursue marriage rather than a career.[27] A *New York Times* article published in 1958 reported that 80% of high school and college girls believed a woman's primary goal should be homemaking.[28] Rodnitzky comments that an examination of the era's music reveals a tendency toward idealized "heterosexual bliss," the idea that only romantic love can ever truly satisfy the human soul.[29] The overall mood of the time seems to have been that marriage was the best and purest manifestation of human relationship, and spurred on by these ideas, people got engaged earlier and earlier. In 1955, 70% of women aged 20 to 24 years old had already

[27] David Riesman, in Special to the *New York Times*, "College is Called No Marriage Bar," *New York Times*, June 25, 1957.

[28] *New York Times*, "Woman's Place Still the Home, Students Insist in Recent Survey," May 29, 1958.

[29] Rodnitzky, *Feminist Phoenix*, 153.

married.[30] Little appears to have drastically changed by 1961 when President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women investigated issues of equality, still assuming that a woman's primary role would be to care for a family.[31]

Capote wrote about a frightened woman struggling to be free, a "wild thing."[32] In the film version, popular culture resolved her problems by exchanging that freedom for a man. The decision which ultimately saves Holly also subjects her to the rule of another. Paul's pivotal decision is decidedly different; he breaks off the relationship with his patroness, refusing to accept her money. Thus, Paul's redemption story is about taking control of his own life. He gains the ability to make his own decisions and earn his own living through his writing. He starts out a kept man and gains independence. In contrast, Holly begins with a measure of independence which she sacrifices for the security of "belonging" to Paul. Paul says of Holly: "She's a girl who can't even help herself. But I can help her."[33] And he does so, over and over again in the film. It starts when he lets her hide out in his room and escape the drunken rampages of her date. He later helps orchestrate her reunion with her ex-husband, and then stands by her when she has the difficult job of saying goodbye to him. Finally, he is the one who picks her up from prison and tries to comfort her over her broken engagement. Their relationship is one in which Paul time and time again steps up to be the man, while Holly steps down to be the one taken care of.

[30] Sidonie M. Gruemberg, "Why They Are Marrying Younger," *New York Times*, January 30, 1955, in Susan Ware, *Modern American Women: A Documentary History* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997), 260.

[31] Hole and Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism*, 19.

[32] Truman Capote, "Breakfast at Tiffany's," *Selected Writings of Truman Capote* (New York: Random House, 1963), 212.

[33] *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, DVD, directed by Blake Edwards (1961).

In her book *A Feminist Critique,* Cassandra L. Langer describes how post-war Hollywood films "worked to defeat the independence of the female protagonists."[34] While *Breakfast at Tiffany's* may, at first glance, seem to offer a refreshing new view of womanhood, it actually subverts Holly's attempts at autonomy. The story reinforces traditional gender roles by promising women's ultimate fulfillment only in marriage, and depicting man as the dominating force in romantic relationships. Even in a culture enamored with newfound freedoms, the film seems to say, a woman still needs a man to protect her.

Capote was never happy with Paramount's adaptation of his story. And his dissatisfaction went beyond just the choice of Audrey Hepburn for the role. "The book was really rather bitter," he remarked in an interview with *Playboy* magazine, "The film became a mawkish valentine to New York City and Holly and, as a result, was thin and pretty, whereas it should have been rich and ugly." [35] In a way his complaints were justified; Hollywood did turn Capote's profound exploration of independence and fear into something of a valentine. But if we look back at that valentine now, we can see it has a dark side. "The core of sexism," Judith Hole and Ellen Levine write, "is that a woman's identity is dependent upon her relationship with a man."[36] "I don't know who I am!" Holly tells Paul in despair, "I'm not Holly, I'm not Lula Mae either!"[37] Her identity crisis is resolved only when she submits to Paul's "ownership" of her. The happy ending may have been meant to tie a pretty ribbon around Capote's story and make it more palatable for its audience, but no one seemed to mind that it tied up Holly as well.

[34] Langer, *A Feminist Critique*, 83.
[35] Truman Capote, quoted in Barry Paris, *Audrey Hepburn* (New York: B.P. Putnam's Sons, 1996), 173.
[36] Hole and Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism*, 197.
[37] *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, DVD, directed by Blake Edwards (1961).

In the years following the release of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, the feminist movement would begin to challenge assumptions concerning gender roles. This film, however, still reflects the prejudice of previous eras. It gives Holly a taste and a dream of freedom, but that freedom is as unattainable as the diamonds in the windows of Tiffany's. Post-war America viewed marriage as a source of financial and emotional security for women.[38] Holly needed to embrace this realistic vision of happiness, exchanging ideas deemed impractical as a diamond necklace for the more commonplace security of a ring.

Understanding this mentality is vital to appreciating the work of feminist authors and activists throughout the sixties and seventies. They struggled to break down the assumption that women could only be happy under the protection of a man. Yet even today, popular culture retains vestiges of this attitude in a new incarnation. Many movies depict romantic relationships as the greatest possible source of happiness.[39] Articles in popular women's magazines like *Cosmopolitan* may testify to women's sexual liberation, but the flip side of this preoccupation with sex may well be that women continue to define themselves by their relationships with men.[40] Like Holly, women may actually be victims in the midst of their own sexual freedom. Feminists fought for women's right to define themselves apart from men, but modern culture undermines that ideal by placing such a premium on romance. Like Holly, women look longingly into the windows of their own Tiffany's, but the dream behind the glass is not independence but relationship. Until women first and foremost seek fulfillment in their

[38] Langer, *A Feminist Critique*, 13.

[39] Jill Birnie Henke and Diane Zimmerman Umble, "And She Lived Happily Ever After. . . The Disney Myth in the Video Age," in Marian Meyers, ed., *Mediated Women* (Cresskill: Hampton, 1999), 334.

[40] Rodnitzky, *Feminist Phoenix*, 160.

own beliefs, passions, and endeavors, they may continue to find themselves trapped in Holly's tragic happy ending.