The Stepford Wives: a Jewish American Novel

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The Stepford Wives presents a disturbing vision of America as a country where men destroy women and replace them with robots in order to simulate a lifestyle they believe existed in the past but which never existed. The author, Ira Levin, is Jewish American, and the novel reflects the Jewish traditions of witnessing and dark humor that result from the memory of the Holocaust and of the Jew’s sense of being the “other” in American society. Jews, like all Americans, try to assimilate to American culture, but they remain separate because of their non-Christian beliefs and the stereotypes others hold of them. This paper studies the aspects of The Stepford Wives that reflect the Jewish writing tradition.

In the 1972 novel, Joanna and Walter Eberhart and their children move from New York City to a home in Stepford, Connecticut. Joanna is surprised that most of the women in the town are uninterested in the Women’s Liberation Movement and are solely interested in household chores and pleasing their husbands. She slowly realizes that the men of the town who belong to an all-male Stepford Men’s Association are surreptitiously replacing the members’ wives one at a time with robots who look like the murdered wives.

In The Stepford Wives, women are the victims of the powerful majority, a role traditionally held by Jews, and women suffer the same fate that Jews
suffered in the Holocaust. The novel addresses the battle of the sexes in the 1970s in America. The epigraph, from Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* warns that when a woman tries to escape from the prison of her position as property in society: “it is with a bad grace that the man lets her go” (Levin Epigraph). Beauvoir notes in her treatise that a married woman “fails to find complete security in her home” because it is surrounded by a male-dominated society and “she feels anxious; lying half asleep at night” (570). Similarly, Jews feel insecure in a society that is predominantly Gentile. Another connection between women and Jews is that one stereotype of the Jewish man is that he is effeminate. As Jacques Derrida notes: “the figure of the Jew and the figure of the woman have often been associated . . . ‘the Jew is the feminization or femininity of society, the threat to all the virile values that govern a community’” (Weber 48–49). *The Stepford Wives* warns Americans that because our culture is controlled by the patriarchy and privileges masculine traits over feminine traits, those who fail to conform are in danger.

One reason for the men’s actions is that men and women in Stepford co-exist but are foreign to each other, similar to the co-existence of Jews and Gentiles. In *The Stepford Wives*, the men regard their wives as foreign in part because the women refuse to conform to America’s cultural messages of how they should behave. The men of Stepford have been brainwashed by advertising messages to believe there is an ideal wife who cleans the house and cares for the children and her husband. However, commercials present a false
representation of women. Joanna refuses to do housework, dresses in ways Walter finds unflattering, and expects Walter to help with cooking meals and caring for the children. The men of Stepford murder the alien non-conformist wives in order to regain control of their situation. Similarly, Derrida notes that when he taught a class of German Jews and Gentiles long after the Holocaust, he observed: “The Jew remains absolutely foreign, infinitely foreign, to the German” (46). The Gentile sees something about the Jew that makes the Jew an alien, something other than the norm and in times of economic trouble like pre-war Germany, groups like the Nazis murdered them in an effort to gain control of their situation.

To establish an explanation for the men’s behavior, Levin relies on the theories of anthropologist Lionel Tiger, who published Men in Groups in 1969.¹ Tiger argues that all-male secret societies “are relatively pointed and exaggerated examples of human aggressive-cum-male-bonding propensities” and that membership in such groups stimulates “inter-group conflict” which “may be violent” (131). Tiger notes that when secret societies (like the Stepford Men’s Association) are supported by the community, they may “emerge to defend a way of life from threats to cultural patterns, values, etc., implied by groups living in the same territory but defined as alien” (132). The police chief and all the prominent men in town are members of the Men’s Association. This

¹ Royal Hendry, who belongs to the Men’s Association, reads this book near the end of the novel (Levin 122).
leads Joanna to realize: “Every Man was a threat” (Levin 109). Women seeking equality with men threaten a desired lifestyle the Stepford men have come to believe has existed previously. The small group of misogynists use their power to exterminate the women. Similarly, less than forty years before the novel was published, a small group of Nazis exterminated millions of Jews they deemed undesirable. The novel uses the specter of the Holocaust to warn Americans that the battle of the sexes may become sinister.

Early in The Stepford Wives the Association is associated with the Nazis. While touring their new town, the Eberharts see the Association’s meeting house and their son says: “‘Boy they’ve got a great big fence! . . . Like in Hogan’s Heroes!’” (Levin 12). The reference to the comedy about American prisoners of war in a Nazi prison camp evokes a sense of danger and highlights how Americans falsely represent the past as much more pleasant than it really was. During the same tour of the town Joanna notices “the you’d-never-guess-what-it-is-from-the-outside non-polluting incinerator plant” (10). When Joanna realizes that the men are replacing women with robots later in the novel, she asks Walter: “‘what happens to the real [wives]? The incinerator?’” (105). This recalls the crematoria in Nazi concentration camps which efficiently burned the corpses of millions of murdered Jews.

Joanna’s behavior and thoughts are similar to the thoughts of Jews who have learned over centuries of persecution to see danger everywhere and yet to question these feelings. The Men’s Association is closed to women, and the
women of Stepford feel vaguely threatened by their exclusion from the association. Joanna attempts to photograph what is going on in the Association’s house at night through open lit windows and is distracted by a policeman. She concludes the policeman must have “radioed a message about her, and then he had stalled her with his questions while the message was acted on, the shades pulled down” (46). She immediately questions her sanity, thinking: “Oh come on, girl, you’re getting nutty!” (46). Throughout the novel, Joanna struggles with conflicting emotions: a fear of the men and a sense that it is crazy to think the men are a danger. Similarly, Jews stayed in Germany prior to the Holocaust despite warning signs because they did not appreciate the severity of the threat posed by the Nazis.

