

# The Stepford Wives



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF IRA LEVIN

Born in 1929, Ira Levin grew up in Manhattan and the Bronx, where he attended the famous Horace Mann School. Upon graduating, he studied for two years at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa before returning to New York City to attend New York University. He double majored in English and Philosophy at NYU, where he participated in a television screenwriting competition during his senior year. The screenplay he wrote earned him second place in the contest, but he later sold it to NBC as an episode on the popular show “Lights Out,” which was a suspense series first made popular as a radio program. This early success hinted at Levin’s mastery when it came to writing suspenseful, unsettling stories—a skill that blossomed in his first novel, *A Kiss Before Dying*, which was published in 1953 and won the Edgar Award for best novel. Levin was in his early twenties at the time and had begun to consistently write for television, though he spent 1953 through 1955 serving in the Army Signal Corps. In 1955, he adapted the Mac Hyman novel *No Time for Sergeants* into a teleplay that later ran on Broadway to great acclaim. He went on to write the famous novels *Rosemary’s Baby* (1967) and *The Stepford Wives* (1972), both of which have been adapted into well-known films. After a fruitful career, he died from a heart attack while living in Manhattan in 2007.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Stepford Wives* takes place at some point in the 1960s or the early 1970s, meaning that it’s set during the second-wave feminist movement. Second-wave feminism was an approach to feminism that began in the 1960s and lasted for roughly 20 years. It built on first-wave feminism, which primarily focused on suffrage (voting rights) and other legal issues. Second-wave feminism, on the other hand, broadened the movement’s scope to consider the many other ways in which society’s patriarchal, male-dominated power structures excluded and oppressed women. This meant looking at issues surrounding sexuality, the workplace, reproductive rights, and traditional familial or domestic expectations of women. In particular, second-wave feminism challenged the idea that married women should automatically devote themselves to domestic lifestyles that kept them from pursuing other interests or careers. Men had long taken it for granted that their wives would stay at home, care for their children, cook, and clean, but second-wave feminism empowered women to push back against these limiting expectations. This is exactly what Joanna Eberhart tries to do in *The Stepford Wives*, and the extreme resistance she

encounters in the novel represents just how difficult it was to challenge gender norms in the 1960s and 1970s.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because *The Stepford Wives* features a community’s systematic oppression of women, it can be seen as something of a precursor to other dystopian feminist novels like Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), which is about a future in which a patriarchal society forces women into sexual servitude. Another well-known novel that combines feminism with dystopic magical realism (or science fiction) is Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*, which—like *The Stepford Wives*—investigates ideas surrounding gender, power, and identity. It’s also worth considering *The Stepford Wives* alongside Levin’s other famous novel, *Rosemary’s Baby*. Although *Rosemary’s Baby* is more of a straightforward horror story than *The Stepford Wives*, both books feature young couples who move into new environments where something is seriously amiss. What’s more, both novels center around female protagonists tasked with saving themselves from horrific fates.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Stepford Wives
- **When Published:** September 1972
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern
- **Genre:** Thriller, Suspense, Satire
- **Setting:** The fictional suburban town of Stepford, which is based on Wilton, Connecticut
- **Climax:** Realizing that the men in Stepford are planning to turn her into a robot, Joanna makes a mad dash for freedom through deep snow, only to be cornered by three men and coaxed into her friend’s house.
- **Antagonist:** The men of Stepford and, more generally, society’s sexist expectations of women
- **Point of View:** Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**The Big Screen.** *The Stepford Wives* has been made into a film two times. The first was in 1975, and it received mediocre reviews. Well-known feminists like Betty Friedan saw it as a cheap rip-off of the feminist movement. The second adaptation was in 2004 and starred Nicole Kidman, Matthew Broderick, Bette Midler, Glenn Close, and Christopher Walken—despite its star-studded cast, most viewers and critics alike did not like it.

**High Praise.** The celebrated horror and suspense novelist Stephen King called Ira Levin the “Swiss watchmaker” of suspense novels, since all of Levin’s books feature such precise and impressive plots.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Joanna Eberhart has just moved from New York City to the suburban town of Stepford with her husband, Walter, and their two kids. The houses here are beautiful, but the women who live here are all old-fashioned and emotionally distant, and they only seem to care housework and pleasing their husbands. Joanna is a member of the National Organization for Women, and she’s used to spending time with likeminded feminists. Walter is also quite involved in the feminist movement. Joanna is surprised, then, when Walter announces that he’ll be joining the local Men’s Association. Joanna thought he agreed that all-male clubs are outdated and sexist, but he promises to change the organization from the inside.

After trying and failing to connect with the women in Stepford, Joanna meets Bobbie, who—like her—is perplexed by how cold and strange their neighbors are. Bobbie and her husband, Dave, are also new to Stepford. Though Dave has also joined the Men’s Association, Bobbie suggests that he also thinks Stepford is behind the times when it comes to gender equality. Bobbie and Joanna decide to go around the neighborhood asking if the local women want to start a female equivalent of the Men’s Association, but they all say they’re either too busy with housework or they simply aren’t interested. Only one woman, Charmaine, who is open to the idea. She moved to Stepford a month before Bobbie and is excited when Joanna agrees to play tennis with her weekly at her home tennis court.

While going through some old things her house’s previous owners left behind, Joanna finds a scrap of newspaper. The scrap contains part of an article about a Women’s Club in Stepford. Joanna is shocked, since such an organization clearly doesn’t exist anymore. Even stranger, though, is that Kit Sundersen, one of the women Joanna spoke to about forming a new club, is listed in the article as the president of the Women’s Club. When Joanna spoke to her, Kit didn’t mention this.

One night, Walter brings home members of the Men’s Association. He tells Joanna that she should sit with them in the living room—it might be good for the men to see she can bring good ideas to the table. She agrees. Everything goes well, as all of the men seem to appreciate her input—except for Dale Coba, the president of the Association. Dale seems condescending and doesn’t even look at Joanna when she speaks. At one point, Joanna she realizes that Ike Mazzard, a famous magazine illustrator, is sketching her. She asks him to stop, but he doesn’t. When Ike finishes his **drawing**, Joanna’s feelings change: she’s flattered by the portrait and is delighted when he signs it and

gives it to her.

One day, Charmaine calls to reschedule her and Joanna’s weekly tennis game. She explains that her husband has gotten it into his head that they need a weekend alone—something she’s not terribly thrilled about. They make plans to play tennis a few days later, but when Joanna shows up at Charmaine’s house, Charmaine has forgotten their plans and claims she doesn’t have *time* for tennis, since she needs to clean the house. Joanna is confused—Charmaine usually has her housekeeper do the cleaning. But Charmaine explains that she let the housekeeper go, saying she was too sloppy. She also says she has lost interest in tennis, and when Joanna says she doesn’t believe this, Charmaine takes her to the back window. Joanna sees that men are ripping up the tennis court, and Charmaine explains that they’re installing a putting green, since her husband likes golf more than tennis. She then goes on about how great her husband is and how devoting herself to doing housework is the least she can do.

Unsettled by Charmaine’s transformation, Joanna leaves and tells Bobbie about this change in their friend. Bobbie visits Charmaine and confirms that something strange has happened. She forms a theory that there’s something in Stepford that makes women become subservient and domestic. She cites a recent news story about a town in Texas where chemicals made residents easygoing and subdued. There might be something similar in the water in Stepford, she guesses, so she starts drinking bottled water. She also says that she’s going to talk to Dave about moving to a neighboring town, where things are a bit more modern and relaxed. She urges Joanna to do the same.

That night, Joanna, and she tells Walter about what Bobbie said. He thinks it sounds far-fetched, but he also wants to make sure Joanna is happy. For this reason, he says he would be open to moving at the end of the school year if Joanna were to decide that’s what she wants. She’s relieved, and though she starts accompanying Bobbie on house-hunting tours, she doubts she’ll actually end up wanting to move herself.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, Joanna watches one of Bobbie’s children for the weekend—she and Dave have decided they need a weekend alone. At the end of the weekend, she’s glad to see how refreshed Bobbie looks. As she, Bobbie, Dave, and Walter stand by the front door and talk, Joanna is impressed by Bobbie’s radiance, though she’s also surprised that Bobbie doesn’t offer any funny comments like she normally would. When they say goodbye, Walter hesitates for a moment before kissing Bobbie on the cheek. Later, Joanna and Walter make plans to have a weekend of their own after Christmas.

In the coming days, Joanna doesn’t hear from Bobbie. Usually, Bobbie calls every day, but this time Joanna is the one to reach out. On the phone, Bobbie seems preoccupied. She has been busy grocery shopping and cleaning, she says. When Joanna visits her the next day, she’s horrified to see that her friend has

undergone the same transformation as Charmaine: she says she doesn't have time to do anything except clean, and she goes on at length about how great Dave is. She has been lazy and neglectful, she says, and now she wants to honor her husband by devoting herself to being a better wife.

Terrified, Joanna rushes home and calls Walter at the office. She tells him that she can't stay in Stepford. She wants to sell the house as soon as possible, but he tells her to calm down and that she shouldn't do anything drastic until he gets home. When they hang up, though, Joanna calls Bobbie's real estate agent and says she's interested in making a fast purchase of a house they recently toured. She also calls her own broker and prepares to list her house. But then Walter gets home and accuses her of being "hysterical." He claims that Bobbie must have simply decided to start putting some effort into her life and appearance—something he thinks Joanna could do, too. He tells her he will go along with her idea to move *if* she goes to see a therapist to make sure she's not having a breakdown. She books an appointment with a female therapist who practices out of town.

At her appointment, Joanna explains her concerns to Dr. Margaret Fancher, who listens kindly and doesn't make her feel crazy. She thinks it's normal for Joanna to feel stifled by her domestic lifestyle in Stepford, but she doesn't think Joanna's theories are realistic. She prescribes her medication and encourages her to come back for another session. Before going home, though, Joanna goes to the library and goes through archives of the local paper. She learns that the Women's Club was extraordinarily active but then suddenly disbanded around the same time that Dale Coba founded the Men's Association. She also learns that Dale Coba used to work at Disneyland as one of the people who designed the lifelike robots made to look and act like American presidents. Suddenly, she realizes what has been happening: the women in Stepford are all robots. It takes four months for the Men's Association to get ready to turn the women into robots, which is why Charmaine changed a month before Bobbie. And Bobbie moved to Stepford a month before Joanna, which means Joanna has a little less than a month before her own transformation.

Joanna speeds home and insists that she's leaving with the children, but Walter reveals that he sent them elsewhere. He won't let her leave, insisting that her theory about robots is crazy. She pretends to rest in their bedroom, and then she then tries to slip out the window, but she's unable. As she tries, she hears Walter making a phone call and realizes he's calling the other men. While he's on the phone, she creeps downstairs and out into the wintry cold. She tries to make her way through the neighborhood undetected, but a group of men eventually corners her. She fends them off with a broken branch, but they soon make her feel foolish, claiming they don't have the intelligence to turn humans into robots. One of them suggests that maybe she would believe them if she saw a Stepford

woman prick her finger—if she bled, then Joanna would know she's not a robot. Joanna agrees to go with them to Bobbie's house, already feeling absurd.

Once they reach Bobbie's house, the men wait on the doorstep while Joanna goes into the kitchen with her friend. She tells Bobbie that she doesn't really have to make herself bleed, but Bobbie doesn't mind. She stands over the sink and pulls out a knife, which is unnecessarily large. She coaxes Joanna forward, saying, "The men are waiting."

The narrative cuts to the supermarket. Ruthanne Henry—a new Stepford resident—encounters Joanna in one of the aisles. The two women became friends several weeks ago, but now Ruthanne is astonished to see that Joanna is completely different. She looks extremely good, but her personality is different, and she seems to only care about housework. Unsettled, Ruthanne goes home and tries to get some work done on the book she's writing, hoping to finish before the weekend, which she and her husband have planned to spend together in privacy.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Joanna Eberhart** – The novel's protagonist, Joanna Eberhart, is a semi-professional **photographer** and a feminist willing to challenge sexist cultural norms. After living for years in New York City, she moves to the suburban town of Stepford with her husband, Walter, and their two kids, Kim and Pete. Because she's an adamant advocate for gender equality, she's put off by the fact that seemingly all of the women in Stepford are uninterested in anything but housework. Joanna resents the idea that she should spend all of her time cleaning the house and providing for her husband. Before long, Joanna makes friends with Bobbie, who is the only person in Stepford who seems to share her feminist beliefs, and they decide to form the female equivalent of the exclusive Men's Association in Stepford—but nobody will go along with their idea. Disheartened, both Joanna and Bobbie begin to suspect that something strange is going on, which Joanna all but confirms when Bobbie herself suddenly undergoes a transformation and becomes exactly like the other women in Stepford. Eventually, Joanna correctly guesses that the men of Stepford have been turning their wives into robots, but Walter and his friends manage to convince her that she's crazy before she can escape. Made to feel irrational and "hysterical," she stops trying to run away—a decision that seals her fate as a subservient robot.

**Walter Eberhart** – Walter Eberhart is Joanna's husband and Kim and Pete's father. He has made a successful career for himself working at a law firm, and he thinks that moving to Stepford is the right choice for his and Joanna's family. Joanna, for her part, views Walter as a feminist ally, proudly talking at

the beginning of the novel about how Walter supports the Women's Liberation Movement. In this way, the novel presents Walter as an enlightened and progressive man. He even promises to help change the Men's Association in Stepford so that it's coed and more inclusive. This, however, proves to be an empty promise, as Walter ends up working with the other Stepford men to turn Joanna into a robot designed to do his bidding. It's never made clear whether or not this was Walter's original intention, or if he gradually came around to the idea of subjugating Joanna. It's possible that he slowly became enticed by the power available to him as a man living in the sexist community of Stepford. Either way, he betrays Joanna and purposefully makes her feel crazy when she figures out what's going on—a good illustration of how men can hide behind supposedly progressive values while still behaving in sexist, manipulative ways.

