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Rosie Revealed: The Problematic Portrayal Produced by the Pop Culture Icon

At the onset of World War II, it was clear America was in for significant change. Coming out of the Great Depression, the country found unexpected hope in a burgeoning global conflict. With the signing of the Lend-Lease Act, the United States began supplying our Allies, which meant guns, ammo, and aircraft. More importantly, it meant factories, workers, and jobs. Men who had been out of a job were back on the assembly line, earning the steady wages they had been deprived of throughout the 1930s. America wouldn't float on the periphery of the war for long, however. The country soon found itself pulled into the war as a result of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, which led to the workforce exchanging their riveting guns for machine guns. The need for factory-produced weapons and supplies continued to increase, and it was clear the work of the homefront would have to be picked up by another sector of the population, or rather, the other half of it. The perfect solution to the shortage of men was to turn to America's women. Filling male-dominated fields was no easy task, but government agencies such as the Office of War Information came together to devise a method to get women on board with the (albeit temporary) breach of social etiquette (Knaff 29). What followed was a years-long propaganda campaign. Through multiple outlets, including propaganda posters, government agencies made it their mission to "sell" war jobs to women" as more and more men were drafted, leaving factories in desperate need of workers (Colman 49). Together, these propaganda pieces created an image of this sought-after female worker who came to be known as Rosie the Riveter.

There is probably not an adult in America today who has not heard the name Rosie the Riveter. At the mere mention of the name, the widely circulated images of female workers during World War II come to mind. Most likely, the first mental picture formulated is that of J. Howard Miller's iconic *We Can Do It!* Poster (see Figure 1). Created for the Westinghouse company in 1942, this poster depicts a woman who has come to be known as Rosie the Riveter. Rosie, in turn, has come to represent the working wartime woman. Today, this figure is heavily associated with the feminist movement, viewed as a representation of women's strength and potential. Images such as the Westinghouse poster are synonymous with the concept of women's progress, particularly in the workforce, largely because of the swell of women who were mobilized during the war effort to take up jobs in all sectors. Most notable were the changes in war industries, which were almost exclusively male before the US entered World War II. By November 1943, 45.3 percent of the workers were female (*Creating Rosie the Riveter* 21). The irrefutable statistical data that communicates these dramatic employment increases has informed our perception of the Westinghouse poster as being a representation of a beneficial era for womankind. However, in the decades that have passed since World War II, the power of retrospect has led us to evaluate and reevaluate this poster in a myriad of contexts. Suffice it is to say that the original message and context of the poster have both come to be contorted by modern audiences. When the revisionist layers are pulled away, Rosie the Riveter is revealed to be much less than the feminist, progressive icon Americans have long believed. Propaganda pieces, including Miller's poster, were deliberate in the image they put forward, encouraging women to fill much-needed jobs while simultaneously taking caution to not be too empowering. By taking into account both the visual aspects and history of the Westinghouse poster, as well as its similarities and difference compared to other posters of the time, it becomes evident that

Rosie the Riveter created a harmful depiction of the female worker. This was accomplished by emphasizing femininity and tradition, which isolated women from the masculine fields they were occupying, while also stripping away any semblance of ambition and self-determination.

Rosie's appearance offers the first glimpse into the portrayal she was intended to project to viewers, affirming femininity as a core trait of the female worker. The main subject of Miller's Westinghouse poster, who was only later referred to as Rosie the Riveter, is as carefully constructed as any other section of the poster. One of the most notable aspects of the woman is the makeup she wears. She is clearly wearing lipstick and mascara, and there is also evidence she has put work into her eyebrows as well. Her beauty is meant to do more than offer an aesthetically pleasing image to the viewer's eye. As James Kimble and Lester Olson point out in their article "Visual Rhetoric Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's "We Can Do It!" Poster," Rosie's use of cosmetics was designed to "affirm her femininity" (539). Westinghouse's Rosie is not alone in regard to her feminine appearance. There is hardly an exception-- if one exists at all-- to the use of makeup in wartime propaganda posters. Norman Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* cover art from 1943, titled *Rosie the Riveter*, depicts a woman bearing similar cosmetic touches to Miller's Rosie (see Figure 2). The woman in John Howitt's propaganda piece, *I'm Proud...My Husband Wants Me to Do My Part: See Your U.S. Employment Service*, is given the same lipstick, brows, and lashes treatment as the other Rosies (see Figure 3). This fictionalized ideal ultimately manifested itself outside of the posters in the form of "women welders working the torch without protective gears or aprons but wearing their lipsticks" (Santana 2016). Practical concerns, such as the use of protective gear, were ignored, showing just how important an unequivocal concern over appearance was in the archetype of the ideal female worker.

