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The Suburban Novels of Richard Yates

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To my family

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Foreword

The ambition of this work might be described in five ways. First, it introduces the work of American fiction writer Richard Yates and mentions the critical approaches to be used for the analysis of his work. Second, focuses on the history of American suburbanization and the related tradition of American suburban fiction that reflects this major sociocultural development in the United States. Third, it brings a summary of Yates's life and career to provide a useful context for the subsequent analysis of his work. Fourth, it situates the fiction of Yates within an earlier tradition of the American suburban novel. Last, it attempts to provide a comprehensive critical reading of five suburban novels by Yates.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The present work provides a new comprehensive interpretation of five suburban novels of American writer Richard Yates (1926-1992). His fiction, consisting of seven novels and two volumes of short stories that were published during his lifetime, shows remarkable consistency with which he explores several recurring themes and characters.¹ Principal among these themes is Yates's preoccupation with the presentation of his characters' interesting but failed struggle to find their true identity and purpose in life. One of the aims of this study is to argue for a re-evaluation of Yates's lesser-known works since most critics have so far focused exclusively on Yates's first novel, *Revolutionary Road* (1961), while his other fiction has been mostly ignored. Far from being a one-book-wonder, Yates's work repeatedly showcases the author's trademark narrative voice, vision, and themes in a realist portrayal of suburban and urban America from the 1930s to the 1970s. While critics have objected to the prevailing tone of hopelessness and despair in Yates's fiction, he was too much of a realist to tell the stories of his flawed and failing characters in embellished form. As he said in a 1972 interview, "easy affirmations are silly and cheap [...] but when a tough, honest writer can look squarely at all the horrors of the world, face all the facts, and still come up with a hard-won, joyous celebration of life at the end, that can be wonderful."² Kate Charlton-Jones shares this view of the quiet power of the affirmation of life that Yates's fiction evokes in the reader although it might seem too dark and hopeless at first sight. She claims that to read his "tales of disordered lives is to uncover not misery (though the lives he describes are sad and profoundly lonely), but an insightful, enriching, and often humorous understanding of human weakness and vulnerability."³ Richard Ford claims that "Yates's dark humor seems calculated less to please us than [...] to soften us up for the sterner truths [...] invites us to pay attention, have a care, take heed, live life as if it mattered what we do, inasmuch as to do less risks it all."⁴ Yates's style is lucid yet hard to specify since, according to Stewart O'Nan, he "wrote about the mundane sadness of

¹ To this list, the posthumously published volume of collected stories should also be added (see *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates* (New York: Holt, 2001)). While it includes the entire two book-length short story collections that had been published before (*Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* and *Liars in Love*), it also brings a section of several previously uncollected stories.

² DeWitt Henry, and Geoffrey Clark, "An Interview with Richard Yates," *Ploughshares* 1, no. 3 (1972): 69, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40349860>.

³ Kate Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 2.

⁴ Richard Ford, "Essay; American Beauty (Circa 1955)," *New York Times* April 9, 2000, section 7, 16, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/09/books/essay-american-beauty-circa-1955.html>.

domestic life in language that rarely if ever draws attention to itself. There is nothing fussy or pretentious about his style. If anything, his work could be called simple or traditional, conventional, free of the metafictionalists' or even the modernists' tricks" while his characters try to deny the fact that their lives are shaped "by the shining paradigms of advertising and popular song [and film]" which contrast with "the blunt reality of failure" that Yates's people face as they pay the price for subscribing to unrealistic dreams.⁵

My approach to the analysis of Yates's fiction is somewhat pluralistic. As Oscar Cargill writes, the task of the literary critic is not "to get the author's meaning [...], but to procure a viable meaning appropriate to the critic's time and place" which means "employing not any one method in interpreting a work of art but every method which might prove efficient."⁶ Consequently, I use a mixture of the historical-biographical approach, thematic analysis, close reading, and the psychological approach when dealing with Yates's suburban fiction.

The second chapter of this text brings a short sociocultural history of American suburbanization from the eighteenth to the early twenty-first century. This chapter is included as Yates's fiction under scrutiny here often draws on historical facts of life in the American suburbs, and requires the reader to be aware of the complexities and challenges of the suburban lifestyle being portrayed in the novels. I survey not only the history of suburban architecture and transportation service but also the complex ways in which the suburbs function as an influence on the formation of American identities including the role of gender roles, family, and domesticity.

The biographical approach, while it may seem outdated to proponents of the recent schools of revisionist criticism, seems useful for dealing with the fiction of Yates, an author who was not afraid of using thinly-disguised autobiographical details, characters, and relevant historical trends and events in his fiction. He is also an author whose writings faithfully reflect the major challenges in American society and culture in the period which his work covers—from the 1930s to the 1970s. For this reason, a survey of the principal facts and defining events in the author's life and career is provided in the third chapter since Yates's life, unlike the period in American history that is reflected his fiction, is not common

⁵ Stewart O'Nan, "The Lost World of Richard Yates," *Boston Review*, October 1, 1999, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/stewart-onan-the-lost-world-of-richard-yates/>. Interestingly, many of the complaints that O'Nan makes in the article about the nadir of Yates's literary reputation as of late 1990s soon changed as his very essay, as well as Blake Bailey's 2003 major biography of Yates, and the 2008 Hollywood production of *Revolutionary Road* contributed to a meteoric rise of Yates's reputation including soaring book sales, multiple translations into many languages, and a rise of critical and scholarly attention to his fiction.

⁶ Oscar Cargill, *Toward a Pluralistic Criticism* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), xiii-xiv.

knowledge and provides essential background for the study of his literary representation of the urban and suburban characters, conflicts, and themes.

The fourth chapter situates Yates's work within the American tradition of the suburban novel that starts with *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis and ends with Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*. While a large body of suburban fiction has been published since Wilson's bestselling novel, Yates's style and thematic range hardly developed after the late 1950s. His style was formed in the short story form he perfected in the 1950s, and he kept revisiting a limited range of urban and suburban themes in his fiction for the rest of his career.⁷ In the fourth chapter, I thus survey the principal American predecessor's to Yates's suburban novels that contribute to the formation of his bleak yet penetrating vision of American suburbs as contested space in which the identity of people is defined by their family as well as community position and status in relation to the socially prescribed norms.

In *Imagined Human Beings*, American critic Bernard J. Paris argues that psychological and psychoanalytical theory of mental disorders might enrich literary criticism since it "provides categories of understanding that help us to recover the intuitions of the great writers about the working of the human psyche, and these intuitions, once recovered, become part of our conceptual understanding of life."⁸ The psychological approach to the interpretation of literature thus might "give us a fuller grasp of human experience than either [field] provides by itself."⁹ Paris has tested the psychological approach to literature on dozens of great works of western fiction and drama, drawing on the little-known theory of Karen Horney (1885-1952), an important German-American psychoanalyst whose work on character pathology, especially neurosis, he uses in his numerous psychological analyses of great works of American, British, and French fiction and drama.¹⁰

Between 1937 and 1950, Horney published several essential books on psychoanalysis, neurosis, and its treatment by analysts as well as self-treatment by the patients themselves. In *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (1937), she examines the development of neurotic symptoms in people and specifies the basic principles of her theory of neurosis through which she articulates the pathological development of a person's sense

⁷ This is not to say that Yates was unaware of the rise of new suburban fiction in the 1940s and 1950s that includes the work of John Cheever, John Updike, Philip Roth, and many other authors. For more details on his influences and his attitude to the other writers, see DeWitt and Clark, "An Interview with Richard Yates," 65-78, as well as my discussion of Yates's career in the third chapter below.