**Bobbie Markowe** – Bobbie Markowe is Joanna's best friend in Stepford. Like Joanna, she's a feminist who's put off by the fact that the other women in Stepford only care about housework and pleasing their husbands. Along with Joanna, she tries to find women who might be interested in forming an all-female club, and when this doesn't work, she starts thinking about moving. She even wonders if there's something in the town's drinking water that makes women passive and subservient. Before she manages to move out of town, though, her husband, Dave, turns her into a robot with the help of the other members of the Men's Association. Because Bobbie was even more outspoken and scornful of housework than Joanna was, her transformation into a traditional and passive housewife is all the more shocking, ultimately prompting Joanna to do whatever she can to save herself from the same fate.

**Dave Markowe** – Dave Markowe is Bobbie's husband. In the same way that Joanna believes Walter shares her feminist views, Bobbie thinks Dave is unlike the other men in Stepford—she thinks he values her for who she is and doesn't care about things like housework. In reality, though, Dave is just like all the other husbands in Stepford, which he proves by turning her into an obedient and docile robot designed to do little more than please him.

**Dale Coba** – Dale Coba is the president of the Men's Association in Stepford. Joanna immediately dislikes him when she meets him, since he talks to her in an incredibly condescending manner—she can just tell he doesn't value her as a human being. She eventually learns that Dale used to work at Disneyland, where he helped design very lifelike robots that looked, moved, and spoke like past presidents. Putting two and two together, Joanna realizes that Dale has applied this skill in Stepford by working with the other members of the Men's Association to turn all of the women into robotic housewives.

**Ike Mazzard** – Ike Mazzard is a famous magazine illustrator who lives in Stepford. Like the other men in town, he belongs to the Men's Association. Ever since she was a young girl, Joanna

has seen Ike's **drawings** and felt inferior to them, since he always draws unrealistically beautiful women. When she first meets him, he sketches her without her permission, and though she wants him to stop, he ignores her. However, she ends up feeling flattered by the final product, which she frames. She later learns that Ike Mazzard has sketched *every* woman in Stepford. All of the drawings are exaggerated to make the women more stereotypically attractive than they are, and the implication is that these drawings are used to design the robotic bodies that will eventually be used to replace the women themselves.

**Dr. Margaret Fancher** – Dr. Margaret Fancher is a therapist Joanna sees after insisting to Walter that they need to move because of the nefarious things happening in Stepford. Walter forces her to see a therapist to make sure she isn't being "hysterical," and though Joanna is hesitant, she ends up going to Dr. Fancher because she's a woman who doesn't live in Stepford. Although Dr. Fancher is sympathetic and doesn't necessarily think Joanna is crazy, she thinks her strong desire to move is simply due to the fact that she feels torn between "old conventions" and "the *new* conventions of the liberated woman"—that is, she thinks Joanna is simply bored by her new domestic lifestyle. In the end, she prescribes Joanna tranquilizers and advises her not to make any drastic life decisions before coming back for a few more sessions.

**Ruthanne Henry** – Ruthanne Henry is the author of a well-known children's book that Joanna likes to read to Kim. Joanna meets Ruthanne in the library shortly after Ruthanne moves to Stepford with her husband and children. Ruthanne—who is Black—tells Joanna that she suspects the women in Stepford are racist, since they've been so flat and unwelcoming. Joanna, however, suggests that this isn't necessarily because the women are racist but because they oddly don't care about *anything* other than housework. She explains her and Bobbie's theories about what turns the women in Stepford into such passive, subservient people, but Ruthanne insists that nothing could possibly force such a transformation on her. Later, at the very end of the novel, Ruthanne sees Joanna in the supermarket and is stunned to discover that she has become just like all of the other lifeless, passive women in town. Still, she doesn't think much of it, though the novel makes it clear that Ruthanne will be the next woman to be turned into a Stepford robot.

**Charmaine** – Charmaine is one of the only women in Stepford who's uninterested in housework and the usual trappings of a domestic lifestyle. For this reason, Bobbie and Joanna are thrilled to meet her, and Joanna starts playing tennis on Charmaine's court on a regular basis. Charmaine isn't necessarily a dedicated feminist, but she has no interest in becoming like all the other women in Stepford—instead, she likes to spend her time thinking about astrology and playing tennis, leaving the housework to a hired cleaner. She's

extraordinarily attractive, and her husband is enamored of her, but she doesn't seem to like him very much—until, that is, she undergoes an abrupt transformation and suddenly becomes obsessed with housework and pleasing her husband. This change is what first alerts Bobbie and Joanna to the possibility that there's actually something happening in Stepford that changes free-thinking women into passive, subservient housewives.

**Claude Axhelm** – Claude Axhelm is one of the members of the Men's Association in Stepford. He claims to be working on a personal project that involves recording the voice of everyone in town. According to him, building up a database of voice samples might eventually be useful for law enforcement or something of that nature, though he frames the entire endeavor as little more than a pet project. In reality, though, the novel implies that Claude is collecting voice samples from the women in Stepford so that the robots that will eventually replace them will have their voices.

**Kit Sundersen** – Kit Sundersen is one of Joanna's neighbors. When Joanna goes around town asking women if they'd like to form a female equivalent of the Men's Association, Kit Sundersen tells her that she's too busy to do such a thing. Later, however, Joanna finds out that Kit Sundersen used to be the president of Stepford's Women's Club, which disbanded around the same time that the Men's Association was formed. The fact that Kit doesn't say anything about her former interest in gender equality makes Joanna all the more suspicious about what's going on in Stepford.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Carol Van Sant** – Carol Van Sant is Joanna's neighbor. Like all the other women in Stepford, she's exclusively interested in housework.

**Ted Van Sant** – Ted Van Sant is Joanna's neighbor who plays a part in getting Walter to join the Men's Association. He is Carol Van Sant's husband.

**Kim Eberhart** – Kim Eberhart is Joanna's daughter.

**Pete Eberhart** – Pete Eberhart is Joanna's son.

dramatizes the experience of living in such restrictive patriarchal systems by placing Joanna Eberhart—a strong-willed feminist—in the insular community of Stepford, where men replace their wives with robots designed to look pretty and serve their domestic (and presumably sexual) needs. The idea is that what these men *really* care about when it comes to marriage has nothing to do with who their wives are as people—rather, it has to do with a sexist desire for women to be completely subservient. Rather than these men wanting to live with *real* humans, the novel implies that men in patriarchal societies unfortunately tend to prioritize the idea of authority and power over all else: they want wives they can basically force into servitude without having to feel guilty about doing so. The novel doesn't necessarily disparage the domestic lifestyle, it just suggests that there are *many* lifestyles available to women and that women should be able to decide for themselves what they want to do. And yet, women do not have this choice in Stepford, where men actively fight against the idea of female independence by doing everything in their power to subjugate their wives. Through this dystopian premise, the novel hints that sexist men living in patriarchal societies often feel empowered to strive for total power and control over women.



## EQUALITY AND SOCIETAL CHANGE

In many ways, *The Stepford Wives* is about a community unwilling to embrace change. The novel takes place in the 1960s or the early 1970s—a period that was important in the struggle for gender equality, as organizations like the Women's Liberation Movement challenged sexist cultural norms. When she first moves to Stepford, Joanna proudly talks about her involvement in the Women's Liberation Movement, clearly already sensing that her interest in feminism will stand out in a town that still clings tightly to traditional gender roles. In other words, Joanna is aware early in the novel that her progressive worldview is at odds with the outdated and sexist traditions at play in Stepford. To that end, her one likeminded friend, Bobbie, calls Stepford “the Town That Time Forgot,” since she and Joanna are the only women even *remotely* interested in forming a female equivalent of the town's prominent Men's Association.

What's interesting, though, is that both Joanna and Bobbie fail to see that their own husbands are just as sexist and traditional as the other men in town. Joanna speaks proudly in the beginning of the novel about how Walter is a big supporter of the Women's Liberation Movement. Throughout the book, then, Joanna—and, in turn, readers—see Walter as a refreshingly enlightened man. He even gives Joanna the impression that he's going to help change the Men's Association “from the inside” by joining and then convincing the others to make it co-ed. In the end, though, Walter turns Joanna into a subservient robot designed to do whatever she's



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## SEXISM AND POWER

*The Stepford Wives* highlights the stifling nature of sexist, male-dominated societies. The novel

told (though it's never made clear if this was Walter's original intention or if the other men convinced him to turn against Joanna). By highlighting Walter's betrayal of Joanna, the novel shows how difficult it is to change sexist power structures when even supposedly open-minded, progressive men appear unwilling to work toward equality.



### SECRECY, DOUBT, AND UNCERTAINTY

In *The Stepford Wives*, the secrecy surrounding what goes on in Stepford makes it possible for the town's men to get away with their twisted schemes:

nobody outside the town's Men's Association knows they have been turning their wives into subservient robots. This secrecy makes it that much harder for women like Joanna and Bobbie to protect themselves, even though they can clearly see that something is amiss in Stepford. The community at large is exceptionally good at hiding the sexist horrors that are just waiting to antagonize the women who move there, and it is precisely *because* of this secrecy that such horrors are able to exist in the first place. This dynamic is a good representation of the reaction many Americans in the mid-20th century had to the Women's Liberation Movement and the push for gender equality: many people denied the significance of gender inequality, arguing that there wasn't a problem with society's sexist cultural norms. Instead of recognizing the injustice at play, many men—and even many women—criticized the people calling for change, ultimately trying to frame them as crazy or unrealistic. Similarly, Walter and the other members of the Men's Association try to make Joanna feel crazy by suggesting that her theories about robots are outlandish and silly—Walter even says she's being “hysterical” at one point. The men thus throw her into a state of uncertainty, causing her to doubt herself and suspect that she has “spun into [...] madness.” This is a tactic (known as “gaslighting”) often used by people in positions of power to force others to second-guess legitimate concerns about their own mistreatment. Joanna, of course, was right all along, but because Walter and the other men were able to throw her into uncertainty, they ultimately succeed in getting her to let her guard down—at which point they kill her and turn her into a robot. In this way, the novel spotlights the unsettling way that sexist, male-dominated societies often undermine women's attempts to protect and advocate for themselves by framing them as crazy and irrational.



### FEMALE AMBITION VS. SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS

*The Stepford Wives* examines the resistance that American society in the mid-20th century showed toward female ambition. Joanna is a semi-professional **photographer**, and though she certainly isn't famous or celebrated for her work, she *has* had some success selling her pictures to well-known magazines. And yet, it's very clear that

her artistic career has been placed on the backburner and that she's not so sure about moving from New York City to Stepford—she worries the move will “diminish[]” rather than “enrich[]” her life. Once the Eberhart family has settled in the suburbs, Joanna struggles to make time for her photography, and the implication is that her life in the city was more conducive to her artistic work. Her husband Walter, on the other hand, is surrounded in Stepford by other career-oriented men, many of whom work at law firms—just like he does. Joanna soon realizes just how hard it will be to hold onto her personal ambitions in Stepford, where women are expected to aspire to little more than housework. In fact, Joanna learns that most of the wives in Stepford *used* to care about things like gender equality, but something about living in Stepford has depleted their ambitions outside of the household. It's later revealed that the women have lost these ambitions because they've been turned into robots, and though this is a farfetched, dystopian plot point, the novel ultimately emphasizes the pressure that American society placed on women in the mid-20th century to abandon their interests and goals in order to focus exclusively on domestic concerns.



### SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### IKE MAZZARD'S DRAWINGS

Ike Mazzard's drawings symbolize the stereotypical male fantasy of unrealistic, flawless women. Joanna is familiar with Ike's work before she moves to Stepford, since he's a well-known magazine illustrator famous for his drawings of beautiful women with perfect features and large breasts. When Ike comes to Joanna's house with some of the other members of the Men's Association, he starts drawing her without asking permission. This makes Joanna deeply uncomfortable, but he just tells her to relax, condescendingly looking back and forth at her and his notepad. In this way, he objectifies Joanna and makes her feel self-conscious—after all, he's carefully scrutinizing her every feature. To make matters worse, she knows that he always draws overly sexualized women that satisfy a certain male fantasy about what women should look like. She therefore feels as if he's comparing her to an unrealistic ideal of feminine beauty, and the drawing itself comes to represent just how willing the men in Stepford are to subject women to unrealistic expectations.



### JOANNA'S PHOTOGRAPHY

Joanna's passion for photography—and the fact that she gives it up at the end of the

novel—symbolizes the challenges that sexist, male-dominated societies pose for women with their own ambitions and aspirations. Before moving to Stepford, Joanna has worked as a semi-professional photographer, and though she isn't wildly successful, she has sold several pictures to an agency. In Stepford, though, she has a hard time keeping up with her craft, largely because it's clear that everyone else in the community expects women to set aside their own interests in order to devote themselves to housework. The idea here is that women should prioritize their husbands' lives over their own, and though Joanna tries to fight this at first, she's unable to succeed. When Walter and the other members of the Men's Association eventually turn her into a robot, she gives up photography completely, which illustrates how patriarchal societies exert pressure on independent, hardworking women to lead domestic lives void of ambition.

who aren't like the women she has met so far in Stepford. She has only been in town for a few days, but all of the women she has met are "completely absorbed in their household duties." For someone like Joanna, who is a feminist who believes that a domestic life is somewhat restrictive, it's important to find people whose interests go beyond "household duties." This is why she decides to speak genuinely about her own interests, in the hopes that the "Notes on Newcomers" column will help her attract kindred souls. And yet, as she'll soon discover, meeting such people in Stepford will be much harder than she originally thought.

☞ "And I'm interested in politics and in the Women's Liberation movement. Very much so in that. And so is my husband."