This concern over femininity functioned to keep women separated from the masculine roles they were assuming through work. On the surface, such depictions appeared well intentioned. Donna Knaff discusses the emphasis on femininity and its functions in her book *Beyond Rosie the Riveter: Women of World War II in American Popular Graphic Art*. “Women entering factories or other jobs,” she explains, “received reassurance from these images that...society approved of their actions” (53). This reassurance stemmed from the fact that the depicted working women were as feminine as any other woman of the time. Should a woman feel insecure about wielding a riveting gun, she would only need to look towards the propaganda of the time to see that her womanhood was not being compromised by the masculine nature of her work. If Rosie the Riveter can do man’s work and still keep up a womanly appearance, then so could any other woman. This quelled the worry of some women that they would become too masculine in society’s eyes. Indeed, Rosie was “everything the government wanted in a female worker,” being as efficient and hardworking as any man and “even pretty,” too (Santana 2016).

The good intentions that seemed to comprise the womanly appearances of the women of the propaganda posters were only skin deep. Emphasizing femininity might have convinced some women to begin working, but in the long run, it served to keep women from fully assimilating into masculine roles and, by effect, the workforce. While propaganda wanted to show that “femininity was not incompatible with arduous high-pressure work,” it certainly did not depict it as being fully compatible, either (*Remembering Rosie* 93). As women began to work, society began to feel considerable anxiety over the consequences of these developments. However necessary it might be for women to move into these fields and take up the work of the overseas men, the concern prevailed that “masculinized women might feminize men, further pushing together...the spheres of femininity and masculinity” (Knaff 49). Should these spheres

overlap, which became a very real possibility as women migrated into more masculine fields, men faced the threat of losing the jobs they left behind. As such, flooding women with images of highly feminine workers was used as a reminder that they were inherently contrasting the masculine nature of the jobs they held. While they were able to do man's work, that is exactly what it was: man's work. Societal approval of women engaging in this work was rooted solely "within the parameters allowed by wartime necessities" (Knaff 53). Allowing women to find any permanent place in the male sector of the workforce was off the table. Constantly reaffirming the separation between masculine and feminine ensured the line between the two would not be crossed, even if it was significantly blurred. Emphasis on femininity thus negatively impacted women, keeping them locked within the traditional parameters of their gender and hindering any long term changes in men's and women's roles.

Women's roles, particularly in relation to marriage, were depicted as strictly traditional in nature, a fact that further constrained women. Propaganda posters were designed to recruit women into the workforce, but the call for a breach in tradition was matched by a "[reinforcement of] women's traditional images and roles" (Colman 67). The Westinghouse poster reflects the earlier rhetoric of the war concerning women workers. As can be seen by looking at her exposed left hand, she is not wearing a wedding ring, establishing her as a single woman. This was a deliberate feature, reflecting the "reluctance to recruit mothers" and married women (*Creating Rosie the Riveter* 27). Men were the typical breadwinners, considered "responsible for supporting the family" while women should only work if they were single and "waiting to get married," after which they would quit and opt for housework (*Creating Rosie the Riveter* 26). Homemaking was a woman's role, making work done by a married woman subject to controversy. This led to pandering toward unmarried women, as is seen in the Westinghouse

poster, since hiring single women did not require deviation from women's homemaking roles. Isolating an entire sector of the female population from the workforce was an obvious detriment to women's progress toward equality.

