1999 Honorable Mention Critical Analysis

A Woman's Sheek and Subtle Revolution:
Analysis of a 1952 Du Pont Nylon Ad

Having invested 27 million dollars and eleven years of research, Du Pont de Nemours Inc. roused world-wide interest when the company displayed the first ever nylon stockings in the New York World Fair in 1938. Nylon apparel, including women's lingerie and foundation garments, soon appeared on the American market in wide varieties. Unfortunately, the quantities were limited. Women paid deathly high pre-war prices to obtain a pair of these famous nylons; they quickly became a symbol of status and wealth (Ewing, 111). Its heyday, however, was brief, for in February 1942, America's nylon literally went to war with the soldiers, and nylon stockings temporarily became extinct. Post-war attitudes toward nylons and other underwear drastically differed from those of the pre-war. This 1952 Du Pont Nylon ad coincides with this change. The advertisement indicates not only the remaining post-war patriotic sentiments, but also the progress women made since the 1930's in obtaining more freedom, independence, and simplified lifestyle.

The 1950's encompassed a spirit that rallied around the American cause. It was fashionable to be patriotic, and Du Pont utilized manipulation of color to suggest that wearing Du Pont nylons is indeed patriotic. No other colors exist than red, white, and blue -- from the white boat to the blue high heels, patriotism is painted all over the ad. The two characters in the ad support the American cause by supporting the nylon company. Wouldn't you? This effective advertising technique guilted many women into buying Du Pont Nylons.

Before the war, women stayed home to take care of the family, but the war forced many to go to work. Women finally tasted the sweet freedom of escaping their monotonous ideal. The woman in the ad carries herself with confidence and surety as she steps up on the boat's plank while the man leisurely watches her from his lounge chair. Many women during the post-war era stepped up to the next level by escaping their formerly suppressed environments. Instead of continual baking, cleaning, mending, and pressing, the ad suggests that women attended a "country walk, an intown luncheon, or an evening's dancing." Men politely stared in admiration as their women began to take on freedoms.

In addition to freedom, women also acquired more independence during the post-war era. Previously, corsets surrounded a woman's every move as whale bones dug into her ribs; she did not have room to exist or make uninfluenced decisions. During the war, women were expected to be useful, and their underwear had to allow them room to function and work as men. Many threw off the chains of their corsets for the sake of factory work. Form wartime to the 1990's, underwear had to be practical. Just as their underwear gave them more independence, women gained independence to make some important decisions.
The woman in the ad advertises this newfound independence. She doesn't need a man to tell her that her skirt is too short as it rides above her ankles. Eric has no influence over her decision to go on this boat ride -- she is doing it for herself. She can flick her own cigarette into the churning water below if she needs to. She can buy her own nylons from whatever store she wants. Almost all women had nylons at their fingertips -- it was so largely accessibly and inexpensive that it became almost classless, contrasted with the social and fashion snobbery it offered two decades before (1930's).

Nylons simplified the lifestyle of many women. Instead of a large Victorian dress and apron, the woman is wearing a simple, blue skirt, white nylons, and sky blue shoes. The introduction of nylon and of the mass-production methods that were stimulated by the rising demand for what now became a machine-made article progressively led to simpler and more functional lifestyles (Ewing 117). This fabric could be rinsed out and drip-dried in an hour or two with no need of ironing. The woman in the ad has no time for laborious tasks that come along with complicated clothing: she has people to see, things to do, and new areas to conquer.

As you women put on your favorite pair of fish net nylons, consider the changes the post-war women made to allow you that freedom and independence. Though women were suppressed in many ways during the 1950's, they were able to gain many rights which progressed women along the road towards the rights we enjoy today.

Works Cited