**Related Characters:** Joanna Eberhart (speaker), Walter Eberhart

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 2

### Explanation and Analysis

When a woman interviews Joanna as part of a "Notes on Newcomers" column in the local newspaper, Joanna announces her interest in politics and—more specifically—the issue of gender equality. She makes a point of talking about this in the interview, since she has already sensed that most of the people living in Stepford have rather outdated ideas about gender roles. All the women she has met seem to care exclusively about housework and pleasing their husbands, so Joanna wants to announce herself as a feminist, hoping that this will help her find likeminded people. To that end, she also proudly asserts that her husband, Walter, is involved in the Women's Liberation movement, clearly recognizing that it is rather unique for a man living in Stepford to have feminist beliefs. This is an important moment in the novel, then, because it invites readers to see Walter as a forward-thinking, enlightened man who believes in gender equality. After all, this is clearly how Joanna sees him. As the novel progresses, though, Walter's behavior will both subtly and overtly challenge his image as a feminist advocate.




## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the William Morrow Paperbacks edition of *The Stepford Wives* published in 2022.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ She was about to say a time-saving no, but hesitated: a full answer, printed in the local paper, might serve as a signpost to women like herself, potential friends. The women she had met in the past few days, the ones in the nearby houses, were pleasant and helpful enough, but they seemed completely absorbed in their household duties. Maybe when she got to know them better she would find they had farther-reaching thoughts and concerns, yet it might be wise to put up that signpost.

**Related Characters:** Joanna Eberhart

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 2

### Explanation and Analysis

When Joanna Eberhart first moves to Stepford, a woman referred to in the novel as the "Welcome Wagon Lady" comes to interview her for a "Notes on Newcomers" column of the local newspaper. For the most part, the Welcome Wagon lady annoys Joanna, especially since the older woman loads her down with free cleaning products that she doesn't need. But Joanna also realizes that being open and honest about herself in this short interview will help her meet "women like herself"—that is, likeminded feminists

●● “I’ve changed my mind; I’m joining that Men’s Association.”

She stopped and looked at him.

“Too many important things are centered there to just opt out of it,” he said. “Local politicking, the charity drives and so on…”

She said, “How can you join an *outdated, old-fashioned*—”

“I spoke to some of the men on the train,” he said. “[...] They *agree* that the no-women-allowed business is archaic.” He took her arm and they walked on. “But the only way to change it is from inside,” he said.

**Related Characters:** Walter Eberhart, Joanna Eberhart (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 6

### Explanation and Analysis

On one of Joanna and Walter’s first nights in Stepford, Walter announces that he will be joining the Men’s Association. It’s clear that he and Joanna have already talked about the Association and decided that he *shouldn’t* join, so this is something of a surprise, and it highlights an important detail about Walter: namely, that he postures as somebody who values his wife’s opinion but, in reality, feels entitled to suddenly decide for himself what he wants to do. What’s more, his reasons for changing his mind about joining the Association seem wrapped up in the idea of power and influence, implying that he’s the type of person who can’t stand the idea of missing out on the opportunity to gain some dominance or authority. And when Joanna tries to remind him of how “outdated” it is for a community to have a Men’s Association without having an equivalent organization for women, he doesn’t even listen to her—he cuts her off, demonstrating yet again that he doesn’t value her opinions quite as much as he has led her to believe.

●● They spent a morning calling on women together, on the theory (Bobbie’s) that the two of them, speaking in planned ambiguities, might create the encouraging suggestion of a phalanx of women with room for one more. It didn’t work. “Jee-zus!” Bobbie said, ramming her car viciously up Short Ridge Hill. “Something *fishy* is going on here! We’re in the Town that Time Forgot!”

**Related Characters:** Bobbie Markowe (speaker), Joanna Eberhart

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 22-23

### Explanation and Analysis

After Bobbie and Joanna meet and realize they’re the only women they’ve found in Stepford who aren’t singularly fixated on housework, they decide to go around town asking their neighbors if they’d be interested in forming a Women’s Club. Nobody is interested, so Bobbie and Joanna team up and go door to door *together*, but it still yields no results. This outcome is a good indication of just how uninterested the women of Stepford are in the idea of forming a female equivalent of the powerful and exclusive Men’s Association, which currently makes all of the important decisions in town. In other words, the women living in Stepford don’t have a representative voice in their own community, but none of them seem to care—except, that is, Bobbie and Joanna, both of whom recognize the value of gender equality.



Bobbie and Joanna are so perplexed by their neighbors’ lack of interest in feminism that Bobbie feels as if Stepford is the “Town that Time Forgot.” Her comment builds on the fact that the majority of the nation has recognized the benefits and importance of gender equality, especially since the feminist cause was quite active in the 1960s and early 1970s (when the novel takes place). In Stepford, though, nobody seems aware of one of the time period’s most pressing issues, causing Bobbie and Joanna to feel like they’ve been transported back in time.

●● “Hey,” she said, shifting uncomfortably and smiling, “I’m no Ike Mazzard girl.”

“Every girl’s an Ike Mazzard girl,” Mazzard said, and smiled at her and smiled at his pecking.

She looked to Walter; he smiled embarrassedly and shrugged.

**Related Characters:** Joanna Eberhart, Ike Mazzard (speaker), Walter Eberhart

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 28

### Explanation and Analysis

When Walter brings a group of members of the Men’s



Association home to conduct a meeting in the living room, he encourages Joanna to join them. He tells her that it might be good for some of the men to see that she has valuable insight, implying that this is the sort of thing that will help him change the organization from the inside.

At first, all goes well, but then Joanna realizes that Ike Mazzard—a magazine illustrator known for drawing unrealistically beautiful women—is drawing her. She thus goes from actively participating in the discussion as an equal to being blatantly objectified, with Ike Mazzard peering at her as if she's little more than a model for him to study. When she voices her discomfort about this, he doesn't listen, simply saying that "every girl's an Ike Mazzard girl"—a comment that suggests that he thinks he has the right to treat women however he wants.

It's worth noting just how many times the word "smiling" or "smiled" appears in this short passage: four, to be exact. Ike Mazzard's insensitive behavior, then, is covered up by a happy façade of politeness, as even Joanna smiles as she asks him to stop drawing her, ultimately implying that she feels as if she needs to dial back her scorn even as she expresses her discomfort. Similarly, Walter does nothing but "smile[] embarrassedly and shrug[]," failing to support his wife by asking Ike to knock it off—a good sign that he isn't terribly concerned about Joanna's feelings.

☝ "These things came out nice and white, didn't they?" She put the folded T-shirt into the laundry basket, smiling.

Like an actress in a commercial.

That's what she was, Joanna felt suddenly. That's what they *all* were, all the Stepford wives: actresses in commercials, pleased with detergents and floor wax, with cleaners, shampoos, and deodorants. Pretty actresses, big in the bosom but small in the talent, playing suburban housewives unconvincingly, too nice—nice to be real.

**Related Characters:** Kit Sundersen (speaker), Joanna Eberhart

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 41-42

### Explanation and Analysis

After Joanna learns that there used to be a Women's Club in Stepford and that one of her neighbors, Kit Sundersen, was the president of the organization, she decides to pay Kit a visit. She recently spoke to Kit about forming a Women's

Club, and Kit didn't even mention that there had already been one in town, nor that she had been the organization's president. Confused, Joanna decides to talk to Kit again. Throughout their conversation, though, Kit periodically interrupts to talk about housework. She's folding laundry while Joanna talks about gender equality, and it seems as if she's more interested in the quality of her bleach than what Joanna has to say. When she interrupts once again to talk about how "nice and white" the t-shirts in her laundry pile came out, Joanna suddenly feels as if Kit is "like an actress in a commercial." This thought highlights the artificial sense of domestic bliss that all the women in Stepford seem to radiate. Mundane, uninteresting things like detergent and floor wax completely preoccupy Kit and the other women, and their level of investment in housework seems too simple and blissful to be "real." On the whole, this thought process is one of the first times that Joanna truly taps into the artificiality at play in Stepford, where—unbeknownst to her—all the women are robots whose sole purpose is to serve men.

☝ He had radioed a message about her, and then he had stalled her with his questions while the message was acted on, the shades pulled down.

*Oh, come on, girl, you're getting nutty!* She looked at the house again. They wouldn't have a *radio* up there. And what would he have been afraid she'd photograph? An orgy in progress? Call girls from the city?

**Related Characters:** Joanna Eberhart (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 46-47

### Explanation and Analysis

One night, Joanna decides to take some pictures of Stepford after dark. Making her way through town, she eventually comes upon the Men's Association building, which hulks impressively over its surroundings. As she prepares to take a picture of its glowing windows, though, a police officer calls out to her and starts asking questions about her camera. But he only does so after using his radio to make some sort of call, and though Joanna doesn't think anything of this at first, she becomes suspicious of his use of the radio when he leaves, at which point she turns back to the Men's Association and sees that they've pulled the

curtains. She suddenly realizes that the police officer must have radioed the Men's Association, warning them that she was outside taking pictures of the building. But then she immediately doubts herself, figuring that she's acting "nutty" for hatching such far-fetched theories. Of course, she doesn't yet have any reason to suspect that the Men's Association is doing anything nefarious, but her self-doubt is still a good illustration of how women are often made to question their own rationality after thinking critically about male-dominated power structures.

“I'm not joking,” Charmaine said. “[My husband's] a pretty wonderful guy, and I've been lazy and selfish. I'm through playing tennis, and I'm through reading those astrology books. From now on I'm going to do right by [my husband], and by [my son] too. I'm lucky to have such a wonderful husband and son.”

**Related Characters:** Charmaine (speaker), Joanna Eberhart

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 53

### Explanation and Analysis

After Charmaine spends a weekend alone with her husband, Joanna realizes that her friend has undergone a massive change. Whereas Charmaine used to constantly disparage her husband and talk about how little she liked him, she now insists that he's a “pretty wonderful guy.” She also says that she has been “lazy and selfish,” suggesting that she has been wrong to prioritize her own interests—like playing tennis or reading astrology books—over doing housework and doting on her husband. Of course, it later becomes clear that Charmaine has been turned into a subservient robot by her husband and the other members of the Men's Association, but Joanna doesn't yet know what has gotten into her. All she knows is that Charmaine is suddenly like all of the other women in Stepford, which feels quite ominous, given that she was the opposite of a subservient wife before this transformation. Seeing Charmaine change so drastically is the first thing that really puts Joanna on edge, since it suggests that the same thing might happen to her.

“Walter wasn't particularly surprised to hear about the change in Charmaine. “[Her husband] must have laid the law down to her,” he said, turning a fork of spaghetti against his spoon. “I don't think he makes enough money for that kind of a setup. A maid must be at *least* a hundred a week these days.”

**Related Characters:** Walter Eberhart (speaker), Charmaine , Joanna Eberhart

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 55

### Explanation and Analysis

After Charmaine suddenly becomes doting and subservient to her husband, Joanna is deeply concerned about what has happened. Walter, however, isn't “surprised to hear about the change.” This is noteworthy in and of itself, since it subtly foreshadows the later revelation that he's in on the Men's Association's plans to turn all the women in Stepford into robots. For now, though, Joanna doesn't know that he's privy to this scheme—nor does she know about the scheme itself. All she knows is that something strange is going on, but Walter actively refutes that there's anything amiss. He says that Charmaine's husband probably just “laid the law down to her,” a comment that highlights Walter's own sexist, patriarchal mentality—a mentality that seemingly aligns with the idea that husbands have the right to tell their wives how to behave. Although Walter has convinced Joanna into thinking he's an open-minded feminist, then, it's clear that he isn't.

“Joanna,” Bobbie said, “I think there's something *here*. In Stepford. It's possible, isn't it? All those fancy plants on Route Nine—electronics, computers, aerospace junk, with Stepford Creek running right behind them—who knows *what* kind of crap they're dumping into the environment.”

“What do you *mean*?” Joanna said.

“Just think for a minute,” Bobbie said. She fisted her free hand and stuck out its pinky. “Charmaine's changed and become a hausfrau,” she said. She stuck out her ring finger. “The woman you spoke to, the one who was president of the club; *she* changed, didn't she, from what she must have been before?”

**Related Characters:** Bobbie Markowe (speaker), Joanna Eberhart, Charmaine , Kit Sandersen

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 56

### Explanation and Analysis

After Joanna tells Bobbie about Charmaine's abrupt transformation, Bobbie goes to see Charmaine for herself and confirms that something has happened. She then sets forth a theory, saying that there's possibly some kind of chemical in Stepford that causes women to become passive and subservient to their husbands. Of course, this sounds like a rather far-fetched theory, but Bobbie has also reminded Joanna of a recent news story about how everyone living in El Paso, Texas had become easygoing because of a chemical making its way into daily life. There is some pretext, then, for Bobbie's theory for why Charmaine has changed (and why all the other women in Stepford seem to behave similarly).

At the same time, though, it's also worth noting how it must feel for Bobbie and Joanna to entertain such seemingly absurd ideas. Unable to account for the strange things happening around them, they're effectively forced to look for answers in odd places, which surely makes it that much harder for them to feel confident about their own concerns. This, in turn, serves as a good illustration of what it's like for many women who have concerns about their positions in male-dominated, patriarchal societies, since living in such societies often means being made to feel crazy by the people in power.

“Even if I'm wrong,” Bobbie said with her mouth full, “even if there's no chemical doing anything”—she swallowed—“is this where you really want to live? We've each got one friend now, you after two months, me after three. Is *that* your idea of the ideal community? I went into Norwood to get my hair done for your party; I saw a *dozen* women who were rushed and sloppy and irritated and alive; I wanted to hug every one of them!”

**Related Characters:** Bobbie Markowe (speaker), Joanna Eberhart

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 58

### Explanation and Analysis

After Bobbie tells Joanna her theory that there might be chemicals seeping into Stepford and making all the women become passive and subservient to their husbands, Joanna expresses doubt. In response, Bobbie notes that she almost

doesn't even *care* whether or not her theory is right—she still wants to move out of Stepford. What she says here highlights the lack of legitimate fulfillment available to women in Stepford: there aren't strong networks of likeminded women, so living in the area essentially means living in social isolation. In contrast, the neighboring town of Norwood is full of women who share Bobbie and Joanna's core values. These women might not be perfect wives who are flawless, organized, and calm, but that doesn't matter to Bobbie. In fact, Bobbie sees this as a *good* thing, because the “rushed and sloppy and irritated” women of Norwood are actually relatable, whereas the eerily perfect and emotionless women of Stepford are impossible to connect with.