⁸ Bernard J. Paris, *Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 8.

⁹ Paris, *Imagined Human Beings*, 8.

¹⁰ For a full range of Paris's application of this approach to literature over his career that started in the 1960s, see his introductory chapter in Paris, *Imagined Human Beings*, 3-16. I outline the basis of Horney's theory of neurosis in more detail here since it is relatively unknown and the Horneyan analyses of character in Yates's fiction are used multiple times in the last chapter which analyzes the two selected Yates suburban novels.

of identity and the ways people respond to crises and conflicts.¹¹ Horney's theory of character pathology emphasizes the importance of sociocultural factors in the development of neurosis and downplays the importance of hereditary and unconscious factors that had been postulated by Freud and his followers.¹² She believes that one's family and social environment places significant demands on the individual, which often leads to feelings of inadequacy. In particular, she argues that the social pressure on the achievement of success and recognition, particularly in terms of material wealth and status, creates a culture of competition that further exacerbates one's insecurity and anxiety.¹³ As a way of treating the neurotic symptoms in people, Horney develops a humanistic approach to psychotherapy that focuses on helping individuals to develop a sense of self-awareness and self-realization. She traces the source of modern dissatisfaction with life and mental problems of individual people in their childhood but pays attention to anxiety inducing factors in adult life as well. While Freudian psychology also examines childhood as a formative period in people's lives, Horney argues that "the main reason why a child does not receive enough warmth and affection lies in the parents' inability to give it on account of their own neuroses."¹⁴ The child's "future feelings of immense insecurity" in adulthood are fueled by factors such as "the self-sacrificing attitude of an 'ideal' mother."¹⁵ She believes that by understanding and accepting themselves as they are, individuals might overcome their neurotic symptoms and lead more authentic and fulfilling lives. Horney's theory of neurosis and her helpful suggestions on how to combat the neurotic symptoms on one's way toward mental health represents a significant departure from traditional psychoanalytic theories and highlights the importance of considering the social and cultural environment in which an person has lived that contributes to mental distress and allows for a better identification of the problem and its possible remedy.

In another book, *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (1939), Horney launches a persuasive critique of Freud's theory that was widely accepted at the time. She rejects Freud's theory of looking at the individual's past and scrutinizing their psyche in terms of the id, ego, and superego. Instead, Horney emphasizes the importance of analyzing the ways in which humans develop patterns of basic anxiety in their responses to other people, defined as "a feeling of intrinsic weakness and helplessness toward a world perceived as potentially hostile and dangerous."¹⁶ Moreover, Horney suggests ways in which the anxiety and neurotic symptoms might be dealt with using interpersonal and intrapsychic defenses with the aim of

¹¹ Karen Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (New York: Norton, 1937).

¹² Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, 30-41.

¹³ Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, 23-29.

¹⁴ Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, 80.

¹⁵ Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, 80.

¹⁶ Karen Horney, *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1939), 277.

freeing the patients from anxiety, helping them regain their spontaneity and find the courage to be themselves.¹⁷

In her last major book, *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1950) Horney summarizes in the way in which every human individual develops his identity as

the unique alive forces of his real self: the clarity and depth of his own feelings, thoughts, wishes, interests; the ability to tap his own resources, the strength of his will power; the special capacities or gifts he may have; the faculty to express himself, and to relate himself to others with his spontaneous feelings. All this will in time enable him to find his set of values and his aims in life.¹⁸

If these capacities are frustrated by the negative influence of family, society, and culture, one develops a basic anxiety which may grow into various neurotic symptoms which might show in three major ways—one's moving away from people in a strategy of withdrawal, moving toward people (suggesting excessive compliance with the wishes of others), and aggressive move against people to resolve a conflict using physical power or aggressive argumentation.¹⁹ These reactions by the individual also reflect his or her need for affection and approval, for power, for glory, and for perfection, among others. Every individual longs for the fulfilment of least some of these needs and suffers if these needs remain ignored for too long. When this happens, the individual typically withdraws or reacts in one (or more) of the above mentioned ways (withdrawal, aggression, compliance). Since Yates's fiction provides ample examples of the way in which people's lives are governed by their neurotic responses to stressful and traumatic situations, Horneyan analysis of the characters and actions in the five novels under review in this text will help emphasize important aspects of Yates's characterization in his suburban novels.

No single critical method, when applied to the writing of an author, seems to provide a definitive interpretation of that author's work, yet using the suggested mixture of approaches to Yates's fiction has been chosen since this approach builds on the existing body of Yates criticism and adds new angles to the appreciation of his work by itself as well as within the historical context of the dominant sociocultural patterns in prewar and postwar America that Yates chose to portray in the five novels surveyed here. In my conclusion, I wind up the survey of American suburbanization and the analysis of Yates's five suburban novels in a comprehensive summary of the principal ways in which the works, from *Revolutionary Road* to *Cold Spring Harbor*, enlighten one's view of twentieth-century

¹⁷ Horney, *New Ways*, 307.

¹⁸ Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization* (New York: Norton, 1950), 17.

¹⁹ See Karen Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts* (New York: Norton, 1945), 34-47.

American identity in the context and challenges posed by the suburban lifestyle that the protagonists of these novels embrace.

Chapter 2

A Short History of American Suburbanization

No other nation [...] is likely ever to be as suburban as the United States is now.

—Kenneth T. Jackson—

In fact there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house: It was not a home.

—Sinclair Lewis—

We're really happy. Our kids are healthy, we eat good food, and we have a really nice home.

—a Californian suburbanite, quoted by Bill Owens—

Conformity, mediocrity, consumerism, self-homogenization happen in the suburbs, but they also happen everywhere else.

—Michael Ruhlman—

Moving to a house in suburbia is perceived as tantamount to achieving the American dream.

—John Archer—

Such is the attraction of suburbs. You look out your kitchen window to the bedroom window of your neighbor precisely fifteen feet away.

—D. J. Waldie—

As Kenneth T. Jackson explains, until the rapid progress caused by modern advances in transportation and industrialization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suburbs in the United States developed slowly.¹ Even the very word “suburb” suggested, until the nineteenth century, a residential area that was considered “less than urban,” defined by the “inferior manners, narrowness of view, and physical squalor” of its inhabitants.² In comparison, in Europe until the early 1800s, as Leigh Gallagher notes, “the privileged

¹ This chapter is a shortened, revised, and updated version of the first chapter of my 2016 book. See Jiří Flajšar, *The Culture of American Suburbs* (Olomouc: Palacký University, 2016), 15-55.

² Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 19. Jackson's book, along with Hayden's *Building Suburbia* (footnoted below) is the most comprehensive history of American suburbs published to date.

classes retreated to rural settings for restoration and contemplation” in their country mansions or villas, thus avoiding the urban (and early suburban) problems associated with a lack of space, filth, illness, crime, noise, and overcrowding.³ Similarly, Dolores Hayden explains that by this time affluent Americans had started to seek “more delicate amenities than noisy urban centers could offer—pure air, pure water, access to fields and gardens, meadows where children might play, lanes where women might walk, trees that would offer shady relief from the stifling summer heat of the city.”⁴ The original negative interpretation of ancient suburbs as an inferior space and community thus changed into viewing suburbs as healthy, pleasurable, and even desirable environment to live in.

