

When Babies Aren't Enough:
Analysis of "Motherhood: Who Needs It?"
by Jessica Hopkins

With the start of the 1970s, women across America threw down their oven mitts and picked up their picket signs. World War II, the Cold War, Vietnam, and the Civil Rights Movement all had a dramatic effect on women and their dissatisfaction with their place in society. The age of the June Cleaver mothers, equipped with their pearl necklaces and homemade apple pies, was dead, and the feminist movement was dawning. One writer, Betty Rollin, sought to change the image of American women forever with her revolutionary article in the September 1970 issue of *Look* magazine, titled "Motherhood: Who Needs It?"

The feminist movement, according to Veronica Loveday's "Feminism and the Women's Rights Movement," has dated back to the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, at which the primary goal was obtaining voting rights for women. Fast forward to the forties: America's involvement in World War II required women workers to take over the jobs of men who were off at war. Government advertisements such as the infamous "Rosie the Riveter" posters encouraged women to participate in the production of military airplanes, tanks, and ships. However, after the war ended, women workers were fired and their jobs were given back to men. Many women went back to their domestic lives, satisfied with the security that comes from being a step behind their husbands. Nevertheless, some courageous women chose to stray from the well-beaten path. One of the first to do so was Betty Friedan in her book, published in 1963, *The Feminine Mystique*. According to Loveday, Friedan in her book argued that "Women needed to discover their own identities outside the confines of the home, marriage, and family." Loveday further reports that "Radical feminists believed that the root of gender discrimination lay in the traditional values of American society. They contended that from infancy to adulthood, men were conditioned to view women as sex objects, rather than as equal individuals."

Betty Rollin's article "Motherhood: Who Needs It?" exposes what she calls "The Motherhood Myth" to readers of the popular *Look* magazine. Rollin defines the Motherhood Myth as "The idea that having babies is something that all normal women instinctively want and need and will enjoy doing," and declares it erroneous. *Look* magazine, in publication from 1937 to 1971, was originally invested in tabloid coverage and was mainly comprised of pictures. However, the influence of publisher Mike Cowles' wife, Fleur, transformed *Look* into a family-oriented magazine, concentrating on reaching women. In an article profiling *Look* magazine, Barbara Orbach Natanson observes that "The magazine made a concerted effort to appeal to women, ...not only covering fashion, food, celebrities and popular culture, but also presenting more probing investigations of the civil rights struggle, health issues, education, and international affairs."

In brief, Rollin's article in *Look* is an extreme feminist call to action, instructing mothers to stop reproducing altogether in order to pursue their own goals, rather than the ones society constructed for them. Rollin's remarks, though often abrasive and outlandish, appear to seek a change of a lesser degree: the liberation of women from their typical domestic roles. In order to do so, Rollin predominately relies on logos. Her argument's main points on the Motherhood Myth provide biological, psychological, and religious reasoning as evidence against its theory. There is also a substantial amount of pathos, which Rollin uses to relate to women and their dissatisfaction with their life as mothers enslaved to the needs of their children, home, and husbands. Though Rollin never references her own credentials in her article, she does create an ethos by citing psychiatrists, medical doctors, and scholars with similar viewpoints.

Rollin begins her article bluntly. The title itself, “Motherhood: Who Needs It?” though novel and intriguing, is possibly too straightforward to the skeptical eye. Rollin’s article may pull in already active or borderline feminists but could easily be deemed ridiculous and overlooked by the average woman. Rollin’s notion that motherhood, one of the purest forms of love, is unnecessary and should be avoided is one that is not easily digested, especially by mothers themselves. First, Rollin quotes psychiatrist Dr. Richard Rabkin: “Women don’t need to be mothers any more than they need spaghetti.... But if you’re in a world where everyone is eating spaghetti, thinking they need it and want it, you will think so too” (369). Although one’s society may have the power to influence his or her eating habits, a mother’s desire to have children is a different matter entirely. According to Daphne de Marneffe’s book *Maternal Desire*, “The desire to mother... is not the duty to mother, or the compulsion to mother, or the concession to mothering.... It is the longing felt by a woman to nurture her children... [and] the wish and choice to participate in their mutual relationship...” (3). De Marneffe’s notion, though vague, depicts the desire that many women harbor to have children, a desire that can be summed up by what is known as maternal instinct. As for the notion of instinct, Rollin cites a study of baby ducks that follow their mothers just as lovingly as they do wooden ducks, or even vacuums (370). Rollin claims that because motherhood “just happened” and was needed, it was assumed to be innate, hence where instinct was derived from. Yet, the feeling that is often associated with motherhood is not something that can be pinpointed. Take for example Socrates’ theory of dualism: the soul is separate from the body because the soul is immaterial and inexplicable. The nature of motherhood derives from the soul, and thus is equally inexplicable and incomparable, rather than artificial.