## Chapter 2 Quotes

“How was the second honeymoon?” Walter asked.

“Better than the first,” Dave said. “Just shorter, that's all.” He grinned at Walter.

Joanna looked at Bobbie, expecting her to say something funny. Bobbie smiled at her and looked toward the stairs.

**Related Characters:** Walter Eberhart, Dave Markowe (speaker), Joanna Eberhart, Bobbie Markowe

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 76

### Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place when Bobbie and Dave come to pick up their son from Joanna's house after having spent the weekend on their own. The exchange between Walter and Dave seems perfectly ordinary and harmless—until, of course, readers learn later in the novel that Dave and the other members of the Men's Association turned Bobbie into a robot on this particular weekend. With this knowledge, Dave's chipper attitude and his joke about the weekend being better than their honeymoon seems especially perverse, as if he has no remorse at all for killing his wife and replacing her with a robot.



This moment, then, is a good window into the unsentimental cruelty that the men of Stepford show their wives, proving that all they care about is the chance to have a submissive and subservient robot designed to fulfill their wants and needs. Joanna, for her part, doesn't yet know anything about the Men's Association's actions, but she *does* pick up on something a little strange here, as she waits for Bobbie

to “say something funny” and is somewhat surprised when she doesn’t. In the grand scheme of things, this is the first time Joanna really picks up on the fact that something is truly amiss, though she just brushes it off—for now.

☝ “Speak to you tomorrow,” Joanna said.

“Sure,” Bobbie said. They smiled at each other. Bobbie moved to Walter at the door and offered her cheek. He hesitated—Joanna wondered why—and pecked it.

**Related Characters:** Joanna Eberhart, Bobbie Markowe (speaker), Walter Eberhart, Dave Markowe

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 77

### Explanation and Analysis

Before Bobbie and Dave leave Joanna’s house after picking up their son, Joanna notices something strange: Walter hesitates when Bobbie offers her cheek for him to kiss. This is an important detail because it’s the most glaring indication Joanna has received so far that there’s something truly sinister going on in Stepford—that is, Walter’s hesitation is the most notable sign so far that the members of the Men’s Association have been turning their wives into robots. Of course, Joanna doesn’t yet have enough information to know why Walter would hesitate before kissing Bobbie, but what’s particularly significant about this moment is that it suggests that Walter is aware of what has been happening in Stepford and, moreover, has been keeping this information from Joanna. It stands to reason, then, that he has plans to do to Joanna what all of the other men in town have done to their wives: turn her into a robot.

☝ “I spoke to Bobbie tonight,” she said. “She sounded—different, washed out.”



“She’s probably tired from all that running around she’s been doing,” Walter said, emptying his jacket pockets onto the bureau.

“She seemed different Sunday too,” Joanna said. “She didn’t say—”

“She had some make-up on, that’s all,” Walter said. “You’re not going to start in with that chemical business, are you?”

**Related Characters:** Joanna Eberhart, Walter Eberhart

(speaker), Bobbie Markowe, Dave Markowe

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 81

### Explanation and Analysis

After Bobbie’s weekend alone with Dave, she doesn’t reach out to Joanna for a few days. In and of itself, Joanna thinks this is somewhat strange, since Bobbie usually calls her on a more or less daily basis. Then, when Joanna finally decides to call Bobbie, she’s unsettled by how her friend sounds. But when she tells Walter about her concerns, he responds dismissively. When he suggests that Bobbie is probably just “tired from all that running around she’s been doing,” he subtly disparages her for trying to move out of Stepford. Bobbie has been seeing new houses in neighboring towns, so Walter’s implication is that she has tired herself out by pursuing an unnecessary move. He clearly thinks Bobbie is foolish and has ridiculous ideas about what’s going on in Stepford—a viewpoint he makes especially clear when he says, “You’re not going to start in with that chemical business, are you?” By saying this, he condescendingly tries to make Joanna feel crazy for thinking that there might be chemicals in Stepford that cause women to become passive and subservient. And though it’s true that the theory is somewhat far-fetched, his attempt to make her doubt herself is little more than a sexist power move to keep her from fully recognizing how the men in Stepford have subjugated their own wives.

☝ In her immaculate kitchen she said, “Yes, I’ve changed. I realized I was being awfully sloppy and self-indulgent. It’s no disgrace to be a good homemaker. I’ve decided to do my job conscientiously, the way Dave does his, and to be more careful about my appearance. Are you sure you don’t want a sandwich?”

**Related Characters:** Bobbie Markowe (speaker), Joanna Eberhart, Dave Markowe, Charmaine

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 82

### Explanation and Analysis

The first time Joanna goes to visit Bobbie after noticing over the phone that her friend seems to have changed, she’s shocked to see that Bobbie truly has undergone a total

transformation—the same one, apparently, that Charmaine recently underwent. Much like Charmaine, Bobbie extols the virtues of housework and suggests that she was previously “sloppy and self-indulgent.” Needless to say, Bobbie wasn’t any more “sloppy” or “self-indulgent” than the average person, but she has now been programmed to view her previous disinterest in housework as a major flaw. She also implies that Dave is somebody to be admired and doted on, insisting that she owes it to him to devote herself to chores and be “more careful about [her] appearance.” Everything she says falls in line with the sexist, outdated beliefs that seem to loom over Stepford as a whole, making it obvious—even to Joanna, and certainly to readers—that something drastic has happened to her. And if such a thing could happen to Bobbie, who was arguably even more progressive and strong-willed than Joanna, then it could certainly happen to Joanna.

●● He came closer to her. “There’s nothing in the water, there’s nothing in the air,” he said. “They changed for exactly the reasons they told you: because they realized they’d been lazy and negligent. If Bobbie’s taking an interest in her appearance, it’s about time. It wouldn’t hurt *you* to look in the mirror once in a while.”

She looked at him, and he looked away, flushing, and looked back at her. “I mean it,” he said. “You’re a very pretty woman and you don’t do a damn thing with yourself any more unless there’s a party or something.”

**Related Characters:** Walter Eberhart (speaker), Joanna Eberhart, Bobbie Markowe

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 86

### Explanation and Analysis

After Joanna tells Walter about seeing how much Bobbie has changed, he tries to make her feel irrational for fearing that the same thing might happen to her. Even though it’s glaringly obvious that there has been an abrupt shift in how both Bobbie *and* Charmaine behave, Walter chalks this up to them realizing that they were being “lazy and negligent”—language that reveals his own sexist view that women who don’t completely devote themselves to housework and domesticity are worthy of criticism. He also underhandedly tells Joanna that he wants her to look better for his sake, as if he has the right to demand that she wear makeup on a daily basis simply for his own satisfaction. This

is all somewhat surprising, since Walter has positioned himself as a feminist who believes in gender equality. If this were really the case, though, he wouldn’t be actively gaslighting his wife (that is, he wouldn’t purposefully make her feel crazy for having legitimate concerns), nor would he advance misogynistic ideas about women having a duty to serve their husbands.

●● “[...] Now look, I’m trying to see this from your viewpoint and make some kind of fair judgment. You want to move because you’re afraid you’re going to ‘change’; and I think you’re being irrational and—a little hysterical, and that moving at this point would impose an undue hardship on all of us, especially Pete and Kim.”

**Related Characters:** Walter Eberhart (speaker), Joanna Eberhart, Pete Eberhart, Kim Eberhart, Bobbie Markowe

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 87

### Explanation and Analysis

Walter says this to Joanna after she insists that they move out of Stepford as soon as possible. She has just been to Bobbie’s house and has seen how drastically her friend has changed, and now she’s quite sure that the same thing will happen to her, too, if she continues to stay in Stepford. Walter, however, responds by framing her concerns as crazy and out of touch with reality. He even calls her “irrational” and “hysterical,” words that sexist men in positions of power often use to get women to doubt their legitimate concerns about their own treatment. Instead of recognizing that Joanna has good reason to worry about what might happen to her, Walter discounts her concerns and, in doing so, underhandedly reveals his own complicity in how women are treated in Stepford (though, at this point in the novel, it’s unclear whether or not he’s involved).

●● “I’ve begun to suspect—” Joanna said. “Oh Jesus, ‘suspect’; that sounds so—” She worked her hands together, looking at them.

Dr. Fancher said, “Begun to suspect what?”

She drew her hands apart and wiped them on her skirt. “I’ve begun to suspect that the men are behind it,” she said.

**Related Characters:** Joanna Eberhart, Dr. Margaret

Fancher (speaker), Walter Eberhart, Bobbie Markowe, Charmaine

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 92

### Explanation and Analysis

After Joanna tells Walter that she's concerned the same thing that happened to Bobbie and Charmaine will happen to her, he insists that she should see a therapist. He says that it's important for her to make sure she's thinking straight before she makes any big decisions about leaving Stepford, and though she doesn't want to go along with this idea, she eventually agrees to see Dr. Margaret Fancher, a female therapist who lives outside Stepford. As she tries to explain to Dr. Fancher what's bothering her, though, Joanna hears herself. "Oh Jesus," she says, "'suspect'; that sounds so—." She doesn't finish her sentence, but it's clear that she has become self-conscious about what she's saying because she realizes she sounds crazy. This, it seems, is why Walter—who is later revealed to be in on the plot against the women in Stepford—wanted her to go to a therapist in the first place: he knows that whatever she tells the therapist will sound far-fetched. Urging her to see a therapist, then, is nothing more than Walter's way of trying to get Joanna to doubt herself.

☞ "It sounds," Dr. Fancher said, "like the idea of a woman who like many women today, and with good reason, feels a deep resentment and suspicion of men. One who's pulled two ways by conflicting demands, perhaps more strongly than she's aware; the old conventions on the one hand, and the new conventions of the liberated woman on the other."

**Related Characters:** Dr. Margaret Fancher (speaker), Joanna Eberhart

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 94

### Explanation and Analysis

When Joanna finally tells the therapist, Dr. Margaret Fancher, her theory that the men of Stepford are somehow responsible for getting the women in town to become passive, subservient wives, she expects Dr. Fancher to think she's crazy. However, Dr. Fancher is actually quite sympathetic. She doesn't disparage Joanna for having far-

etched ideas, nor does she speak condescendingly to her. Instead, she recognizes that many women living in the 1960s and 1970s are "pulled two ways by conflicting demands"—that is, she highlights the tension between the widespread push for gender equality and the sexist cultural norms that still hold sway over American society. By saying this, she also touches on the fact that Joanna recently moved from New York City to an isolated suburb, where progressive ideas about gender roles are less accepted by the general public.

All of this is very true and, in any other situation, might be helpful to Joanna. However, Dr. Fancher's words do little to put Joanna at ease, since Dr. Fancher ultimately doesn't believe that there's *actually* something going on in Stepford—she just thinks Joanna is having a strong reaction to a broader societal problem. As such, she's unable to give Joanna the help she needs.



☞ "I'm going out," she said.

He shook his head. "No," he said. "Not when you're talking like this. Go upstairs and rest."

She came down a step. "I'm not going to stay here to be—"

"You're *not* going out," he said. "Now go up and rest. When you've calmed down we'll—try to talk sensibly."

**Related Characters:** Joanna Eberhart, Walter Eberhart (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 105

### Explanation and Analysis

After Joanna goes to therapy, she realizes that nobody is going to help her—she's going to have to save herself. With this in mind, she goes to the local library and looks up old articles about the town's residents, ultimately using these articles to piece together that the men of Stepford have been turning their wives into life-like robots. Upon returning home, she insists that she's leaving Stepford, at which point Walter stops her. He once again tries to make her doubt herself by implying that she's not thinking clearly, saying that he won't let her out of the house while she's "talking like this." Of course, what she's saying is actually the truth, but because the truth itself is so mind-boggling, Walter is able to really emphasize the idea that Joanna has gone crazy. More importantly, though, this is the first moment in the novel that fully depicts Walter as an

antagonistic figure. Previously, the novel presented him as an enlightened man who believes in gender equality. Now, though, he actively imposes himself upon his wife, forcing her to stay in the house and, in doing so, revealing his own sinister motivations.

“You must think we’re a hell of a lot smarter than we really are,” the man in the middle said. “Robots that can drive cars? And cook meals? And trim kids’ hair?”

“And so real-looking that the kids wouldn’t notice?” the third man said. He was short and wide.

“You must think we’re a townful of geniuses,” the man in the middle said. “Believe me, we’re not.”

“You’re the men who put us on the moon,” she said.

“Who is?” he said. “Not me. [...]”

**Related Characters:** Joanna Eberhart, Walter Eberhart

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 112

### Explanation and Analysis

After Joanna finally manages to escape the house and get away from Walter, she runs desperately through the snowy landscape of Stepford. But she doesn’t get far. Before long, three men corner her and start trying to convince her that she has nothing to worry about. To do this, they use the same technique that Walter has tried: they imply that she’s crazy to think that she’s in danger in a place like Stepford. They downplay their own intelligence and abilities, making it seem like it would be completely impossible for them to turn women into robots. And to be fair, this theory *does* seem quite ridiculous and far-fetched. By leaning heavily on the overall unbelievability of the situation, then, the men are able to set forth a pretty convincing argument for why Joanna should stop running from them and go back home to Walter. The problem, of course, is that Joanna has no way of knowing whether or not they’re telling the truth.

“She was wrong, she knew it. She was wrong and frozen and wet and tired and hungry, and pulled eighteen ways by conflicting demands. Including to pee.


If they were killers, they’d have killed her *then*. The branch wouldn’t have stopped them, three men facing one woman.

[...]

Bobbie would bleed. It was coincidence that Dale Coba had worked on robots at Disneyland, that Claude Axhelm thought he was Henry Higgins, that Ike Mazzard drew his flattering sketches. Coincidence, that she had spun into—into madness. Yes, madness.