Jackson traces three major centers of early modern American suburbs in the period before the American Revolutionary War—the margins of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. The suburban expansion of these early American cities followed the British development of suburban enclaves in London and elsewhere.⁵ Jackson also notes that while the growth of suburbs as residential places “outside city walls” was an integral part of urban civilization anywhere up to the age of the Industrial Revolution, something historic happened in Great Britain and the United States around the year 1815, namely, the suburbanization of both countries on a scale that did not happen anywhere else, “a process involving the systematic growth of fringe areas at a pace more rapid than that of core cities, as a lifestyle involving a daily commute to jobs in the center.”⁶ This radical development of Britain and the United States happened in response to the changes in nineteenth-century improvements in mass transportation and to ideas about proper housing, architecture, privacy, and domesticity.

There British and American cities such as London, Boston, Philadelphia, and New York started to suburbanize in the early nineteenth century. By the 1810s, their character was still that of “walking cities” as the preferred method of transportation was walking and the size of these cities reflected the limits of far one could travel on foot.⁷ However, the walking cities in Britain and the United States generally suffered from congestion as the density of their population and the traffic progressively deteriorated. Moreover, the cities could be defined by a clear-cut distinction between the country and the city, even in the United States, where the cities lacked the symbolic boundaries of historic city walls that are

³ See Leigh Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs: Where the American Dream Is Moving* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 29.

⁴ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 22.

⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 12-13. For the adoption of London’s suburban growth pattern in Manchester, a major industrial center of 19th-century England, see Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 73-102.

⁶ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 13.

⁷ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 13-14.

to be found in many European cities, but still maintained “an obvious visual distinction between the closely built-up residential precincts of a city and rural sections surrounding it.”⁸ The walking cities and their architecture served a whole range of functions and the public buildings, private establishments, and residential buildings were often to be found in close proximity or interspersed with each other; the modern pattern of zoning was not yet practiced. The walking cities of the early nineteenth century did not force their citizens to travel great distances to work as everything was reachable on foot within a few hours at most. The best addresses in walking cities still tended to be close to city centers, reflecting the traditional belief in the social superiority of a central urban residential location.⁹ The crucial change in the development of the social status of American suburbia happened around the 1810s, as those Americans who could afford it started moving away from city centers and the age of commuter suburbs was born.

One way of addressing the history of suburbanization in the United States is to consider the suburban house as crucial to the construction of identity. Hayden argues that the real achievement of American suburbanization has meant the realization of a “triple dream,” that is, the acquisition of a detached, single-family suburban “house plus land plus community,” which included “both the private and public pleasures of peaceful, small-scale residential neighborhoods.”¹⁰ Hayden thus relates the modern meaning of American single-family house ownership to the realization of the American Dream, a traditional concept which had been resonant in American writing since the Puritans but was most memorably outlined by James Truslow Adams, who wrote in 1931 about

that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. [...] It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.¹¹

Along with achievement in the workplace and social recognition, the material side of the Dream has, since the late nineteenth century, been associated with the ability of Americans to move to the suburbs and live in single-family houses with generous lots that would offer healthy, pleasurable life with sufficient privacy while staying close to their neighbors. Charles E. White argued along the same lines, claiming that

⁸ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 15.

⁹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 15.

¹⁰ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 8-9.

¹¹ James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Harbor, FL: Simon Publications, 2001), 404. Adams’s famous definition came at a time when the United States had been swept by the Great Depression and was in dire need of uplifting narratives about the strength of the national culture and identity.

the man who does not own his home is looked upon by others as an underling or weakling. He is regarded in the eyes of his neighbors as lacking in initiative, in the eyes of his family he is considered unfortunate, in his own mind he realizes that he has never quite achieved success.¹²

Similarly, in 1914 Carol Aronovici, general secretary of the Suburban Planning Association, considered the single-family detached house to be what John Archer considers to be “a vehicle of private idealism”¹³ which could bring about social reform:

The poet, the moralist, the efficiency expert and the social reformer have made the homes the center of their speculations and the means of realizing their individual and social ideals. We are all agreed that the one family house with private garden and plenty of open space is the condition towards which we should all strive.¹⁴

For those Americans who could afford to move out of the city, the pastoral benefits of European-style country residences combined with the proximity of the cultural and economic attractions of the city that was within commuting distance. Moreover, as Jackson reminds, “the emerging values of domesticity, privacy, and isolation reached fullest development in the United States, especially in the middle third of the nineteenth century.”¹⁵ Philippe Aries explains that although the Judeo-Christian culture has always emphasized the centrality of the family within society, the notion of “the family as a tightly knit group of parents and children is a development of only the last two hundred years.”¹⁶ As the concurrent demands upon privacy and its role within the lives of individual citizens expanded by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the American families of the middle and upper classes came to require change in the way homes were structured in order to meet the new function of the home. Increasingly, the family home would be seen as “the zone of private life” in which the house would assume the role of “a personal bastion against society, a place of refuge, free from outside control.”¹⁷ While the rapid expansion of the American urban population marked a decline in the availability of the newly-sought privacy

¹² Charles E. White, Jr., *Successful Houses and How To Build Them* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 1. As I will explain in a later chapter, much of the suburban fiction of Richard Yates chronicles the lives of characters who live in American suburbs as renters, not buyers, of their homes, which is a situation that became increasingly rare in post-WWII America as more people than ever before could afford to buy, rather than just rent, their suburban houses. For more information on the history of house renting as opposed to house ownership in the United States, see Arthur Acolin, Laurie S. Goodman, and Susan M. Wachter, “A Renter or Homeowner Nation?”, *Cityscape* 18, no. 1 (2016): 145-158, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26328246>.

¹³ John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690-2000* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 294.

¹⁴ Carol Aronovici, “Housing and the Housing Problem,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 51 (January 1914): 3.

¹⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 48.

¹⁶ Philippe Arles, quoted in Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 47.

¹⁷ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 47.

for the American family in the city, an exodus to the suburbs could provide the family with the desired privacy, security, and healthy environment. In the nineteenth century, the single-family house thus became “the most visible symbol of having arrived at a fixed place in society, the goal to which every decent family aspired.”¹⁸ As land and property values skyrocketed in American cities through the nineteenth century, the dream of owning a private house for the nuclear family would increasingly come to be located in the suburbs. The American Dream, firmly entrenched in American thinking since the Declaration of Independence, would now be directly linked to the achievement of owning a house in a good neighborhood, located beyond the vices and deprivations of the city. Russell Conwell, a Baptist minister and orator, noted in his famous “Acres of Diamonds” lecture that house ownership should be tantamount to achieving the American version of success, for when one travels “out into the suburbs of Philadelphia,” the suburbanites who own “those beautiful homes with gardens and flowers, those magnificent homes so lovely in their art” are to be considered the people of the best character and enterprise.¹⁹ Moreover, Conwell argued that: “A man is not really a true man until he owns his own home.”²⁰ The nineteenth-century shift towards privileging house ownership and private domesticity might also be seen as “a kind of anchor in the heavy seas of urban life”²¹ since Americans have always been a nation of immigrants and migrants who never seem to stay at one address for more than a couple of years.