Historically, married women still moved into the workforce, but they were confronted with similarly stifling demands for tradition. The early opposition to hiring married women began to subside later in the war as the need for workers increased, leading to propaganda being aimed at these groups (*Creating Rosie the Riveter* 50). An early poster like Miller's does not capture this shift, but later posters do; Howitt's 1944 poster is a prime example of the attention turned to the married population. The woman is depicted beside her husband, claiming her husband wants her to do her part by getting a job and assisting in the war effort. Much like the posters that emphasize femininity, this poster can be seen in a positive light. By showing women their husbands would approve of their work, an observer might find the inspiration to begin working. The result could be an entire sector of women deciding to work when they would not have otherwise. As a technique for filling much needed roles, this was an intelligent strategy, but in terms of the long-term progress of women's rights, the message communicated by these posters left much to be desired. The woman in Howitt's poster is framing her work within the parameters of her husband's approval, showing observers that she fits the traditional role of a wife. She is subservient and obeys her husband. She is clearly happy her husband wants her to work, meaning it can be assumed she would not be working (or at least not "proud") if her husband was opposed. Women with less agreeable husbands would be on the receiving end of a message that indirectly told them there was nothing they could do; if he said no, then she should not work. Enforcing these traditional roles discouraged women from challenging their husbands, and kept them constrained within the male-female, dominant-submissive system to which they

had long been subjected. This prevented progress towards women's liberation and, while it may have emboldened some women to get jobs, it did little to challenge the oppressive gender-based hierarchy.

The lack of a challenge to the sexist system of the time stems from the lack of ambition imbued into Rosie's image. Despite the need for female workers, the government was not looking to change the status quo. America's women should follow suit, having no ambitions to make any significant social change. This is seen in the rather docile depictions of women. The woman in Rockwell's poster is depicted relaxing on a lunch break, while Howitt's woman just stands and smiles at the viewer. Clearly, these posters are not creating the image of a determined and ambitious woman. On first glance, the Westinghouse poster seems to be an obvious exception to this trend. Her raised arm and clenched fist give an appearance of strength and willpower, while "we can do it!" exudes determination. This analysis would be fair without knowledge of the poster's history. The most important fact is that the poster was "aimed at workers employed at various Westinghouse factories," meaning it was never meant to be seen by the general public--and America's women-- as a whole (Kimble & Olson 545). With this in mind, the effect her determination could have had on women is negligible. Even women within Westinghouse would likely not have been particularly inspired by her, as the meaning behind her pose and slogan were not in any way directed toward them or their struggles. The raised arm pose was a "team-building gesture that men and women alike at Westinghouse adopted for rallies and community building" (Kimble & Olson 551). It was meant to build a sense of community amongst the workers, not incite any notions of strength and power amongst women. Its company specificity and multi-gender audience negates any interpretation that the pose was inspiring to women. Similarly, modern audiences commonly perceive the phrase "we can do it!" as a call to

women, assuring them of their strength and ability to work masculine jobs. However, considering the poster's limited audience, it becomes clear that this is not true. The "we" being addressed could only be "the women already working at Westinghouse-- and...their male coworkers" (Kimble & Olson 549-550). Furthermore, the "it" mentioned in the slogan is not quite as inspiring as breaking gender boundaries and moving into male-dominated fields. Rather, it was a reference to the work of the Westinghouse factory personnel, who were, again, both male and female. Given this context, it is evident that this poster was no more meant to create the image of the ambitious woman worker than other posters of the time.

Women's ambitions were further muted through visualizations of precisely why they were working in the first place. Patriotism was a primary factor. Both Miller's and Howitt's posters include the colors of the American flag, while Rockwell and a propaganda piece titled *Good Work Sister* (see Figure 4) include the "V" symbol, referring to Allied Victory. Together, the use of red, white, and blue as well as the "V" create an image of a woman working for the good of her country, not herself. As Maureen Honey points out in her book *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II*, recruitment posters were "never to focus solely on financial or personal gain but had to include some reference to patriotism" (130). Indeed, showing women they could make more money and become more independent would be too much of a threat to the social hierarchy, and would give women the ambition necessary to make those social changes. Instead, these posters remind women that they are doing this work for their country and freedom, creating the image of a dutiful, not ambitious, woman. The second reason women were depicted as working was for their families, stemming from the traditional roles invoked in the wartime propaganda. Under any other circumstance, a woman would not work, but their "primary duty was to the men in their lives" (*Creating Rosie the*