**Related Characters:** Joanna Eberhart, Bobbie Markowe, Dale Coba, Claude Axhelm, Ike Mazzard, Walter Eberhart

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 115

### Explanation and Analysis

The three men who corner Joanna as she runs through Stepford ultimately convince her to follow them to Bobbie’s house. The plan is for Bobbie to prick her finger—if Joanna sees blood coming out of her friend’s finger, she’ll know that the members of the Men’s Association haven’t been turning their wives into robots. As soon as she agrees to this proposition, though, all the self-doubt Joanna has been building up comes crashing down. She suddenly seems to feel foolish and a bit sheepish about everything she has done to get away from Walter and the others, deciding once and for all that she was wrong to think they would do such sinister things. This is exactly how the men *want* her to feel, as their multiple attempts to push her into doubt seem to have finally worked.


As she walks through the snow, Joanna thinks about how it must have been a coincidence that Dale Coba has experience working on robots, that Claude Axhelm has been recording all of the women’s voices for an unknown project, and that Ike Mazzard has been drawing the women. And yet, by going through this list, the novel also hints at how, exactly, the men would go about turning a woman into a robot: Dale Coba would design the actual robotics, Claude Axhelm would create the voice using his recordings, and Ike Mazzard would provide the aesthetic design. And though Joanna no longer believes her own theory, this information will later prove helpful to readers as they piece everything together.

☞ When had it begun, her distrust of him, the feeling of nothingness between them? Whose fault was it?

His face had grown fuller; why hadn't she noticed it before today? Had she been too busy taking pictures, working in the darkroom?

**Related Characters:** Joanna Eberhart, Walter Eberhart

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 116

### Explanation and Analysis

As Joanna walks to Bobbie's house with the three men who cornered her after her attempted escape, she thinks about how her suspicions have impacted her life. She now feels certain that she was wrong: the members of the Men's Association aren't turning their wives into robots, she believes. Thinking this way, she begins to feel guilty for distrusting Walter and the distance this has put between them. When she thinks about how his face has "grown fuller," she's ultimately worrying about her own inattentiveness, clearly feeling that she has been a bad wife because she hasn't been completely preoccupied by her husband. Instead, she has been taking pictures and working in the darkroom. Her entire thought process in this moment shows how easy it can be to internalize sexist, patriarchal ideas about gender roles. Instead of recognizing that she has every right to become absorbed in photography (which, after all, is partially her career), Joanna blames herself for being a bad wife. This, it appears, is the end result of Walter's efforts to get Joanna to doubt herself—she has now not only given up her theory about what happens to women in Stepford but also her commitment to her own autonomy.

## Chapter 3 Quotes


☞ "Oh no," Joanna said. "I don't do much photography any more."

"You don't?" Ruthanne said.

"No, Joanna said. "I wasn't especially talented, and I was wasting a lot of time I really have better uses for."

**Related Characters:** Joanna Eberhart, Ruthanne Henry (speaker), Charmaine

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 121

### Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between Joanna and Ruthanne Henry in Stepford's local grocery store. When Ruthanne sees Joanna in the aisles, she's surprised to see that her friend looks different, which is the first indication that Joanna has been turned into a robot. Then, throughout the conversation, Joanna talks about how busy she is and how much housework she has been doing—things, in other words, that all of the other women in Stepford (except for Ruthanne) talk about. Finally, when Ruthanne asks about Joanna's photography, Joanna says that she gave it up. This part of the conversation is reminiscent of the conversation Joanna previously had with Charmaine, in which she was shocked to learn that Charmaine had given up tennis because it was taking too much time away from her ability to do housework. Now Joanna is the one to step away from her interests in order to make sure her house is perfect for her husband—a fact that proves once and for all that she has been turned into a robot.

☞ "I want to get it done with," she said. "Otherwise I won't enjoy next weekend."

**Related Characters:** Ruthanne Henry (speaker), Joanna Eberhart, Bobbie Markowe

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 123

### Explanation and Analysis

After getting home from the grocery store, where she saw the new robot version of Joanne, Ruthanne tells her husband that she wants to work for the evening on the children's book she's writing. As such, she asks him to take the kids out for dinner, saying that she wants to get the draft of her book "done with" so that she can "enjoy next weekend." By saying this, she reveals that she and her husband have plans to spend the weekend alone together. Given that all the other women in Stepford seem to have been turned into robots while spending a weekend alone with their husbands, it's evident that Ruthanne is destined for the same fate. The novel thus ends on a rather ominous



note, ultimately illustrating just how difficult it can be for women to escape the detrimental effects of living in a sexist society. After all, even Bobbie and Joanna didn't manage to

save themselves from being turned into robots, and it now becomes clear that Ruthanne won't be able to save herself, either.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

Joanna Eberhart stands on the doorstep of her new home in Stepford. She impatiently answers questions from a “Welcome Wagon lady,” who always interviews new Stepford residents and writes a small article about them in the local paper. When the Welcome Wagon lady asks if she has any hobbies, Joanna is tempted to say no so she can end the conversation, but she realizes that an article about her interests might help attract like-minded women—women who aren’t like the neighbors she has met the last few days, all of whom seem completely fixated on housework and little else.

Joanna says that she plays tennis, is a semi-professional **photographer**, and is interested in the Women’s Liberation Movement. She adds that Walter—her husband, who works at a law firm—is also interested in the Women’s Liberation Movement, which surprises the Welcome Wagon lady. When the short interview is over, the Welcome Wagon lady leaves, and Joanna looks across the street. She sees a rag moving in tight patterns as her neighbor washes the windows. Joanna smiles, in case the neighbor is looking out, but she can only see the white rag moving methodically across the glass.

That night, it’s Walter’s turn to do the dishes. Joanna has spent the day with the kids, Pete and Kim, who fought by the TV about what to watch. Now, when Joanna enters the kitchen, she sees Walter craning his neck to look out the window toward the neighbors’ house. He jumps when he realizes she’s behind him, explaining that he was watching to see if the neighbors, the Van Sants, had finished eating dinner yet, since Ted Van Sant invited him over for a chat. Walter adds that he has changed his mind: he is going to join the Men’s Association, after all. Joanna talks about how antiquated an all-male institution is, but he insists that they’ll miss out on too many important things if he doesn’t join—plus, he insists that he’ll be able to change the organization from the inside.

*As soon as she moves to Stepford, Joanna makes a point of subverting the expectations that stereotypically male-dominated suburban communities have when it comes to women. She has already recognized that the majority of the women living in Stepford are preoccupied with housework, meaning that they fit the role of the traditional housewife in mid-20th century American society—a role that Joanna is clearly eager to evade.*



*The Welcome Wagon Lady’s surprise about Walter’s interest in the Women’s Liberation Movement is a good indication that the men in Stepford aren’t very progressive or enlightened when it comes to gender equality. Joanna seems aware of this and is clearly proud of her husband’s open-mindedness. It remains to be seen, however, just how much Walter’s supposed feminist advocacy will matter in a place like Stepford, where there are constant reminders of American society’s sexism—reminders like the ominous vision of a white rag moving almost robotically across a window across the street, as if the woman holding that rag has no other choice but to clean.*



*It has already been made clear that Joanna sees Walter as a progressive, forward-thinking man who believes in gender equality. Now, though, it seems as if he’s already getting sucked into the sexist traditions that are still very much alive in Stepford. Although he claims that he will try to change the Men’s Association from the inside, it seems likely that he simply feels the allure of power and exclusivity emanating from the Association. In other words, he doesn’t want to miss out on anything, even if refusing to join the Association would align with his supposed values concerning gender equality.*



Joanna and Ted move to the backyard and continuing discussing the Men's Association. Joanna is still skeptical. It's possible, she tells Walter, to change organizations from the *outside*. But Walter thinks it'll be easier to challenge the Men's Association if he joins. He promises that if the organization isn't co-ed within six months, he'll quit and they can protest it together. But that probably won't be necessary, he jokes: before Joanna knows it, the Men's Association will be open to everyone and there will be "co-ed poker" and "sex on the pool table."

Ted goes back inside to get ready to leave. Meanwhile, Joanna thinks about her new life in Stepford, hoping that the move will enhance her life instead of "diminish[ing]" it, as she originally feared. As she thinks this way, she hears Carol Van Sant bringing out the garbage next door, so she calls out to her. Carol responds flatly, even though it seems like Joanna may have startled her. Joanna explains that Walter is going to be visiting Carol's husband later that evening, and she suggests that Carol should come over for a drink while the men chat. Carol, however, insists that she couldn't possibly do that—she has to wax the floors.

Joanna is confused: why can't Carol wax the floors later, perhaps when school starts in three days and everyone is out of the house. Carol simply says she can't wait that long, so she's going to take advantage of Ted leaving later that night to visit the Men's Association. When Joanna asks if he goes there every night, Carol says, "Just about." She then says goodnight and goes back inside, leaving Joanna alone and thinking about how she herself will never care that much about housework.

In the coming days, the family familiarizes itself with Stepford, driving around and looking at the various buildings. The Men's Association is a big building on top of a hill, lurking over the rest of Stepford. During this period, Joanna makes a point of *not* doing housework, even though there are a few things she'd like to do. Instead, though, she devotes herself to starting work on creating a small darkroom in the basement, where she'll be able to expose her own film.

*Walter's jokes about turning the Men's Association into a co-ed organization are somewhat revealing. When he says that there will soon be "co-ed poker" and "sex on the pool table," he makes light of the entire idea of gender equality. He also sexualizes the idea of women joining the Association. In doing so, he undermines the fact that Joanna wants the organization to be co-ed so that women can have just as much influence in the community as men do—not, of course, because she wants to have sex on a pool table.*



*In this scene, Joanna has trouble connecting with her new neighbor. Carol seems somewhat lifeless and unengaged, as if she's only interested in various domestic chores (like taking out the trash or waxing the floors). Joanna, on the other hand, wants to establish a sense of camaraderie over some drinks, ultimately hoping to lead a life that is just as full and entertaining as Walter's. For Joanna, life is about more than taking care of the kids and the house, but Carol doesn't seem to feel the same way.*



*It's not just that Carol declines Joanna's invitation to do housework—it's that she declines the invitation to wax the floors, a task that is pretty arduous and involved, especially considering that Carol has decided to do it in the middle of the night. She's so dedicated to cleaning her house that her behavior comes off as a little strange, prompting Joanna to wonder how somebody could possibly be so committed to such a mundane existence.*



*Joanna intentionally goes against the sexist and outdated societal expectation that women should spend all of their time doing housework. In fact, she makes a point of not doing the few things there are to do, not necessarily because she doesn't want to do them, but because she wants to prove her autonomy. Unlike the other women living in the neighborhood, she refuses to unquestioningly prioritize housework above all else. With this in mind, she focuses on her own ambitions by working on her photography career.*



That weekend, Walter goes to the Men's Association for the first time. He doesn't come home until quite late—so late, in fact, that Joanna begins to worry. But she forces herself not to be paranoid, eventually going to bed. When she wakes up in the middle of the night, the bed is shaking. She whips around and sees the whites of Walter's eyes. He abruptly turns away. Joanna realizes he was masturbating. He's embarrassed and doesn't want to talk, but she eventually gets him to admit that he didn't want to wake her. She tells him that he *should* have woken her. And since she's awake now, she says, they might as well have sex. Still embarrassed, he reluctantly agrees. The sex they have ends up being notably better than usual, at least for Joanna.

After Joanna and Walter have sex, he tells her about his evening at the Men's Association. He insists that many of the men are in favor of letting women into the Association. But he didn't want to press the issue too much on his first night.

The next day, Joanna is introduced on the phone to a woman named Bobbie Markowe. Bobbie moved to Stepford just five weeks ago and is eager to meet Joanna after having read in the local paper that she's an "avid shutterbug with a keen interest in politics and the Women's Lib movement." It's instantly clear that Bobbie, like her, is uninterested in devoting her life to housekeeping. The two women decide to meet up at Joanna's.

Standing in the kitchen (which Bobbie praises for being dirty), Joanna is relieved to hear Bobbie talk about how dull all the women seem in Stepford. They also talk about how sexist it is for Stepford to have a Men's Association without also having an equivalent organization for women. Bobbie's husband, Dave, is in the Men's Association, but—like Walter—he thinks it can be changed from the inside. Bobbie, however, doesn't believe this. Together, Bobbie and Joanna decide to go around to the other women in Stepford to see if they can start a chapter of the National Organization for Women.

*The description of the whites of Walter's eyes makes him seem almost inhuman and unrecognizable, perhaps hinting at the possibility that Joanna doesn't know him as well as she thinks she does. But then she realizes he's only masturbating, and although the book doesn't necessarily frame masturbation as shameful, it's possible to read this scene as an indication that Walter is more interested in servicing his own needs and pleasures than he is in engaging in his relationship with Joanna. This is an important detail, given the novel's exploration of what men living in a patriarchal society want out of marriage.*



*The fact that Walter is open with Joanna about his time at the Men's Association perhaps suggests that he truly wants to change it from the inside. And yet, there's no real sign that he has good reason to be optimistic about changing the organization. What's more, the fact that he's hesitant to start shaking things up right away makes it seem likely that he'll end up getting sucked into the Men's Association without ever managing to improve its gender politics.*



*Because she broadcasted her interests to the woman who interviewed her for a column on Stepford newcomers in the local paper, Joanna has managed to finally connect with a likeminded woman who's interested in gender equality. Now that she has Bobbie, she will perhaps feel less isolated in Stepford, where seemingly all the other women have completely different values than her.*



*Bobbie's skepticism regarding her husband's ability to change the Men's Association from within suggests that she's realistic about how hard it is to improve fundamentally sexist power structures. It also suggests that she recognizes her own husband could get swept up in the exclusivity and power that the Men's Association offers its members—something that is likely to happen to Walter, too.*



Both Bobbie and Joanna talk to as many women as they can in the next few days. All of them say the same thing: they're either too busy to meet up with other women, or they have no interest in such a thing. All of their responses are similarly flat and polite. Bobbie thinks something odd is going on, as if Stepford is a place uninfluenced by time, since the women are all so uninterested in gender equality.