In this light, suburban “homeownership was regarded as a counterweight to the rootlessness of an urbanizing civilization.”²² Even Walt Whitman, himself a pioneer of the open-road kind of social and physical mobility in America, claimed that these qualities were secondary to owning real estate since “a man is not a whole and complete man unless he owns a house and the ground it stands on.”²³ Jackson documents that between the 1820s and 1870s, the preferred mode of residential architecture, even in the newly built suburbs of big cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore, was the row house, a reincarnation of the European city house, defined as “a large home on a tiny lot in a densely-settled neighborhood [which] was considered a perfectly appropriate residence for a high-status family prior to 1875.”²⁴ The nineteenth-century problem with the overcrowding of American cities, lack of sanitation, and the spread of disease became increasingly hard to

¹⁸ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 50.

¹⁹ Russell Conwell, *Acres of Diamonds*, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rconwellacresofdiamonds.htm>.

²⁰ Conwell, *Acres*, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rconwellacresofdiamonds.htm>.

²¹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 50.

²² Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 50-1.

²³ Whitman, Walt. “New York Dissected.” 19 July 1856. Ed. Jason Stacy. *The Walt Whitman Archive*, <<http://www.whitmanarchive.org>>.

²⁴ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 55.

bear. By the 1870s, “detached housing had clearly emerged as the suburban style” as we know it today, with the suburban house resembling “a semirural homestead,” notable for the novel use of free, unused lawn as a large empty space around the house with no explicit practical use.²⁵ Jackson explains that the “idealization of the [American suburban] home as a kind of Edenic retreat, a place of repose where the family could focus inward upon itself, led naturally to an emphasis on the garden and lawn.”²⁶ Moreover, the newly-cherished function of the yard to serve as the basis of a well-kept lawn became synonymous with the late 19th-century innovation of the lawnmower, which developed from the heavy early models to “machines light enough to be pushed by a woman or boy,” making it possible for the suburban lawn and its regular maintenance to become a quintessential part of the suburban lifestyle.²⁷ Frank J. Scott notably extolled the lawn-moving activity as follows: “Whoever spends the early hours of one summer day, while the dew spangles in the grass, in pushing these grass cutters over a velvety lawn, breathing the fresh sweetness of the morning air and the perfume of the new mown hay, will never rest contented in the city.”²⁸

As the American cities in the nineteenth century “became larger, noisier, and more fearsome, the specter of danger replaced the earlier notion of the city as refuge.”²⁹ A ready solution to the rising problems of staking out an urban existence in the United States was offered by the detached single-family house, a home which would “combine the best of both city and rural life.”³⁰

By the 1850s, American architects started planning radically new architecture for the new suburbs whose design would combine the best of urban and rural patterns of upper-class housing, striving for the creation of what Jackson calls “a romantic community in harmony with nature.”³¹ Hayden considers this new trend as the rise of “picturesque enclaves,” that is, early planned suburban communities which defied the traditional gridiron system of rectangular town planning that had been much in vogue in ancient Greece and became widely used again in Europe from the sixteenth century onwards.³² In the 1853, Llewellyn Park, NJ was founded by Llewellyn S. Haskell, a New York City businessman who chose Alexander Jackson Davis to mastermind the design. In this pioneering gated residential community for

²⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 56-7.

²⁶ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 57.

²⁷ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 61.

²⁸ Frank J. Scott, *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds of Small Extent* (New York: John B. Alden, 1886), 111, <https://archive.org/details/artofbeautifying00scot/mode/2up>. Ironically, the popularity of suburban lawn-tending evaporated by the mid-twentieth century, as some suburbanites would “learn to curse such a vision” of a well-manicured lawn and the monotonous sound of lawn sprinklers. See, for example, Richard Wilbur, “To an American Poet Just Dead,” in *New and Collected Poems* (San Diego, Harcourt, 1988), 329.

²⁹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 69.

³⁰ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 72.

³¹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 73.

³² Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 45.

the well-to-do of the New York City metropolitan area, Haskell provided a picturesque retreat from the evils of the American city. There were several ways in which Llewellyn Park revolutionized the notions of what an American suburban community might look like.³³ First, the landscaping and design of the whole community was guided by the principle of spatial irregularity. This preference came as a reaction to the dominance of the rectangular, gridiron system of city and county design that had come to dominate land survey and urban architecture in nineteenth-century America.³⁴ To counter this trend, the more pleasurable pattern of undulating country roads, winding lanes, and irregular house placement in the new suburban communities was championed by figures as diverse as Catharine Beecher, Andrew Jackson Browning, and Calvert Vaux.³⁵ In Llewellyn Park, its founder wanted Davis to counter the dominant pattern of urban architecture by reflecting the principles of English landscape design in which space was more abundant and therefore used with a greater degree of freedom. In the middle of the Llewellyn Park community, a fifty-acre open irregular park called “Ramble” formed a natural (even if artificially landscaped) center for community meetings and recreation. The size of the home sites in Llewellyn Park ranged from one to twenty acres.³⁶ Unspeakably large by contemporary standards, these lot sizes provided the individual house owners in early planned suburbs with an exceptional degree of privacy comparable to that of traditional country villas owned by European aristocracy and rich businesspeople. The irregularity of the picturesque landscaping was endorsed by the irregular layout of roads, tree and shrub planting, and by the diversity of the individual house styles, which ranged between “gothic, bracketed Swiss, and Italian.”³⁷ Haskell’s community was able to retain a high degree of exclusivity and privacy from the intrusions of the quintessential American metropolis, New York City. However, the city still offered its charms, located only twelve miles away. While the picturesque enclave of Llewellyn Park proved influential for subsequent suburban developments across the United States, its social aura of upper-class exclusivity and “snobbish ambience” attracting those who could afford its cost, such a lifestyle still remained out of reach for most Americans at the time. Even though picturesque suburbs remained unaffordable for the majority of Americans, they gave rise to modified house and community designs that were built in later decades.³⁸ However, the greatest achievement of Llewellyn Park was the introduction “to the United States [of] a

³³ See John R. Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 52-55; and Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 76-9.

³⁴ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 74-5.

³⁵ Beecher was a pioneer of American theories of domesticity, Downing a pioneer American landscape architect, Vaux an architect and disciple of Downing.

³⁶ It is necessary, for continental European readers unused to the American units, to explain here that one acre is about 4,047 m² or about 40 percent of a hectare (ie 10,000m²).

³⁷ Stilgoe, *Borderland*, 54.

³⁸ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 78.

new residential area: the heavily landscaped suburb with substantial private houses next to shared parks,”³⁹ with the overall design serving the needs of a rural aesthetic of irregular beauty rather than urban requirements for regularity and efficacy.