Riveter 130). With their men off fighting the war, women's work was depicted as just another way of servicing their husbands and being dutiful wives. This overshadowed any personal motives a woman might have had for working and served to instill in women the notion that their new jobs did not represent any sort of social advancement, but rather another way of operating within their loyal, wifely roles. A woman's role not just as a wife but as a homemaker in general was invoked by wartime propaganda. The *Good Work, Sister* poster displays this when the man refers to the woman as "sister." While not insinuating any relation between the two, the familial term was intentional. It reinforces the connection between women and family. They are sisters (and wives and daughters) first, and workers second. Women's responsibility "was to keep their families healthy and safe until war's end," and factory work was included within the broad reaches of that responsibility (Knaff 67). This reasoning blinded women to the possibility that their work meant something bigger than a simple fulfillment of their traditional roles. The connection of work with duty to the family constructed the perception that this work was temporary. Women were made to understand that their family needed help during the war effort, and once the war was over, this need would disappear. So, too, would a woman's reason to work. The realization that these new opportunities could outlive the war and extend to a woman's own ambitions was blocked by the emphasis on duty to family and country.

Without analyzing World War II propaganda, a little knowledge of history corroborates the idea that these posters were not as beneficial to women as many now believe. It is widely known that the 1950s saw significant regression in women's presence in the workforce and a demand for a return to normalcy, which naturally meant "a return to the home and domesticity as dependents" (Santana 2016). This entailed a feminine, family-oriented woman who worked as a homemaker, not as a riveter. The characteristics embodied by the '50s were mirrored in the

propaganda posters. Rosie the Riveter, the representation of the wartime women who moved into factory work, projected these characteristics. This made it difficult for women to shake the bonds of patriarchal oppression despite the significantly increased opportunities afforded to them during the war. This is a surprising revelation, particularly in connection to well-known Westinghouse poster. Westinghouse Rosie's image has been associated with a variety of causes, usually relating to feminism and equality. This has largely contorted our view of the poster, leading us to see it as an inspiring piece representative of women's progress towards equality. However, in taking the poster's visual features and history into account alongside other Rosies of the time, it becomes clear that this 'rosy' view of Rosie the Riveter is not historically accurate. Of course, there is nothing wrong with reusing the image today. Using it to promote beneficial causes is a good way to reclaim the figure from her less than progressive past. This was done during the Second Wave of Feminism, for example, when feminist groups began to use Rosie as a symbol for women's rights (Santana 2016). However, recognizing the history is equally important. The use of her likeness in the name of feminist causes comes off as insincere when the original purpose of the poster is ignored, creating a contradiction between the messages of these movements and the symbol they rally behind. In acknowledging the subtle problematic features of this icon, causes can exchange their ignorance for a poignant reclamation of what she represents. No longer will we incorrectly assume what Rosie the Riveter was supposed to mean to past audiences. Instead, we will recognize her flaws while giving her new meaning to a modern, more progressive audience. In turn, this thoughtfulness will leave us better equipped to see such problems in other modern imagery. Regardless of the potentially good intentions of certain symbols and icons, we must be vigilant in looking for negative, sometimes conflicting

minutiae that can exist within them, such as those that exist within portrayals of Rosie the Riveter.

Appendix



Figure 1. J. Howard Miller's *We Can Do It!* Propaganda poster.



Figure 2. Norman Rockwell's *Rosie the Riveter* cover for the *Saturday Evening Post*.



Figure 3. John Newton Howitt's propaganda poster, *I'm Proud...My Husband Wants Me to Do My Part: See Your U.S. Employment Service.*



Figure 4. *“Good work, sister: we never figured you could do a man-size job!” American’s women have met the test!*, a government propaganda poster meant to recruit women into the workforce.

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