*At this point in the novel, a somewhat unsettling feeling creeps into the narrative, as Joanna and Bobbie begin to wonder why, exactly, all of the women around them are so alike. Why do they all respond in the same way to the idea of creating a Women's Club, and why are they completely uninfluenced by the push for gender equality that is otherwise sweeping through the nation? After all, the novel takes place in the 1960s or early 1970s, when feminism was gaining quite a bit of traction in mainstream American culture. It's strange, then, that everyone in Stepford is so uninterested in gender equality.*



Walter goes to the Men's Association for the third time. That evening, he calls Joanna and asks if he can bring some of the other men back with him—he has been appointed to the New Projects Committee, and because there's construction going on at the Association's building, they need a quiet place to talk. Joanna hesitatingly agrees, saying that she's working on the darkroom, meaning that they can use the living room. But Walter tells her to join them: it could be a good opportunity to show the men the benefit of working with intelligent women. She jokes that he probably just wants a beautiful waitress to serve them, but she agrees.

*Walter's insistence that Joanna should join him and the other members of the Men's Association suggests that he genuinely wants to change the organization. Until this point in the novel, his belief in the importance of gender equality has only been abstract and vague. Now, though, he seems to genuinely want to help change his peers' minds about the value of letting women into the Association. However, Joanna also acknowledges—albeit jokingly—that her husband probably just wants her to wait on him and his friends. Although this is only a joke, it subtly invites readers to question Walter's true intentions.*



Five men come home with Walter. One of them is Ike Mazzard, a magazine illustrator famous for his depictions of beautiful women. Joanna jokes that his work ruined her childhood because she could never measure up to the women in his **illustrations**. In response, he says that he's sure she measured up just fine. There's also a man named Dale Coba, the president of the Association. He gives Joanna a “disparag[ing]” look and thanks her for having them. She instantly dislikes him. The others, though, are quite friendly and respectful. Joanna feels awkward at first when she sits with them in the living room after serving snacks, but soon she starts proposing ideas for various projects, and everyone—except Dale Coba—seems impressed by what she has to say.

*Joanna's comment about Ike Mazzard's illustrations of women highlights the fact that she has grown up in a society in which mainstream representations of women are tailored to unrealistic male expectations. The implication here is that Ike Mazzard draws skinny women with large breasts and flawless features that women like Joanna have often compared themselves to. That Ike Mazzard is now in Joanna's living room is a good representation of how difficult it can be in American society for women to escape the expectations constantly forced on them.*



At one point, Joanna realizes that Ike Mazzard is drawing her. She suddenly feels self-conscious, as if she's naked and Ike is staring at her to get every detail. She asks him to stop, but he tells her to relax. When she looks to Walter for reinforcement, he just awkwardly laughs. The other men seem uncomfortable and try to keep talking about various community projects. Eventually, though, Dale Coba—who has been resignedly staring at the ceiling for the whole conversation—looks down and compliments Ike's **drawing**. Ike then shows Joanna the sketch, and she's actually quite flattered. He signs it and gives it to her. She feels a little starstruck, finding it hard to believe that the famous Ike Mazzard actually drew her.

*Even though Joanna originally seems to have resented Ike Mazzard for the way he draws women, she can't help but feel flattered by the final result of her own portrait. This, however, is most likely because Ike has made the kind of unrealistic exaggerations that he always makes with his drawings. In other words, Joanna is most likely flattered because Ike has drawn an unrealistically beautiful version of her. Though she might not agree with his tendency to create art that makes other women feel inferior, it's undoubtedly hard for her to feel mad at somebody who has just portrayed her in such a becoming manner.*



When Joanna goes into the kitchen, Dale Coba follows her in. She asks why his friends call him "Diz," and he explains that he used to work at Disneyland. She doesn't believe him, but he says it's true, though he wants to know why she can't picture him working there. Eventually, she admits that he doesn't look like somebody who would enjoy making people happy. Later that night, after everyone has left, Joanna tells Walter that she doesn't like Dale, and he says that hopefully Dale will lose reelection as the Association's president in the coming year.

*It's clear that Dale Coba is a rather sinister character, and Joanna's dislike of him predisposes readers against him. Plus, he's condescending in a sexist way and, as president of the Men's Association, he represents the male privilege and power that Joanna wants to challenge in Stepford.*



The next day, Joanna learns that Bobbie finally found a woman living in Stepford who doesn't care about housekeeping. Her name is Charmaine, and she lives in a huge house that Joanna and Bobbie visit later that week. Joanna plays Charmaine in tennis while Bobbie watches, and then the three of them sit on a terrace and chat while a housekeeper brings them drinks. Charmaine spends most of the time talking about astrology and sex—her husband can't get enough of her, she says. He also has very particular sexual preferences; he recently bought her a full rubber suit, but she categorically refuses to wear it for him. When Joanna and Bobbie leave, they agree that, while Charmaine might not be "NOW material," it's still significant that she doesn't care about housework.

*Joanna and Bobbie are simply happy to have found a woman in Stepford who is unique and who thinks for herself. Of course, they note that Charmaine isn't exactly the kind of cutting-edge feminist they'd expect to find in the National Organization for Women (NOW), but that doesn't matter. What matters is that she refuses to unquestioningly submit to sexist societal expectations. She doesn't necessarily have grand feminist ambitions to change society, but it's enough that she simply refuses to do housework or do whatever her husband wants her to do. In and of itself, this refusal is significant to Joanna and Bobbie, since the other women in Stepford are seemingly so unwilling to live on their own terms.*



One day, Joanna is sorting through some old things left behind by the previous owners of the house. The family before she and Walter moved in only lived there for two months before leaving for Canada. The family before that, though, was here for quite a long time, and they left behind some random objects. Finally finding time to organize these things, Joanna finds a paintbrush wrapped in some old newspaper. Just as she's about to put the brush back, something on the old newspaper catches her eye: it's an article about a Women's Club in Stepford hosting a well-known feminist author. Joanna guesses that the article is about six years old.

*The sense of uncertainty and mystery at play in Stepford deepens when Joanna finds this article about a former Women's Club. Not only does this club no longer exist, but nobody she spoke to about forming an equivalent of the Men's Association mentioned anything about it ever existing. Either the women she spoke to are hiding something, then, or there are factors at play forcing them into silence.*



Joanna pays a visit to Kit Sunderland, the former president of the Stepford Women's Club. She already spoke to Kit when she was initially trying to drum up interest in an all-female organization, but Kit said she was too busy—and she said nothing about the Women's Club. Now, Kit invites Joanna into the kitchen and offers her coffee, insisting that she have a cup. As Joanna asks her about the Women's Club, Kit periodically interrupts to make comments about the coffee or about the laundry she's currently folding as they talk, explaining that she's doing laundry for a friend because the friend got sick. But she also answers Joanna's questions about the Women's Club, saying that it just became boring and that everyone lost interest in it.

As Kit speaks, Joanna realizes that she seems like an actress. In fact, *all* of the women in Stepford seem like actresses in commercials for various cleaning products. They're all very pretty and have big breasts, too. Joanna tries to speak frankly to Kit, asking her if she's really happy with her life. But Kit insists that she is, saying that she feels fulfilled because her husband's work is important. If it weren't for her, she says, her husband wouldn't be able to devote so much to his job.

That night, Joanna ventures out with her camera. She wants to take long exposures of Stepford at night, hoping to build up a body of work she can send to the **photography** agency, which has already given her money for a few of her pictures. After taking pictures of various buildings, she decides to venture up toward the Men's Association, since it's certainly the most interesting feature in town. From below, she can see light glowing from the large windows, and she can even make out a few figures milling about inside.

Just as Joanna's changing her lens, a police officer pulls up. He uses his radio for a moment and then starts talking to her. She's nervous about his presence at first, but it becomes clear that he just wants to chat—he asks about her camera, how much it costs, and a number of other things. He then quickly brings the conversation to a close and drives away. When she turns back to the Men's Association, she's disappointed to see that all of the curtains have been drawn. She suddenly wonders if the police officer saw her taking **pictures**, radioed to tell the Men's Association, and then distracted her until they closed the curtains. But then she thinks she's being crazy and paranoid.

*Kit Sunderland seems to have undergone a total transformation. The fact that she was once president of the Women's Club in Stepford suggests that she used to take an active role in the community instead of focusing exclusively on housework. It also indicates that she was possibly interested in gender equality and female empowerment. Now, though, she has no interest in such things whatsoever, hinting that something must have happened to change her outlook.*



*Kit's comments about her husband suggest that she has prioritized his life and ambition over her own—something Joanna herself doesn't want to do. By moving to Stepford, though, it seems as if Joanna is now in a community that expects her to give everything up for her husband.*



*There's an ominous and foreboding quality to the Men's Association building. The fact that it stands on a hill overlooking the rest of Stepford highlights its domineering presence, as if everything that goes on in town is under the Association's surveillance—which, of course, is quite possibly the case.*



*Joanna is beginning to feel suspicious about the Men's Association and the strong influence it has over the town of Stepford. At the same time, though, she feels foolish for hatching far-fetched theories about the Association. This is a good representation of how women living in sexist, male-dominated societies are often made to feel crazy or unhinged for even thinking to challenge the patriarchal system. This kind of doubt makes it that much harder for women to speak out against gender inequality.*



In the coming weeks and months, Joanna spends time playing tennis at Charmaine's house and seeing Bobbie almost every day. Walter, meanwhile, is forced to work late for a long period because of a disaster at work, but by October he's back to coming home on time. Joanna and Walter throw a dinner party and hire a woman from out of town to help them serve the guests. The woman notes that she used to work very frequently in Stepford but that now nobody in the town seems to need her help. She blames it on the formation of the Men's Association—ever since it started up, everyone in Stepford stopped entertaining. Joanna is confused by this, since she assumed the Association has been around forever. But the woman tells her that it's only about six years old.

In the end, the dinner party doesn't go very well. Walter spends the whole time talking about work with one of the other men, and Joanna's out-of-town male friends ogle Charmaine because she's in a lowcut dress. Bobbie, for her part, isn't talkative at the dinner party because she has laryngitis from recording her voice for a project that one of Dave's friends is undertaking—she jokes that the man thinks he's Henry Higgins, but Charmaine says she shouldn't make fun of him. Charmaine also recorded her voice for this man, and she says that, because he's a Capricorn, Bobbie shouldn't mock him: after all, she says, Capricorns get things done.

The next day, Charmaine calls to cancel her and Joanna's weekly tennis game. Her husband, she explains, has gotten a "bee in his bonnet" and has decided that they need a weekend alone to "rediscover each other." She laments that this means he's just going to chase her around the bedroom, and when Joanna jokingly suggests that perhaps she should let him catch her, Charmaine says she doesn't really like sex. She even suggests that no women like sex, but Joanna disagrees. All the same, Charmaine reschedules their tennis game for Thursday.

On Thursday, Joanna shows up at Charmaine's house, but Charmaine doesn't remember making plans to play tennis. In fact, she surprises Joanna by saying that she's done with tennis altogether—it has been taking up too much of her time, which she should be using to do housework. Joanna can't believe her ears and reminds Charmaine that she has a housekeeper to do the cleaning, but Charmaine says they fired the housekeeper. She also says she needs to get back to cleaning the house, since her husband doesn't deserve to live in such sloppy conditions. Joanna thinks she's kidding, but Charmaine insists that her husband is actually pretty great. She says that she has been lazy and too preoccupied with herself, but now she's going to "do right by" her husband.

*It's notable that the woman Joanna hired tells her that the Men's Association is only about six years old, since the newspaper article she found about the Women's Club was from roughly six years ago. It seems, then, that the Women's Club disbanded at the same time that the Men's Association was founded. If this is the case, then Stepford appears to have undergone a sudden shift, pivoting away from a more progressive community and becoming more outdated and patriarchal.*



*Henry Higgins is a fictional professor of phonetics (the study of speech sounds), so Bobbie's comment suggests that the person who recorded her voice fancies himself some sort of speech specialist, though it's not yet clear how this detail is relevant to the larger plot. On another note, the fact that Walter spends most of the dinner party talking to another man about work suggests that, despite his supposedly progressive and enlightened views about gender equality, he still has a tendency to exclude women.*



*It's clear that Charmaine doesn't have a very good relationship with her husband, who seems unable to satisfy her. Therefore, spending an entire weekend alone with him isn't something Charmaine is particularly looking forward to—a detail that will soon become rather important.*



*Charmaine's opinions about her husband—and, in fact, life in general—have changed rather drastically. Before spending some alone time with her husband, the mere idea of being with him for an entire weekend was upsetting to her. Now, though, she goes on at length about how he deserves to be treated well. And what this means, according to her, is that she should start making more of an effort to "do right by" him. Although she has never cared about housework before, she now seems fixated on the idea of making sure everything is perfect for her husband, which implies that something happened over the weekend that fundamentally changed her perspective.*





Again, Joanna thinks Charmaine is kidding, but then Charmaine tells her to look out the back window, where workers are tearing up the tennis court to make room for a putting green. Charmaine's husband plays golf, so Charmaine is giving up tennis and letting him repurpose that area of the backyard. Joanna asks if Charmaine's husband hypnotized her, but Charmaine just says that nothing happened and that she's lucky to have him. Then she offers Joanna coffee and suggests that they can keep talking while she cleans. Horrified, Joanna backs away and says she'll talk to Charmaine later.

*It's now overwhelmingly clear that something has happened to Charmaine. She has always loved tennis, but now she has not only decided to stop playing so much but also to rip up the court altogether—and to accommodate her husband's interest in golf, no less. Whereas she previously didn't care much about her husband, she now prioritizes his wants and needs above all else. What's more, the fact that she asks if Joanna wants a cup of coffee while she cleans is noteworthy, since this is exactly what Kit Sundersen offered when Joanna went to see her. There is, then, an eerie similarity at play in the way Charmaine and Kit behave.*



A few days later, Joanna meets up with Bobbie, who has gone to see Charmaine's transformation for herself (Walter, for his part, suggests that Charmaine's husband simply must have "laid the law down to her"). At lunch, Bobbie makes Joanna promise not to call her crazy and then presents a theory: there must be some sort of chemical, she says, that has turned all of the women in Stepford into subservient, doting wives. She references a recent magazine article about a chemical leak in El Paso, Texas, where chemicals were tranquilizing the community and, as a result, causing a decrease in crime. Joanna isn't so sure—it seems like a crazy theory, even if it's true that something seems strange about the way the women in Stepford behave.