Another early planned residential suburb, Riverside in the state of Illinois, proved equally exclusive in terms of its design and the social status and income requirements of its early inhabitants. Completed in 1869 by Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted, Riverside was another suburban community whose design avoided a rectangular grid pattern and made ample use of curvilinear streets and large house lots (100 by 225 feet), giving the elites of Chicago an opportunity to enjoy “natural topography in innovative urban design.”⁴⁰ Olmsted’s Riverside is a community whose design feels much more modern than Davis’s Llewellyn Park. Hayden explains that although the density of the suburban population of Riverside was much higher than that of Llewellyn Park, the pattern of the Riverside houses being “merely set back a minimum of thirty feet and separated from the [curved and irregular] road by the required trees,” such a modern arrangement proved highly influential for subsequent suburban communities everywhere in the United States.⁴¹ Riverside was twice larger than Llewellyn Park and it also “held twenty-one times as many houses as well as a business district.”⁴² Both Llewellyn Park and Riverside were railroad suburbs designed as “bedroom communities for the ultra wealthy,” retaining the feel of a bucolic landscape that pleased the weary spirit of the successful and affluent American urbanite.⁴³

Garden City, NY, another important early planned suburb, was also founded in 1869, and designed by John Kellum. Unlike the irregular design of Llewellyn Park and Riverside, Garden City followed the gridiron system of street arrangement. However, Kellum gave ample opportunity for the individualization of each estate, offering house lots whose size was about 1.5 acres, which was about “twenty-five times as big as its New York counterpart.”⁴⁴ The early failure of Garden City to attract sufficient interest was caused by the idea of Alexander Tunney Stewart, its owner and builder, who decided to rent rather than sell the houses which were targeted at affluent businessmen who could afford the long and costly commute to New York. Social historian Constance Perin explains the traditional distrust of Americans toward people who rent, rather than own, their homes. Renters are perceived as people who “are a different and lesser species,” and to rent a home rather than own it is a mark of an individual’s failure to pursue the materialist version of the American Dream, which might be summarized as the progression from a city-dweller who rents to a

³⁹ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 60.

⁴⁰ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 81.

⁴¹ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 64.

⁴² Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 64.

⁴³ See Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, 31.

⁴⁴ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 85.

suburbanite who gets to own their home.⁴⁵ Hayden notes that the 1850s introduction of the picturesque enclaves as planned American suburbs marked an intricate attempt to solve the habitual problem of juggling the demands of domestic privacy and community involvement, which was nowhere more prominent than in the early communities' inclusion of areas for shared public activities such as common parks, for, in the early picturesque enclave communities such as Llewellyn Park and Riverside, "the exploration of community and privacy, as part of spiritual life, was as important as the negotiation of city and country, or the development of taste and style."⁴⁶ What followed the picturesque enclaves was a gradual downgrading of the exclusivity in later planned suburban communities. Rather than duplicating the spacious arrangement of house layouts of Llewellyn Park, Riverside, and Garden City, architects of later suburbs kept reducing the size of house lots and common areas until, by the 1920s, there would typically only remain the pattern of a "flat subdivision with just a suggestion of two-dimensional curvature to the streets".⁴⁷ However, affluent picturesque suburban enclaves were still widely built in the Gilded Age, that is, in the 1870-1900 period.⁴⁸ The most important innovation of this era was the gradual replacement of the picturesque park by the country club as the center of social life in the new suburban communities.⁴⁹ More than anything else, as Jackson notes, "the growing acceptance of physical activity and of sports was closely associated with the expansion of upper-class railroad suburbs in the late nineteenth century."⁵⁰ By this time, exclusionary practices in suburban development proliferated as developers of (not only) affluent suburbs "increasingly wished to exclude potential buyers on the basis of race, religion, and social class."⁵¹

By 1900, a dual nature of American suburbia had come into existence—on the one hand, "the expensive suburban property in picturesque enclaves," modeled after Llewellyn Park and other exclusive suburban community designs of the early planned suburbs, on the

⁴⁵ Constance Perin, *Belonging in America: Reading Between the Lines* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 98-9.

⁴⁶ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 66.

⁴⁷ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 66.

⁴⁸ The communities of the North Shore of Long Island built at the time are an example of the Gilded Age suburbanization in the New York metropolitan area. Richard Yates explores these communities in some of his late suburban novels (such as *The Easter Parade* and *Cold Spring Harbor*). For more on this, see my analysis of Yates's suburban novels in the fifth chapter.

⁴⁹ For more information on the rise of the country club phenomenon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see James M. Mayo, *The American Country Club: Its Origins and Development* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

⁵⁰ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 97.

⁵¹ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 69. For a comprehensive history of the way race and racial segregation has played a role in the suburbanization of the United States, see Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: New Press, 2005).

other hand, more new compact suburbs came within the reach of the middle and working class as profit would often come to be associated with quantity and downsizing of the new lot and house sizes.⁵² Jackson explains that the “rapid suburbanization of the United States cannot be viewed in isolation from the material prosperity of its people and the sheer abundance of its land.”⁵³ The combination of cheap land and rising wages of many Americans, advances in transportation technology, as well as the industrialization and innovation of house-building strategies, made the United States the fastest-growing suburban nation by the end of the nineteenth century.

If the early 1800s saw American cities still defined by the limits of where people could walk, by 1900, many upper-, middle-, and working-class Americans had been able to flee the city and enjoy life in the newly-created suburban communities that were built away from the pollution of urban factories and poor districts. There were two major factors that might explain the growth of residential suburbia—the favorable relationship of the quality and cost of new suburban housing to the convenience, speed, and cost of transportation that the suburbanites could use to commute to and from the city on a daily basis.⁵⁴ Moreover, as Hayden documents, the last third of the nineteenth century marked the growth of the influence of house pattern books and mail order companies to such an extent that by 1900, “customers could order an entire house from a catalog.”⁵⁵ Perhaps the best known of the kit house providers, the Sears, Roebuck and Co. mail-order company, managed to sell, between 1908 and 1940, over 70,000 mail-order kit houses in numerous designs from cheap to luxury, that could be assembled by the house-owners themselves or with the help of local carpenters and craftsmen.⁵⁶ The first decades of the twentieth century thus became the heyday of do-it-yourself suburban housing construction, especially in the working-class communities whose members would “stick to self-building the kit [house] from start to finish” or simply “bypass the kits” and build houses gradually, as their finances allowed, using scavenged materials.⁵⁷ Interestingly, the proliferation of ready-made kit housing also contributed to the “dissolution of denser neighborhoods like the streetcar suburbs” since people gave up living in crowded conditions within reach of the cities and chose instead to settle further away, where the land was cheap but transportation and utilities provision posed a new problem. Ultimately, “as suburban house lots became more remote from city centers, owners felt more connected to

⁵² Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 70.

⁵³ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 128.

⁵⁴ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 137.

⁵⁵ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 102. The popular practice of ordering such an intricate and complex product as a kit house from a mail order company tells a great deal about the extremes of American individualism.

⁵⁶ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 100-110. Other prominent kit house mail-order companies included Montgomery Ward, Aladdin, and Pacific Ready-Cut Homes. See Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 116.