For her next appeal, Rollin makes a risky choice: an appeal to the audience through religious ideology. Rollin suggests that “The word of God got the ball rolling with ‘Be fruitful and multiply’” (370). Quoting 1 Timothy 2:14-15, “Yet woman will be saved through bearing children” (370-71), Rollin asserts that the issue of Adam and Eve has made women’s status what it was in mid-twentieth century: degraded with laws that “made woman a chattel [and] denied her education and personal mobility” (371). Quoting the word of God is powerful, to say the least. Through the word of God, clergymen have the ability to weave their own theories into sermons, just as writers can in their articles. With the existing feminist notion that men are conditioned from birth to treat women as sexual objects, Rollin’s claim is conceivable. Rollin traces both motherhood and gender inequality back to the beginning of mankind, linking the two to each other.

One of the most important strategies that Rollin employs in her article is pathos. She claims that “a lot of evidence suggests that for more women than anyone wants to admit, motherhood can be miserable” (372). This statement alone has the capacity to both offend mothers and relate to them at the same time. But Rollin takes it a step further by citing sociologist and author Dr. Jessie Bernard: “Many women have achieved a kind of reconciliation—a conformity that they interpret as happiness. Since feminine happiness is supposed to lie in devoting one’s life to one’s husband and children, they... assume they are happy” (372). Rollin utilizes this quote to inform mothers that they are allowed to be unhappy. However, Rollin offers a misleading statistic to further emphasize her point: “The realities of motherhood can turn women into terrible people. And, judging from the 50,000 cases of child abuse in the U.S. each year, some are worse than terrible” (373). Although startling, Rollin’s statistic fails to address the point that not all child abuse cases stem from mother-child abuse. Child abuse comes in a variety of forms, from fathers to teachers to foster parents. The statistic misleadingly correlates all 50,000 reported cases of child abuse with mother-child abuse.

In continuation of this argument, the article cites several quotations from mothers about their unhappiness. One of them claims, “You never get away from the responsibility. Even when you leave the children with a sitter, you are not out from under the pressure of the responsibility...” (qtd. in Rollin 373). Another mother states, “I had anticipated that the baby would sleep and eat,

sleep and eat. Instead the experience was overwhelming.... I don't have the physical energy to go out in the evenings. I feel like I'm missing something" (qtd. in Rollin 373). The purpose of these passages is to further connect readers to the feelings of overwhelmed mothers. Rollin determines that the price of having children is unforeseen unhappiness. However, there are two problems with Rollin's arguments in these quotes. First, many of the quotes were truncated, which possibly skewed what the women were actually trying to convey. Second, the feelings that are described depict the feelings of parents in early parenthood. Addressing the effects of parenting on later-life happiness would have strengthened Rollin's argument. In reality, few parents would look back later in life and regret their decision to become parents. According to Timothy Brubaker's article "Families in Later Life," "The benefits of parenthood may be the most rewarding in the middle and later years because parental responsibilities are lessened and children often hinder the development of social isolation during the later years" (967). The sacrifices of parenting are generally outweighed by the loneliness and regret of not having children at all. Children provide many things for their parents: a source of youth, a continuing legacy, and companionship and security in later life. At the end of life, parents can look back and be comforted by the realization that what they have accomplished in their life will live on through their children and their children's children.

Rollin's closing argument is the one that is the most convincing for young women of the early feminist era. Rollin claims that it is the cultural influences that our society has placed upon us that determine who we are: "the motherhood minuet is taught freely from birth, and whether or not she has rhythm or likes the music, every woman is expected to do it" (375). Rollin also claims that young women's friends and family can contribute to the social pressures of motherhood. Additionally, she asserts that "a young married woman often wants a baby just so that she'll (1) have something to do (motherhood is better than clerk/typist, which is often the only kind of job she can get...); (2) have something to hug and possess, to be needed by and have power over; and (3) have something to *be*—e.g., a baby's mother" (376). At this point, Rollin reveals that women desire to be mothers because they are culturally expected to and because they subconsciously desire social power. "The Social Standing of a Housewife," published in 1978, suggests that a housewife's social standing is modified by the specification of her husband's occupation (Nilson 541). Thus, women of the 1970s were bound, socially and financially, to their husbands. The home, where the family lives, is the one place where women can have all the power, so naturally they tend to not wander far from there. But not only do women obtain their power from their home and family, they also obtain their identity. Instead of being just wives, they are now the mothers of children, and through this, they have obtained power and a sense of purpose.

Rollin concludes her piece, stating that "The more children one has, the more of an excuse one has not to develop in any other way.... It doesn't make sense anymore to pretend that women need babies, when what they really need is themselves" (377). In making this last point, Rollin's argument transcends its focus on motherhood to become something greater. The notion that women must break away from their cookie-cutter roles in the home, and not that they completely cease reproducing, is a main goal of the feminist movement. Just as Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" did not in actuality call on all people in Ireland to eat their children, so too it seems that Rollin's goal was less outrageous. Rollin's call to action to cease producing children could never be expected to be taken literally. Rather, her article in *Look* serves as a springboard for women of the early 1970s to realize their fixed role in society. Rollin strategically and subtly uses ethos, pathos, and logos in order to relate to and persuade her readers. "Motherhood: Who Needs It?" calls for the end of the great myth that women must fulfill their biological destiny of bearing children as their main role in society. The realization for women that identity lies deeper than motherhood is one that we are just coming to today, and although they are often criticized as men-hating extremists, it is the early feminists that we can thank for our progress.

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