*Bobbie's theory is somewhat far-fetched, but this just goes to show how bewildering it must feel to live in a community where all the women behave in the same subservient way. By suggesting that there's some kind of chemical leak responsible for this behavior, Bobbie grasps for any possible way of understanding the otherwise perplexing situation around her. Meanwhile, though, Walter is hesitant to recognize that anything is amiss, which is a good illustration of how unfortunately common it is for men to overlook the effects of sexism because they don't experience it firsthand.*



Bobbie points out that Charmaine used to play tennis with another woman who suddenly lost interest, which is why she was so happy when she found Joanna. Plus, there's the fact that Kit Sundersen used to be the president of the Women's Club and now has no interest in anything but housework. Bobbie insists that there must be something in the drinking water. And even if there *isn't*, she asks if Joanna's really happy in Stepford. Bobbie recently went to the neighboring town of Norwood and saw all sorts of independent, *real* women—women who were annoyed and stressed and frazzled. Now Bobbie wants to move to Norwood; she's going to ask her husband what he thinks, and she suggests that Joanna should do the same.

*Bobbie has recognized a pattern at play in Stepford—a pattern in which free-thinking, independent women suddenly lose interest in anything other than serving and pleasing their husbands. Even if chemicals in the drinking water aren't responsible for this phenomenon, Bobbie wants to move. After all, it's clear that Stepford isn't a forward-thinking, progressive place that promotes gender equality. With or without a conspiracy theory, Bobbie can tell that the town is stuck in an outdated, sexist way of life.*



That night, Walter asks Joanna what's bothering her. She didn't intend to bring it up, but she tells him about Bobbie's theory about chemicals. She also says that Bobbie wants to move. Walter asks if Joanna wants to move, and though she doesn't say yes, he can sense that there is part of her that does. She admits that she might be happier elsewhere, and he says that if that's the case, she should continue to think about it. She's surprised that he's not immediately opposed to the idea, and he assures her that he just wants her to be happy. The only thing he wouldn't want to do is move before the end of the school year. She agrees with this and says she'll tell him if she ends up realizing she truly wants to leave.

Dave had the same reaction as Walter: he isn't opposed to moving but doesn't want to do it before the end of the school year. In the meantime, Bobbie tells Joanna, she's going to drink bottled water. They decide to write a letter to the Department of Health about their concerns regarding potential chemicals in the area.

Around this time, Claude Axhelm comes over to speak to Joanna. He's the one who has been recording everyone's voice for some kind of strange project involving speech patterns. He says that he records the men at the Men's Association and the women in their homes. He will leave the tape recorder with Joanna, along with a binder full of pages she's supposed to read aloud while taping herself. When she sits down to tape herself shortly after Thanksgiving, she sees a neighbor across the street busily cleaning the house. She thinks, "They never stop, these Stepford Wives." Realizing this sounds like the first line of a poem, she adds: "They work like robots all their lives." Then she starts taping herself while looking at the framed **drawing** that Ike Mazzard gave her. "Taker. Takes. Taking," she reads into the microphone.

## CHAPTER 2

Joanna has decided that she'll only move if she finds a perfect house. Bobbie, on the other hand, is pushing forward with the idea, spending almost every day looking at new houses. Joanna accompanies her and listens to a real estate agent talk about how much more "with-it" the neighboring town of Eastbridge is compared to Stepford—there's even a National Organization for Women chapter. Around this time, Bobbie and Joanna receive a response from the Department of Health, which assures them that the area is free of any toxic chemicals. Still suspicious, Bobbie continues drinking bottled water.

*Walter appears quite supportive in this moment. Instead of framing the idea of moving as crazy and unnecessary, he recognizes that it might be something Joanna wants to do. In other words, he acknowledges that moving out of Stepford could be a legitimate way for Joanna to respond to the town's outdated, sexist environment. He thus lends Joanna some emotional support by agreeing to go along with whatever she decides—as long as they stay in Stepford through the end of the year.*



*Although their husbands support the idea of moving, Bobbie and Joanna don't want to just sit around until the end of the year. They don't, in other words, want to wait until things get worse. Therefore, they take action by writing to the Department of Health, demonstrating their unwillingness to be passive when it comes to their own well-being.*



*At this point in the novel, it's still unclear what Claude Axhelm's recording project has to do with anything. It is clear, however, that Joanna is increasingly aware of how subservient and passive the women in Stepford seem—so subservient and passive that it's as if they "work like robots all their lives." In many ways, then, Joanna's attempt to preserve her individuality and autonomy is an attempt to resist the highly limited life of a robot designed to serve the needs of a male-dominated society.*



*The uncertainty about what, exactly, is going on in Stepford builds suspense. Bobbie and Joanna have a clear sense that something is amiss, but they can't actually point to any sort of tangible proof, other than that Charmaine has undergone a sudden transformation—which, of course, could just be a coincidence, since people do sometimes change of their own volition. Without any proof that something sinister is going on, then, Joanna and Bobbie are forced to tensely wait to see what will happen next.*



Shortly before Christmas, Bobbie asks Joanna if she and Walter will watch one of her kids for the weekend. She explains that she and Dave have decided to spend a weekend all by themselves—a sort of second honeymoon. Joanna thinks this sounds nice and agrees to watch Bobbie's son.

Before the weekend comes, Joanna goes to the library and sits next to a Black woman who has recently moved to the area. She has already heard through the grapevine that a Black family bought a house in Stepford, and she's eager to make the woman feel welcome, but she's unsure how to start up a conversation—but then the woman starts talking about how long it's taking the librarian to appear from behind the desk. She introduces herself as Ruthanne Henry, and Joanna recognizes her as the author of a children's book she likes to read to Kim. The two women hit it off. Eventually, Ruthanne hints that the other women she has met in Stepford aren't quite as warm and welcoming. Joanna quickly insists that it's not because Stepford is racist but because of how strange the women are, going on to explain her and Bobbie's theories.

That weekend is complete chaos for Joanna as she tries to get her kids and Bobbie's son to behave. By the end of the day on Sunday, she's deeply relieved to see Bobbie and Dave coming up to the front door to pick up their son. They both look very good, prompting Joanna to conclude that they really needed the alone time. At one point, there's a brief pause in the conversation where Bobbie would usually say something funny, but she doesn't say anything. Joanna doesn't think much of this and bids farewell to Bobbie and Dave.

When Bobbie goes to kiss Walter goodbye on the cheek, Walter hesitates for a moment, as if he doesn't want to kiss her. After they're gone, Joanna asks Walter why he hesitated, and he claims it's because he thinks kisses on the cheek are showy and pointless. Either way, they both agree that Bobbie looks better than they've ever seen her. In fact, Joanna is so impressed by how rejuvenated her friend seems that she says perhaps she and Walter should have their own weekend alone. Walter agrees. They plan to do so after the holidays.

*Bobbie's request seems unremarkable—unless, that is, readers recall that Charmaine's abrupt transformation into a passive and subservient wife took place right after she spent a weekend alone with her husband. But there's nothing that directly links her transformation to the weekend she spent with her husband, which is most likely why it doesn't even occur to Joanna to worry about Bobbie.*



*Joanna shares her and Bobbie's theories with Ruthanne, since Ruthanne will inevitably encounter the same kind of behavior that Joanna herself ran into when she first moved to Stepford. However, it's rather naïve of Joanna to insist that Stepford isn't a racist community—after all, it's a wealthy, exclusive suburb that clings tightly to outdated ways of thinking, so it's highly likely that Ruthanne will encounter some racism, even if it's not particularly overt. Still, Joanna's friendly support is most likely a welcome development in Ruthanne's life, since Joanna offers Ruthanne the same kind of camaraderie that she herself yearned for when she first moved to Stepford.*



*Given that Charmaine underwent a huge change right after spending a weekend with her husband, it's notable that Joanna senses something different about Bobbie when she comes to pick up her son. Joanna, however, doesn't seem to think much of this, since it's just a passing moment. It thus remains unclear whether or not Bobbie has changed.*



*At this point, it becomes quite clear that Joanna hasn't made the connection between Charmaine's transformation and the fact that she spent a weekend alone with her husband right before the abrupt change. In fact, she's so unaware of this potential link that she suggests that she and Walter should spend a weekend alone. This development ratchets up the suspense, especially when Walter agrees to Joanna's idea after having hesitated to kiss Bobbie, which is a possible sign that he knows something happened to her over the weekend.*



Two days pass. Joanna doesn't hear from Bobbie, which is strange because she usually calls every day. Finally, Joanna calls her and is somewhat put off by the way her friend sounds: sort of "flat" and distracted. She asks if Bobbie went house-hunting, but Bobbie says she went shopping instead, prompting Joanna to wonder why she didn't invite her. When they hang up, Joanna wonders if Bobbie and Dave smoked pot over the weekend—maybe that's why Bobbie seems different. She brings it up with Walter, but he says she's probably just tired from all the house hunting she has been doing. When Joanna suggests that Bobbie seemed strange on Sunday, he says he didn't notice. "You're not going to start in with that chemical business, are you?" he says.

The next day, Joanna goes to Bobbie's. Bobbie apologizes for forgetting that they planned to get together—she has been busy. She invites Joanna inside and offers her a sandwich. Joanna notices that her friend looks as fresh and presentable as she did on Sunday, and that she must be wearing a push-up bra. Bobbie acknowledges that she has changed, saying that she realized she was being "sloppy and self-indulgent." She adds that there's no shame in being a "good homemaker," especially since doing this is like contributing to Dave's career, too. She has also decided to pay more attention to the way she looks. Joanna tries to shake Bobbie out of her apparent trance by saying that whatever they were afraid of has finally gotten her, but Bobbie disagrees, saying that she was foolish earlier and that Stepford is a very healthy place to live.

Joanna rushes home and calls Walter at the office. She's determined to move out of Stepford as soon as possible, but she can't find their banking information to figure out how much money they have. Walter tells her that he has the banking materials because he has been buying some stocks on Dave's advice. He's distressed by Joanna's urgency and demands that she refrain from doing anything until he gets home—but she hangs up and calls the real estate agent, telling her to find out the lowest possible asking price for a house she recently saw with Bobbie. She also calls her old broker and says that she might want to relist their house.

*It seems obvious that Bobbie has undergone the same transformation as Charmaine. Joanna is seemingly beginning to get suspicious of this, though she doesn't appear ready to fully suggest that this is what happened. Still, when she hints at this change, Walter condescendingly writes off the possibility, making the entire notion of "that chemical business" seem absurd. Instead, he pins Bobbie's potential change on the fact that she has been house hunting. In doing so, he subtly disparages her—and, in turn, his own wife—for wanting to move out of Stepford.*



*Joanna now sees that Bobbie has undoubtedly changed. After all, Bobbie says things that are eerily similar to what Charmaine said when Joanna last visited her. In particular, both women suggest that devoting themselves to housework is the least they can do for their hardworking husbands, who—they imply—deserve to be pampered by their wives. While it was certainly surprising that Charmaine adopted such ideas, it's even more shocking that Bobbie has somehow been forced to make this change, since she was a devoted feminist who abhorred the idea of devoting her life to housework and little else. And if Bobbie can be made to change in this way, it's clear that Joanna could, too.*



*Joanna has good reason to be frightened, now that she knows Bobbie changed after a weekend alone with her husband. She also has good reason to suspect Walter, though it's unclear whether or not she's suspicious of him. In fact, she still seems to trust him, given that she calls him and announces her intentions to move out of Stepford. He responds by trying to calm her down, and though it's possible that he's just trying to help her collect herself before doing anything, it's also possible that he's trying to make her feel crazy so that he can later pull the same trick on her that Dave pulled on Bobbie.*



Walter is angry when he gets home, thinking that Joanna is blowing things out of proportion. But Joanna insists that whatever happens to women in Stepford clearly takes four months to kick in—that’s what happened to both Charmaine and Bobbie. Joanna moved to Stepford one month after Bobbie, meaning that she only has a month before she’ll lose herself. But Walter says there’s nothing in Stepford that makes women change, arguing that Charmaine and Bobbie changed for other reasons: because they realized they had been lazy. What’s so wrong with Bobbie starting to care about her looks, anyway? Walter thinks it wouldn’t hurt Joanna to do the same.

Joanna is taken aback by Walter’s comment about her looks, and she wonders if he wanted to move to Stepford because somebody told him she would change. Walter denies this accusation and instead says that he’s not moving, though he’s trying to understand things from Joanna’s perspective. Still, he thinks she’s being “irrational” and “a little hysterical,” so he wants her to see a psychiatrist. He’ll consider moving if Joanna visits a therapist to confirm she isn’t having a mental breakdown. Walter proposes a therapist, but Joanna refuses because he’s part of the Men’s Association and his wife is just like all the other women in Stepford.

As she talks to Walter, Joanna realizes that both Charmaine and Bobbie changed after spending a weekend alone with their husbands. She now fears that this is what will happen to her, but Walter reminds her that *she* was the one to propose that they spend a weekend alone after the holidays. Still, she’s apprehensive. But she eventually agrees to see a psychiatrist of her own choosing.

Joanna books an appointment with Dr. Margaret Fancher, whose practice is several towns over. She leaves her children at Bobbie’s house when she goes to the appointment, briefly going inside and asking Bobbie what happened to her—but Bobbie says she has just started caring about her appearance a bit more, though it looks like she has lost about ten pounds in the course of a week. She also speaks appreciatively about Dave and a particular cleaning product, encouraging Joanna to hurry out of the house.