⁵⁷ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 111-115. The self-building of suburban homes was especially widespread in African American and other ethnic enclaves whose members could not rely on financing by the government and on the private funding schemes that traditionally benefited white suburban builders and home owners.

their houses than to their neighborhoods.”⁵⁸ In the 1920s, zoning policies became widespread in the United States, the aim of which was to “rationalize land use so that local governments would be able to separate single-family residential, multifamily residential, commercial, and industrial uses.”⁵⁹ While criticism of single-use zoning is too obvious as everything became too far away and reachable by automobile only for the suburbanites, the one big advantage of single-use zoning should be mentioned, namely, the prohibition of industrial development. While the zoning policies made sense in making sure that residential neighborhoods would not be damaged by such value-killing neighbors as industrial and sewage treatment operations built on adjacent land, it also contributed to the isolation of different zones from each other and increased the dependency of suburbanites on their cars. Following the landmark 1926 decision of the Supreme Court in the case of *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co.*, it became mandatory for American real estate developers to avoid building toxic or pollution-bringing projects (including factories, waste disposal, and commercial centers) adjacent to residential areas. Hayden emphasizes the beneficial effect of single-use zoning in preventing the destruction of the suburban environment by adjacent industrial pollution producers at a time when “factories often spewed visible, noxious emissions” and environmental protection was still not in existence.⁶⁰ Gallagher explains that the implementation of zoning policies, of what Andres Duany has called the “unmade omelet” type of building in which ingredients such as commercial, residential, industrial, and recreational facilities are kept apart in distinctly separated areas, is symptomatic of the postwar suburban communities, whereas the prewar American suburbs still preserve the traditional small-town feel of a kind of “made-omelet” downtown mixture of stores, offices, and residential architecture.⁶¹

In a parallel development of American cities, with the rise of urban core populations, there came an increase in the exodus of American urbanites outside the crowded cities, to the suburbs. In this effort, they were assisted by several innovations in public transportation. For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “advances in transportation technology delivered [Americans] at faster speeds to farther-flung places, each innovation enabling a new phase of [suburban] development.”⁶² In chronological order, these developments included “the introduction of the steam ferry, the omnibus, the commuter railroad, the horsecar, the elevated railroad, and the cable car.”⁶³ The age of the steam ferry

⁵⁸ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 118-9.

⁵⁹ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 121. See also Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, 39-43, and Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 242.

⁶⁰ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 121.

⁶¹ Quoted in Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, 40.

⁶² Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, 30.

⁶³ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 20.

suburbs started with the 1814 introduction of the regular steam ferry passenger service that connected Manhattan and Brooklyn Heights and gave rise to upscale suburban communities in the latter area.⁶⁴ Before long, new ferry suburbs were springing up along American harbors, bays, and major rivers that were reachable by boat. However, the range of communities that could be reached by ferry was limited and, as Jackson documents, by 1825, still “no city anywhere possessed a mass-transit system—which may be defined as operation along a fixed route, according to an established schedule, for a single fare.”⁶⁵ This would change with the introduction of the omnibus services in New York (1829), Philadelphia (1831), Boston (1835), and Baltimore (1844).⁶⁶ While the horse-driven omnibus was an improvement when compared to the limits of walking, it had its share of problems, including “unpadded benches, poor ventilation, and rude, bad-tempered drivers.”⁶⁷ The next major development in transportation, the steam railroad meant for commuter travel, was started in New York City in the 1830s and grew rapidly everywhere else by the 1840s.⁶⁸ The 1850s saw the widespread adoption of the horse railway, which in many American cities came to replace the omnibus as it offered more passenger capacity and a smoother ride at greater speed than its railless precursor.⁶⁹

In the 1850s and 1860s, the rapid development of commuter railroad lines that branched out of major American cities such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Chicago contributed to the rise of suburban communities, called railroad suburbs, along these lines. Moreover, “most of the development was actively encouraged by the railroads which developed communities, advertised suburban advantages, and offered frequent and reliable service.”⁷⁰ The final decades of the nineteenth century, however, came to be called the age of the electric cable car, whose regular passenger service in major American cities likewise contributed to the development of suburban communities along the cable car lines branching out of cities. Early cable car lines started operating in Philadelphia (1883) and New York and Oakland (1887), with other cities following suit. The advantages of the cable car, which used a central cable situated in the ground, over the horse-driven car were obvious, since “the cable car was cleaner [...], quieter [...] and more powerful.”⁷¹ Another late-nineteenth-century technological advance was the electric streetcar, whose power was supplied from overhead wires connected to the car by a trolley. Early cities connected by

⁶⁴ For more details, see Furman, Robert, and Brian Merlis, contributor, *Brooklyn Heights: The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of America's First Suburb* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2015).

⁶⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 33.

⁶⁶ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 34.

⁶⁷ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 34.

⁶⁸ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 35-9.

⁶⁹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 39-42.

⁷⁰ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 95.

⁷¹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 104.

this mode of transportation were Montgomery, Alabama (1886) and Richmond, Virginia (1888). Jackson notes that the electric streetcar represents the last major technological development in public transit before the advent of the gasoline-powered automobile, as the electric streetcar routes would radiate outward from the central business districts of major American cities, opening up “a vast suburban ring” and enabling “electric trains to travel as fast as fourteen miles per hour, or four times faster than the horse-drawn systems they replaced.”⁷²

By far the most important development in transportation in the history of American suburbia is, however, the introduction of the automobile for private transportation between the city, country, and the suburb. The greatest progress in automobile technology happened between the 1890s and 1910s, with a commensurate meteoric rise in the degree of automobile ownership and use. There was a big difference in the early marketing of European and American car manufacturers. While European producers “concentrated on expensive motorcars for the rich, American entrepreneurs soon turned to promoting economical vehicles that could be mass-produced.”⁷³ Perhaps the best-known of the early American car producers was Henry Ford, who famously claimed that he wanted “to build a motor car for the great multitude.”⁷⁴ Ford, a pioneer of automobile industry and its treatment of worker conditions, realized this ambition to sell his cars to millions of Americans by implementing two important strategies. First, as of January 4, 1914, he raised the minimum wage of his workers. Second, Ford also lowered the price of his trademark Model T from \$950 in 1910 to \$290 in 1924.⁷⁵ Following these innovations, the United States became the world leader in automobile use, ownership, and transportation by the 1920s. If there were only about 8,000 automobiles registered in the United States in 1905, the number rose to 2,332,426 in 1915 and 17,567,827 in 1925 and kept rising with each subsequent decade.⁷⁶

By the 1920s, the omnipresence of car ownership became reflected even in literary representations of suburbia. George F. Babbitt, the protagonist of *Babbitt*, a major early novel about suburbia by Sinclair Lewis, published in 1922, considered his motor car an essential mark of his status, feeling a successful middle-class businessman and suburbanite whose car ownership he considered comparable to the artistic achievement of “poetry and tragedy, love and heroism.”⁷⁷ In a speech given to the fictitious Zenith Real Estate Board, Babbitt extols the virtues of the proliferation of American suburbia in the 1920s and defines

⁷² Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 114-15.

⁷³ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 159.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 160.

⁷⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 161.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 162.

