

# “I’m Not a Feminist but…”

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In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. In the fifty years since its publication, Americans have repeatedly redefined the meaning of *ideal man* and *ideal woman*. As they confronted economic upheavals, sixties activism, and the rise of conservatism, they repeatedly found it necessary to reassess their assumptions about gender, social roles, individual rights and social responsibilities. The challenge for historians is how to get at these assumptions. How can we determine how “ordinary” people understood the place of men and women in society and how did their understanding change over time?

One method is to use top-grossing films as cultural artifacts. These films were as successful as they were in part because they gave audiences what they wanted. When Americans laid down their hard-earned money to see a film, they chose movies that did not violate their most cherished beliefs. Well aware of this, Hollywood tried hard to create films that conformed to, even harnessed, these beliefs. By analyzing several films—among them *The Graduate*, *Love Story*, *Fatal Attraction* and *Titanic*—and by examining the historical context at the time that these films were released, we will be able to determine a great deal about American attitudes toward gender and the ways in which these attitudes changed during the twentieth century.

