

## Key Words for Housework in the 1900's

Unless you were rich, in the 1800's you did it yourself. Lots of housewives made their own candles, their own soap, canned their own food, baked their own bread, made their own clothes, and did their own laundry. During the late 1800's factories took over production. They made candles, canned food, and made clothes. The head of the household then had a new job. She didn't have to do it, but she had to find it and buy it. Women went from producers to purchasers. From 1900 on there have been lots of experts telling women how to be "**educated consumers.**" An educated consumer knows how to get the best buys and learns how to choose the best merchandise.

The principles of running a factory influenced the mindset of these experts. They were full of ideas for housewives to be more efficient and to act like the purchasing agents of factories. This was a major shift in the role women played in running a home.

### Reading: "Labor-saving devices" The Washing Machine

A machine that started and stopped itself, filled and drained itself, and spun the clothes "amazingly dry" obviously saved time and labor in this most onerous and traditionally time-consuming household task.

Over the long run, the automatic washer probably restructured rather than reduced laundry time. As the Westinghouse pamphlet boasted, it ended washday—"an entire new day has been added to your week"—by making the laundry into and "'odd-moments' job—with little time and no hard work involved." Now women could "wash any time, whenever you get a load." At first, most women had to follow the "odd-moments job" with a considerable amount of time and labor, hanging every load of clothes on the line, taking them down, and ironing them. Westinghouse included the clothes dryers they hoped to sell in their model floor plan for the new-age laundry. Eventually, by allowing women to wash "whenever you get a load," the automatic washer, the dryer, and the synthetic fabrics that ended ironing probably increased the weekly household laundry load. Encouraged by advertisements for these machines and for the detergents, fabric softeners, bleaches, and static reducers they used, Americans began to make quicker decisions

about what to throw in the hamper. No individual laundry load caused as much fatigue or took as much time as hand-done laundry or even the nonautomatic washing machine; the automatic washer really did permit women to put dirty clothes in and take clean ones out. But it changed the laundry pile from a weekly nightmare to an unending task, increasing the size of the pile, the amount of water and fuel and laundry products most households used, and possibly even the housewife's working time, which was now spread out over the week.

*from Never Done Susan Strasser New York: Pantheon 1982, p. 268.  
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## After Reading

### Discussion or Essay Questions

1. The experts encouraged women to make careful purchases. Think of a time when you bought something that you researched. What was it? How did you research it?
2. The more people needed to buy, the more energy went into advertising. Sometimes this was educational, as with the ad for anti-perspirant. Sometimes the ads were full of promises, designed to persuade the consumer to buy a new product.
  - (1) What were the promises made to women about new washers?
  - (2) What was the reality?
  - (3) In your own words, what is the main idea of the first passage?
  - (4) What is the main idea of the second passage?

3. Choose five vocabulary words from the passage and write a sentence to go with each one.

4. This lesson revisits themes from the 1800's, "Blue Monday" and the prevalence of the factory mentality in "Turn-Out". Make a chart or a cartoon or write a page to show your opinion on the following questions. Choose #1 or #2.

(1) How did things change and how are they still the same when you consider laundry in the 1800's, middle 1900's and now? For example, make a chart to show how much time you put into doing the laundry each day during the course of one week.

(2) How is the factory mentality the same or different in the 1800's, early 1900's, and now?

## 1950's Ideal Woman

Excerpt from *The Ideal Woman*,  
by Cecilia Vicuña

Every year for the last fifty  
the Ideal Woman  
has been elected  
in England.  
Every year innumerable young ladies  
compete in the following categories:  
Elegance  
Cosmetic Art  
The Art of Ironing  
The most beautiful —  
and diligent — wins the title.

Certain scientists  
have dedicated  
a lifetime to a study of the subsequent  
careers of those wholesome beauties  
displayed on the runway:  
the fifty Ideal Women.

The results?  
Alcoholics - 30  
Drug Addicts - 10  
Relatively Miserable  
Housewives 10

## Before or After Reading

1. Listen to the poem two times and do a drawing as you listen. What colors would you choose to show the mood of the poem? Do you want thick lines or thin lines? What images belong in the picture?

or

Work with someone to interpret this poem with movement and sound. What kinds of movements with your arms and head go together with this poem? What kinds of rhythm does it suggest to your legs and body? Which words or sounds go with the poem? Choose some lines from the poem to read aloud and do your movements along with them.

2. What is the poet's point of view of the ideal woman? What is your view of the ideal woman? How is it the same or different from the view of the ideal woman in the poem?

3. Does it make sense to have a contest or election for the ideal woman (Miss America)? Why or why not? If you think it does make sense, what should the contest be like? What would one for the ideal man be like? As a class, make a play based on this idea. Is it a game show or contest ad or pageant? Will the tone be authentic or sarcastic?

4. What do you think of the ending? How many explanations can you think of for the statistics?

## Barbie

These pictures are from the Smithsonian Magazine, Dec. 1989. The cover featured a look at Barbie over the past 31 years. Here are images from that cover. You'll find more pictures on p. 42.

Photo used with permission of photographer, Brian Wolf, and *Smithsonian Magazine*.



## The Barbie Syndrome

### Before Reading:

What do you know about Barbie dolls? Write down five things that are true of Barbie dolls and five questions you have about them.

### Facts about Barbie

Most of us have some memory of a Barbie doll or two in our childhood. Why? Because since they were introduced in 1959, Mattel Toys, Inc., has sold over 200 million of the 11 1/2" dolls. As a matter of fact, if you laid all the Barbie's sold since 1959 head to foot, they would circle the earth 3 and 1/2 times.

### Studying the Pictures

The Barbie doll figure was sculpted after the ideal of a woman's body in the 1950's. Large busts and small waists were very fashionable. Sex appeal and wholesomeness were supposed to go hand in hand.

1. Do you think Barbie has had an impact on or has been affected by the ways in which the world has changed in the last 35 years? A good way to look at the changes in society (economically, socially and otherwise) is to look at the fashions Barbie has worn over the years.
2. In the picture are a few of Barbie's outfits. Which connect to the issues and events happening in the 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's? Consult the timeline at the beginning of this unit.
3. What does the Barbie doll symbolize, in your opinion? Is she a role model for the children that play with her? Why or why not?
4. Fashions in the 1950's tended to reflect the idea that women were ornaments, consumers, caretakers and, occasionally, business and professional women.

(1) Did you notice the evolution of Barbie's fashions as the years went by?

(2) How would you compare this ideal in the 1950's to the way women are represented (on television, in the movies and in magazines) today?

5. Barbie's measurements are  $5\frac{1}{2}$ " - 3" - 5". On a real woman comparable measurements would be  $38\frac{1}{2}$ " - 21" - 35". If you made a statue of Barbie that was twice as big as an average woman, what would the proportions be? How did you get your answer? Do you know anyone with the measurements  $38\frac{1}{2}$  - 21 - 35?