⁷⁷ Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*, in *Main Street & Babbitt* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 509. I examine Lewis’s groundbreaking suburban novel in more detail in the fourth chapter.

the model American of his time as the average suburbanite father, “the fellow with four to ten thousand a year, say, and an automobile and a nice little family in a bungalow on the edge of town, that makes the world go round!”⁷⁸ Babbitt is a classic example of the American suburbanite, a braggart and conformist achiever whose short-lived rebellion against the social norms rings hollow.⁷⁹ After the 1920s, the proliferation of the automobile used for private use in the United States caused a change in the traveling habits of Americans since the automobile owner could, according to Jackson, “leave and return when he wanted and along routes of his own choosing,” unlike the limitations of set routs and travel schedules of the public transportation by rail, electric streetcar, and bus.⁸⁰ Moreover, car manufacturers successfully lobbied for government funding for road construction and development as opposed to funding upgrades and maintenance of the existing but aging networks of public transportation. As Mark Clapson explains, there was another major effect of the use of the automobile and proliferation of its ownership in the United States, namely, the increase of the distance of suburban communities from city centers as the automobile provided its users with “increased choice in housing location, as people realized they could enjoy improved accommodation within convenient, and sometimes not-so-convenient, commuting distances from the city.”⁸¹ More distance from the city came to mean cheaper land and lower real estate prices. Besides, the proliferation of suburban housing, in the period after WWII, along with the massive decentralization of factories and offices and the gradual relocation of these from cities to the suburbs or beyond brought work closer to the suburbanites’ homes, reducing commuting time.⁸² Still, the history of innovations in transportation in the United States is, as Dolores Hayden documents, a tale of paradoxes, for

speed and movement [of the new means of transportation such as the cable car, electric streetcar, and the automobile] connected diverse neighborhoods and made exciting new relationships possible, at the same time that they disconnected people from familiar places, destroyed the peace and quiet of older neighborhoods, and caused monumental traffic jams in the streets.⁸³

Although Jackson’s account of the suburbanization of the United States in *Crabgrass Frontier* focuses on the principal improvements in transportation technology as crucial agents that made the suburbanization of the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries inevitable, Hayden has outlined a history of American suburbanization in the last

⁷⁸ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 650.

⁷⁹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 844.

⁸⁰ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 188.

⁸¹ Mark Clapson, *Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the United States* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 25.

⁸² See Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 266-71.

⁸³ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 90-91.

two hundred years that places equal stress on issues of housing, architecture, family, and domesticity.

If the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was marked by the massive development of urban and suburban networks of public transportation, another major trend was the increased affordability of suburban housing, first to middle-class and later also to working-class families.⁸⁴ This development would not have been possible without the advances in house construction technology. Jackson documents how in the 1830s, a particular type of cheap, very durable, and easily mounted wooden framing, the balloon frame, was introduced in Chicago and soon copied in millions of houses all over the United States.⁸⁵ Another essential development that fostered the speed of suburbanization in the US was the adoption in the 1830s to 1870s of the industrial technologies of mass production in house building, as a result of which a host of publications featuring diverse house designs for would-be suburbanites appeared, including such influential titles as “Andrew Jackson Downing’s *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850), Gervase Wheeler’s *Houses for the People* (1855), Calvert Vaux’s *Villas and Cottages* (1857), and Henry Hudson Holly’s *Country Seats* (1866), [while these designs also appeared in popular] magazines and pattern books.”⁸⁶ All of these publications resulted in the development of a specific type of suburban architecture which combined “the requirements for servantless domesticity with the ideal of independence and privacy.”⁸⁷ Perhaps typically for the United States, where private ownership has always played an essential role as one of the foundations of the democratic society, “residential development [...] has largely been the work of private [business] interests,” which was very much unlike the situation in Europe where governments would be heavily involved in the transformation of land for housing purposes.⁸⁸ Ultimately, as Jackson emphasizes, all of the factors contributed to the uniquely American situation in the United States by the end of the nineteenth century, when

middle-class families [...] could reasonably expect to [be able] to buy a detached home on an accessible lot in a safe and sanitary environment. Because streetcars were quick and inexpensive, because land was cheaper in suburbs than in cities, and because houses were typically put up using the balloon-frame method, the real price of shelter in the United States was lower than in the Old World.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ See Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 71-127; and Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 116-37.

⁸⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 124-6. The balloon frame method of house building is still the most widespread way houses in American suburbs are built until today.

⁸⁶ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 127.

⁸⁷ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 128.

⁸⁸ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 134.

⁸⁹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 136.

Besides becoming accessible by the new technology in transportation, life in American suburbia came to represent the best cultural values of both the country and the city. Sam Bass Warner, Jr. explains that

the rural ideal [...] shifted people's attitude from being favorable to being hostile to city life. The physical deterioration of old neighborhoods, the crowding of factory, shop, and tenement in the old central city, the unceasing flow of foreigners with ever new languages and habits—these negative pressures tended to drive the middle class from the city [...] out from the old city boundaries into an expanded area of vacant and lightly settled land. In this new land the rural ideal, by its emphasis on the pleasures of private family life, on the security of a small community setting, and on the enjoyment of natural surroundings, encouraged the middle class to build a wholly new residential environment: the modern suburb.⁹⁰

In the twentieth century, America developed further into a predominantly suburban society. As Leigh Gallagher reminds, ownership of a detached, single-family house in the American suburbs has, for more than a century now, “represented more than just prosperity; over the years, it came to represent patriotism, good citizenship, and the mark of a productive member of society.”⁹¹ Countless representations of suburbia in American literature, film, and other media have perpetuated this view, or, in many cases, deplored its influence. The 1920s could be considered the Roaring Twenties even in the area of suburbanization, fostered not only by the massive rise in automobile usage but also by the proliferation of car suburbs around nearly every major American city.⁹² A classic novel of the Jazz Age, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), makes considerable use of the setting of new suburban communities and portrays Jay Gatsby, protagonist of the story, as the proud owner and user of a flashy bright-colored car whose ostentatious use is not practical but symbolic, aimed to win the woman of his dreams, Daisy Buchanan.⁹³ Jackson highlights the most important characteristic of the automobile suburb of the 1920s (and ever after) as being its “lower density and larger average lot size as compared with anything ever previously experienced in an urban world.”⁹⁴ Since the automobile made it viable to build new suburbs that were farther away from city centers, on cheaper land, beyond the reach of public transportation such as the electric streetcar, “the average size of a [suburban] building lot rose [in the 1920s]

⁹⁰ Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 14.

⁹¹ Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, 65.

⁹² See Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 174-7.

⁹³ See F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner's, 1925).

⁹⁴ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 184.

from about three thousand square feet in streetcar suburbs to about five thousand square feet in automobile suburbs.”⁹⁵

The 1930s, marked by the onslaught of the economic depression worldwide, meant a halt to suburban development as well. Jackson documents that between 1929 and 1933, “the construction of residential property fell by 95 percent, and expenditures on home repairs fell by 30 percent.”⁹⁶ Government support for housing construction in the 1930s, however, was strong, peaking with the creation of the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) by President Roosevelt on June 13, 1933, and the passage of the National Housing Act of 1934, which, among other things, led to the creation of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which subsequently set the standards for building and bank lending. Yet, the 1930s were “lean years” in the history of American suburbanization and these government policies failed to mitigate the reality of millions of Americans becoming unemployed, and often even homeless.⁹⁷

World War II marked a turning point in the relative decline of American suburbanization that had marked the situation following the stock market crash of 1929 and lasted for much of the 1930s. Although during the war, the annual number of new homes built in the United States was just about a hundred thousand, the marriage rate and birthrate had begun to rise by the middle of the decade, as the wives of servicemen received monthly support whose level rose with the birth of each new baby.⁹⁸ In 1944, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (known informally as the GI Bill) was passed by Congress, providing a wide and extremely generous range of postwar benefits to the returning World War II veterans (and, later, also to the veterans of later wars). Jackson argues that especially the affordable mortgage section of the bill was instrumental in the massive development of postwar suburbia in the United States since it “gave official endorsement and support to the view that the 16 million GI’s of World War II should return to civilian life with a home of their own.”⁹⁹ When the war ended in 1945, the need for affordable housing intensified as servicemen (and servicewomen) returned home and badly needed accommodation. The Federal Housing Authority was instrumental as an agency which helped foster the postwar boom in housing construction and house acquisition for young families, especially war veterans. A returning veteran could get a very good deal from the Federal Housing Authority and the VA loan system which made it possible for millions of veterans to buy a modest

⁹⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 185. Interestingly, the house size in the car suburbs kept growing until the housing bubble of the late 2000s burst, by which time a large-scale turn towards smaller, more economy-sized housing had become the new vogue. See Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, 70-5.