*In this scene, Walter starts to seem a lot less progressive and enlightened than Joanna previously thought he was. Not only does he suggest that Joanna should change her looks, but he also says that Charmaine and Bobbie were lazy because they didn’t devote themselves to housework. In other words, he thinks it’s reasonable for husbands to expect their wives to unquestioningly dedicate themselves to housework—a viewpoint that should make Joanna very worried, since it suggests that perhaps Walter wouldn’t mind if she underwent the same transformation as Bobbie and Charmaine.*



*When Walter calls Joanna “irrational” and “hysterical,” he treats her with complete condescension. Instead of recognizing the legitimacy of her concerns, he tries to make her feel crazy in an attempt to get her to doubt herself—a common technique known as “gaslighting,” which sexist men in positions of power often use to delegitimize women’s concerns about mistreatment and inequality.*



*Joanna is now suspicious of Walter but not so suspicious that she completely withdraws from him. Instead, she agrees to go along with his idea for her to see a therapist, perhaps thinking that she’ll be better able to convince him to move after playing along with his proposal. She also probably feels somewhat comforted by the fact that the sudden transformation seems to take place after a woman has lived in Stepford for four months, meaning that she has at least a few weeks of safety—a period she can use to make sure she’ll be able to avoid the same fate as Bobbie and Charmaine.*



*Again, Bobbie’s behavior makes it glaringly clear that something drastic has happened to her. Not only does she look different, but she even takes the time to speak admiringly about a cleaning product—something she would never have done before, since she always found such behavior abhorrent. Seeing Bobbie most likely motivates Joanna even more intensely in her quest to escape Stepford.*



Dr. Margaret Fancher is a kind, sympathetic woman who listens patiently to everything Joanna has to say. She doesn't discount Joanna's feelings, recognizing how unfulfilling it must feel to live in a town where all of the women are only interested in doing housework and pleasing their husbands. But she isn't so sure about Joanna's various theories—she doesn't think there's anything strange going on. Rather, she just thinks Joanna is having a difficult time adjusting to a more domestic lifestyle than the one she led in New York City. She suggests that Joanna is torn between “the old conventions on the one hand, and the *new* conventions of the liberated woman on the other.” Urging her not to move just yet, she prescribes her some tranquilizers.

Joanna goes straight from therapy to the library, where she goes into the basement to look through back issues of the local paper. She spends hours down there, flipping through the “Notes on Newcomers” section of each paper and also looking out for any mention of the Men's Association or the (now disbanded) Women's Club in Stepford. As she goes through the papers, she sees just how many of the women she now knows in Stepford were deeply involved in the Women's Club.

But the Stepford Women's Club disbanded around the time Dale Gribble and his wife moved to town from California, where—Joanna learns in a “Notes on Newcomers”—he used to work at Disneyland to help make the lifelike presidential robots, which are capable of moving and talking like humans. When she makes this discovery, Joanna starts uncontrollably laughing. She laughs so much that she attracts the librarian's attention, who tells her the library is closing. Joanna walks out of the building still laughing.

*It's unsurprising that Dr. Fancher doesn't think Joanna's theories are realistic—after all, they aren't realistic, even if they're accurate. To her credit, Dr. Fancher ends up recognizing the difficulties of living in a community that has outdated expectations surrounding women leading domestic lives. Unfortunately, though, Joanna's problem isn't just that she has experienced something of a culture shock by moving from New York City to Stepford—it's that there's an imminent threat to the way she leads her life. Therefore, Dr. Fancher's advice isn't that helpful.*



*Joanna seems to understand that her session with Dr. Margaret Fancher has done nothing that will help her convince Walter to move, so now she's taking the situation into her own hands by going to the library to research what, exactly, has been happening in Stepford. What she needs, it seems, is more information about what has been going on—information that will perhaps help her decide what her next course of action should be.*



*Joanna's discovery hints at the possibility that Dale Gribble and the rest of the Men's Association members have been turning the women of Stepford into lifelike robots. This would align with the fact that they all seem to behave the same way. It would also make sense of Claude Axhelm's recording project, which could be the Association's way of perfecting the robots' voices. It's also possible that Ike Mazzard's drawings of the women serve as templates for their new bodies. The fact that this discovery makes Joanna uncontrollably laugh is noteworthy, as the novel subtly invites readers to question her sanity. In turn, the novel manages to maintain some suspense: is Joanna right in thinking that the men of Stepford have an elaborate plan to turn all of their wives into robots? Or is Joanna herself out of touch with reality, perhaps because of the stress of living in such a stifling community? By forcing readers to ask such questions, the novel manages to put them in the same position that many women are in when patriarchal systems of power force them to doubt themselves.*



When Joanna gets home, Walter is angry and worried because she didn't call to say she was at the library. He thought she had gotten in a crash, but she brushes off his concern. She informs him that she will be taking the kids to the city right away—she won't spend another minute in Stepford. She'll call Walter in a couple days, or perhaps she'll have a lawyer contact him. She then tells him that she knows what he and Dale Gribble—and everyone else in the Men's Association—are up to: they're turning their wives into robots. Walter denies this, apparently finding the claim absurd. Still, Joanna calls out for the kids so she can take them away, but Walter informs her that he sent them away for the night.

Joanna feels as if Walter has moved up their weekend alone together. Terrified, she tries to leave the house, but Walter blocks her path, making it impossible for her to go downstairs. She asks him what Dale Gribble and the other men do with their *real* wives once they create the robots—do they burn them or throw them in a pond? Her questions only make Walter all the more determined to get her to lie down, saying he won't let her out of the house when she's talking like this. Finally, she agrees and goes into the bedroom, though she locks the door and refuses to let him in, saying that she wants some time to rest on her own. He agrees to leave her be and goes downstairs.

Joanna dresses in the warmest clothes she can find and then opens the window, planning to slip out and make a break for it. But the storm window won't budge. As she tries to figure out how to leave, she hears Walter dialing the phone downstairs and fears that he's calling Dale Gribble. She creeps to the top of the stairs and hears him say, "...not sure I can handle her myself..." While he's preoccupied, she dashes down the hall and out the door, sprinting toward the dark woods.

Joanna's plan is to make her way to Ruthanne Henry's house, since she's the only other woman in Stepford who hasn't been turned into a robot. But getting there will take a long time on foot, especially in the snow. Plus, she has to hide every time a car goes by, as she suspects that Walter and the other men will be looking for her. Sure enough, when one car goes by, Joanna realizes that somebody is shining a flashlight out of the window. As she makes her way through the neighborhood, she eventually gets cornered by three men with flashlights, who chase her into a dead-end. She has a broken branch in her hand and threatens to hit them if they approach, but they insist—with kind voices—that they're only there to help her.

*The fact that Walter sent the children away for the night suggests that Joanna has good reason to be concerned—he wants to be alone with her, and though he insists that this is simply because she's acting crazy, it's also possible that he doesn't want the kids to see what he and the other members of the Men's Association are going to do to her.*



*Again, Walter treats Joanna like she's crazy, and though his concern could be genuine, it also might be a way for him to get her to doubt herself. If this is the case, then he's employing a common technique used by sexist men in positions of power to discount legitimate concerns that women might raise about gender inequality and mistreatment. It's possible, in other words, that Walter is gaslighting Joanna. But Joanna remains steadfast in her conviction, agreeing to play along with Walter's suggestions only because this is clearly the only way she'll have a chance of getting away from him.*



*Joanna manages to escape the house by tricking Walter into thinking she's doing what he wants. Whereas he (possibly) deceives her by trying to make her feel crazy, she ends up deceiving him by putting him at ease. And yet, it's still not necessarily clear to readers whether or not Joanna's theory about robots is actually accurate. This tension makes the plot that much more suspenseful, as readers are encouraged to doubt Joanna in the same way that women are often forced to doubt their own misgivings about sexist circumstances.*



*Joanna ultimately fails to escape the men of Stepford, which is a good illustration of how difficult it is for women to break out of male-dominated power structures. In the same way that she is unable to run away from the dangers of living in Stepford, many women living in patriarchal societies are hard-pressed to escape sexist cultural norms.*



The three men sound very sympathetic. They say that Walter told them what Joanna thinks is going on—they're there to assure her that nobody's making robots out of women! They note that Joanna must think they're all a lot smarter than they are, but she points out that many of them work in advanced technical fields; they're the people who put a man on the moon, she says. But they just chuckle, asking each other if any of them put a man on the moon. None of them have. Plus, if they knew how to make such realistic robots, they point out, they surely would have found some way to profit from the idea by now. But Joanna thinks that maybe turning their wives into robots is just a test run.

Finally, one of the men asks if it would help Joanna to see one of these supposed "robots" bleed. Would she change her mind if one of the women nicked their finger and blood came out? Joanna thinks for a moment and then admits that this *would* help dispel her fears. She thus agrees to follow the men at a distance—while shining her flashlight on them so they know she's still there—until they get to Bobbie's house. One of the men runs ahead to make sure Bobbie is home and to ask if she'd be willing to lightly cut her finger.

On the walk to Bobbie's, Joanna realizes she has been wrong all along. She can just tell that Bobbie will bleed. If the men had wanted to kill her, they already would have. She just feels cold and tired now, and she thinks about how it's clearly a coincidence that Dale Coba worked on the robots at Disneyland. She feels slightly embarrassed for descending into "madness," and she plans to follow up with Dr. Margaret Fancher when all of this is over. She feels guilty for distrusting Walter, too.

Joanna and the men reach Bobbie's house. The men say they'll wait outside while Joanna goes inside with Bobbie, but Joanna backtracks and says Bobbie doesn't have to cut herself. Still, the men encourage her to follow through with the plan. They say that it'd be good to completely put her doubts to rest, just to make sure she doesn't start wondering again later.

*The men respond to Joanna's theory as if it's far-fetched and ridiculous—which, of course, it is. But that's not to say it isn't accurate. At this point in the novel, it's not really clear whether or not Joanna is onto something legitimate, and this uncertainty reflects the doubt women are often made to feel after challenging sexist cultural norms.*



*It's still unclear whether or not Joanna's theory is accurate. The novel thus sustains the level of suspense, as Joanna goes to further investigate her theory—but under the supervision of three members of the Men's Association, meaning that she has to remain on guard.*



*The members of the Men's Association have successfully disarmed Joanna by causing her to doubt herself. Of course, it's still unclear to readers whether or not this is just a tactic used by the men to convince Joanna to do what they want. As it stands, things could really go either way: it's possible that Joanna has simply been paranoid and desperately searching for ways to understand her concerns, but it's also possible that the men really are turning the women of Stepford into robots. Once again, this ambiguity reflects how difficult it can be to take a stand against powerful, sexist institutions, which often frame women who accuse them of sexism as irrational and out of touch with reality.*



*Joanna now fully doubts herself. She even seems to be somewhat embarrassed for causing a stir in the community—a good indication of the extent to which the members of the Men's Association have succeeded in getting her to question her thought process and even her sanity.*





Joanna goes into the kitchen with Bobbie, who is perfectly happy to help put her friend's mind at ease. As they talk, loud rock music plays from upstairs. When Joanna asks what it is, Bobbie says Dave must be listening to music with the kids. She stands over the sink with a huge knife—so big that Joanna says she'll accidentally cut her whole *hand* off, but Bobbie says she'll be careful. She then tells Joanna to get closer. Again, Joanna says Bobbie doesn't have to cut herself, adding that she's going to see a therapist, which will ease her mind more than seeing her friend use the knife. Still, Bobbie urges her to come forward, saying, "The men are waiting."

*This section of the novel ends without revealing what happens next. However, the fact that Bobbie pulls out such a big knife and repeatedly tells Joanna to come closer is extremely ominous. What's more, the loud music blaring upstairs could be intended to cover up the sounds of Joanna's screams, masking the sound of her murder so that Bobbie and Dave's children don't know what's going on. Bobbie's final line in the novel—"The men are waiting"—is a fitting thing for her to say, now that she's so concerned about pleasing her husband. Joanna herself is likely to adopt the same concern after the members of the Men's Association are finished with her.*



## CHAPTER 3

Ruthanne Henry goes grocery shopping. She hasn't been out of the house much recently, since she has been working so hard on her next children's book. She hates grocery shopping in Stepford, since all of the women move so slowly down the aisles and fill their carts in an orderly fashion. As she tosses things in her own cart, Ruthanne passes Joanna Eberhart. She looks incredible. Ruthanne comments on how pretty she looks, but Joanna just says that she has been caring for herself a little better recently. When Ruthanne asks what Joanna has been up to these days, Joanna says that she has been busy with housework. Ruthanne asks about her **photography**, but Joanna says she gave photography up—she wasn't that good, anyway, and she now feels that doing housework is fulfilling enough.

*It's now revealed that Joanna has been turned into a subservient robot. She didn't used to care about housework, preferring to concentrate on her semi-professional photography career—now, though, she not only says that she has been very busy with housework but also says she has given up photography altogether. This revelation is a surefire indication that the members of the Men's Association ultimately succeeded in turning her into a robot designed to serve her husband's needs.*



Joanna insists that she's much happier lately, adding that her family is also better off now that she's devoting more time to her home life. Somewhat perplexed, Ruthanne suggests that they should have lunch soon, since she's close to finishing her book. Joanna noncommittally agrees and then says goodbye. That night, Ruthanne tries in vain to work on the book, but she doesn't get in the right headspace until late in the evening. Wanting to work more, she asks her husband if he can take the kids out for dinner. He doesn't mind, he says, and she thanks him for giving her the time to work. "I want to get it done with," she says. "Otherwise, I won't enjoy next weekend."

*The implication at the very end of The Stepford Wives is that Ruthanne Henry is only a few days from succumbing to the same fate as Joanna, Bobbie, and Charmaine—and, of course, all of the other women living in Stepford. It's clear that she and her husband have plans to spend the weekend alone, which is when she will be turned into a robot. The unsettling thing about the novel's ending, then, is that it seems to suggest that escaping an oppressive, sexist community like Stepford is nearly impossible. Joanna even figured out what was happening, and she still couldn't save herself, which is an uncomfortable reminder of how hard it can be to challenge systems of power founded on sexism and inequality.*





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