Joanna is the only woman to figure out what the men are doing and this may be because she is a photographer, i.e. an observer of her community. Similarly, Jews often act as witnesses in society. Elisabeth Weber notes: “If the program of what was called the ‘Final Solution’ had as its aim the extinction of the Jews and of all traces that could keep the memory of them, it was also seeking to abolish the ‘witnesses of witnessing’—a name that, for Jean-François Lyotard, could be given to the Jews” (17). The novel is Levin’s act of witnessing the conditions of society which may give rise to persecution, a topic often addressed by Jewish writers. Derrida notes that Jews have “a duty to try to understand how [the Holocaust] was possible, without being content with the images and the conventional concepts that circulate on the subject of the
Shoah [Hebrew for “Holocaust”], the genocides, etc." (45). This duty to understand the Holocaust drives Jewish American writers like Levin to write novels like The Stepford Wives which examine the social forces that lead to mass murder.

Levin masterfully creates a situation where the reader learns of the men’s activities from Joanna’s viewpoint. Joanna becomes uneasy with members of the Men’s Association when the New Projects Committee members meet at her home and they invite Joanna to join them. As the reader comes to realize later in the novel, the new project the men are working on is replacing Joanna with a robot. Although she is unaware of their intentions, the men’s demeanor makes Joanna feel uncomfortable and objectified. As association member and famous illustrator, Ike Mazzard, draws sketches of her, she thinks: “Try being Gloria Steinem when Ike Mazzard is drawing you!” and she feels “as if she were naked, as if Mazzard were drawing her in obscene poses” (Levin 28–29). The drawings by Ike Mazzard are presumably depictions of what the robot that replaces Joanna will look like. It is similar to Joanna but more sexually provocative.

The robot replacement wives, like women in commercials, are designed to like housework, child rearing, caring for their husbands, and sex. They are simulacra, false copies, of the women they replace. Jean Baudrillard observes: “simulation . . . is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (169). The men regard their wives as commodities. The real wives are
imperfect commodities which the Stepford men trade in for wives that exhibit more of the features they desire. The advertisers’ portrayal of a mythical American wife creates a false need for men to acquire wives that are like those depicted on television. The men act on a nostalgic belief that women were once like those depicted in commercials. Baudrillard explains: “when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” and “myths of origin and signs of reality” proliferate (174). The women in the commercials never existed, so the novel questions the concept of what is “real” and proves that “simulation . . . is still and always the place of a gigantic enterprise of manipulation, of control and of death” (Baudrillard 185). Like the Stepford men who scapegoat the women and destroy them out of a nostalgic desire to return to an idyllic past, Nazis scapegoated Jews and set out to exterminate them in the hopes of returning to a falsely idyllic vision of the past. Levin shows how false cultural messages that conformity is desirable create danger to non-conformists.

Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of the novel is the use of technology. The Stepford men use sophisticated technology to replace and murder their wives recalling how the Nazis used technology for the mass murder of Jews. The Stepford Men’s Association uses audio-animation technology developed by Disneyland, to create robots that act and speak “so lifelike you’d have” thought they were real (Levin 94). The robots they build can be controlled by the men and it is a robot that kills Joanna. When Joanna tries to escape and is trapped by the men of Stepford, one of them suggests: “Suppose one of these women
you think is a robot . . . was to cut herself on the finger, and bleed. Would that convince you she was a real person?" (Levin 114). This seduces Joanna to go to her friend Bobbie’s house so Bobbie can cut herself. The robot Bobbie beckons Joanna to come closer so she can see her cut herself. Joanna observes that Bobbie is “so real-looking—skin, eyes, hair, hands, rising-falling aproned bosom—that she couldn’t be a robot, she simply couldn’t be, and that was all there was to it” (118). Until this point in the novel, the story is told through Joanna’s point of view. After this chilling scene, the narrator changes to another woman’s point of view and it is clear that Joanna has been silenced by the robot Bobbie. During the Holocaust, Nazis used technology like gas chambers to murder millions of Jews. The novel depicts the terror of victims murdered through the use of advanced technology.

Jews often use humor to deal with persecution and Levin follows the Jewish tradition of using dark humor throughout The Stepford Wives. Laughter for the Jew is “more than gay frivolity,” it is a “defiant answer to the world’s cruelties” (Ausubel xx). This humor is evident when Joanna reads an archived copy of a local newspaper article about Men’s Association President Dale Coba’s past work at Disneyland doing audio-animatronics: “Mr. Coba’s work here will probably be less attention-getting than his work at Disneyland” (Levin 99). Joanna begins to giggle uncontrollably at this sentence, focusing on the word “probably”. This newspaper article confirms Joanna’s worst fears that the men are a threat to her existence and that they are able to act undetected,
yet she cannot stop laughing. Laughter is her way of coping with an absurd situation that defies reason. Laughter is a very Jewish response to absurdity and it is a tactic of resistance. When faced with the absurd hate of the powerful, laughter is an equally absurd response that indicates the person laughing refuses to relinquish control.

_The Stepford Wives_ follows the Jewish writing tradition of witnessing oppression, warning of its danger, and employing humor as a tactic of resistance to the danger. The replacement of people with robots provokes questions of how those in power react to non-conformists; what is real; the effect of simulation on the real; and how we are victims of our cultural myths. The American culture of simulation creates a situation where all Americans fail to match the images produced by our culture and all Americans are non-conformists. Thus, the Jewish condition of “otherness” is the modern American condition. Jewish American writers like Levin explore this aspect of American identity.
Works Cited