⁹⁶ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 187.

⁹⁷ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 125.

⁹⁸ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 232.

⁹⁹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 233.

suburban house after the war with no down payment and very low mortgage payments thereafter.¹⁰⁰ In the late 1940s, all seemed set for a massive boom in the housing construction business. In particular, there was a large market for new housing as “over 2 million couples in 1948 were living with relatives”¹⁰¹ or in overpriced rental accommodation such as rooming houses, or were simply camping out in cars.¹⁰² Chafe sums up the cycle of postwar progress as defined by the cycle of demand and consumption in the American suburbs as the US government provided the loans for the new suburban houses. It also built the highways that went to those homes. And an economy, built in large part on the consumption of new housing and automobiles, created a spiral of sustained prosperity and growth.¹⁰³

In the late 1940s, as the demand for new suburban housing reached its peak, large building companies such as Levitt and Sons reacted by fine-tuning the mass-production of cheap houses in the Cape Cod and Colonial neo-traditionalist style, managing to build “more than 140,000” houses and turn “a cottage industry into a major manufacturing process.”¹⁰⁴ Having developed their fast-construction technique by building several thousand war homes for the government in Norfolk, Virginia, in the early 1940s, the Levitts later applied their knowledge to the construction of housing for civilians, with great popular success. In 1947, the first of several Levittowns opened in New York State. Each house was simplified to the barest essentials, being

built on a concrete slab (no cellar); the floors were of asphalt and the walls of composition rock-board. [...] New power hand tools like saws, routers, and nailers helped increase worker productivity. Freight cars loaded with lumber went directly into a cutting yard where one man cut parts for ten houses in one day. [...] The construction process itself was divided into twenty-seven distinct steps—beginning with laying the foundation and ending with a clean sweep of the new home. Crews were trained to do one job—one day the white-paint men, then the red-paint men, then the tile layers. Every possible part, and especially the most difficult ones, were preassembled in central shops, whereas most [other] builders did it on site. More than thirty houses went up each day at the peak of production.¹⁰⁵

By achieving such a Henry Ford-like automatization and speed of suburban house-building, the Levitts could proudly call their postwar housing communities the “General Motors of

¹⁰⁰ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 112-3.

¹⁰¹ Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 117.

¹⁰² Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 131.

¹⁰³ See Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 119.

¹⁰⁴ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 234.

¹⁰⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 234-5.

the housing industry.”¹⁰⁶ The original Levittown community opened in 1947 and until 1949 the houses were for rent, and yet “because the total for mortgage, interest, principal, and taxes was less than the rent, almost everyone [who had rented a house in Levittown] bought; after 1949 all units were for sale only.”¹⁰⁷ Most Levittowners liked what they bought, yet criticism of the postwar suburban experiment with mass-produced house production is to be reckoned with. As James Howard Kunstler argues, the typical postwar suburban tract house was situated in the “noplac” area between the country and the city, and, while resembling the city in the fact that it provided “no escape from other people into nature” as any attempt at a natural feel in the new communities would be “obliterated by the relentless blocks full of houses,” uniform, endless, and impossible to distinguish from one another.¹⁰⁸ However, even Kunstler admits that the postwar tract house suburban community was “a vast improvement” for many suburbanites over the inferior accommodation they had before. The consumerist craze of the 1950s found its full realization in the suburban pursuit of all the latest household appliances to be fitted in the houses, which were uniform in design and yet “spacious compared to city dwellings, and they contained modern conveniences,” plus a dose of air, light, and greenery in front of the buildings.¹⁰⁹ The problem for critics such as Kunstler is in the fact that life in postwar suburbs seemed to disrupt “all the traditional connections and continuities of community life” and with the replacement of these traditional social structures [to which one would add the extended family] with car worship and television consumption.¹¹⁰

Jackson claims that suburbanization in the United States in the 1945-1980 period became

the quintessential physical achievement of the United States; [...] more representative of its culture than big cars, tall buildings, or professional football. Suburbia symbolizes the fullest, [...] embodiment of contemporary culture [...] a manifestation of such fundamental characteristics of American society as conspicuous consumption, a reliance upon the private automobile, upward mobility, the separation of the family into nuclear units, the widening division between work and leisure, and a tendency toward racial and economic exclusiveness.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ See “Housing: Up from the Potato Fields,” *Time* 56 (July 3, 1950): 72, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,812779,00.html>.

¹⁰⁷ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 235. On the difference in the status of American house users who are renters, as opposed to owners, see Constance Perin, *Everything in Its Place. Social Order and Land Use in America*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 66.

¹⁰⁸ See James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Touchstone, 1993), 105.

¹⁰⁹ Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere*, 105.

¹¹⁰ Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere*, 105.

¹¹¹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 4.

Between 1950 and 1960, the heyday of postwar suburbanization, over 13 million new homes were built in the United States, with 11 million of these being located in the new suburbs.¹¹² Jackson provides a more detailed account of how these annual figures of new single-family houses built during this period spurted “from only 114,000 in 1944, to 937,000 in 1946, to 1,183,000 in 1948, and to 1,692,000 in 1950, an all-time high.”¹¹³ Such massive construction did not come without problems, though. Hayden notes that “the postwar suburbs were constructed at great speed,” in order to “maximize consumption of mass-produced goods and minimize the responsibility of the developers to create public space and public services.”¹¹⁴ Problems of the new suburbanites in such hastily constructed suburbs are satirized by John Keats in *The Crack in the Picture Window*. In this book of part-fiction and part-social criticism, Keats exposes the lack of utilities and public services that the new suburbanites often faced in the absence of suburban planning and enforceable municipal policies that that would make these facilities a mandatory part of the builder’s suburban construction projects.¹¹⁵ By the late 1950s, “about two thirds of the new houses in the United States were produced by large builders.”¹¹⁶ These builders, such as Levitt and Sons, “built tracts the size of cities and reaped enormous profits,” only to leave the much more expensive, arduous, and time-consuming job of creating “the physical infrastructure and social fabric [in these new communities] to the federal, state, and local governments, and the new homeowners.”¹¹⁷ Other notable tract housing suburbs that were built in the postwar period include Lakewood, California, and Park Forest, Illinois.¹¹⁸ The difference between these notable planned suburbs of the 1950s and Levittown is that in Lakewood, unlike in Levittown, the shopping district was planned to be reachable on foot from all sections of the community. Moreover, Lakewood was incorporated in 1954, after only four years of existence as an independent city, with a local government that was established to serve its

¹¹² Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 117.

¹¹³ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 233. Interestingly, Gallagher documents another housing construction boom in the United States which happened in the early 2000s, as in 2000, 1.3 million new single-family houses were built and in 2006, the number rose to 1.7 million, an all-time high in the United States, before the market plummeted toward the end of the decade. See Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, 67.

¹¹⁴ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 128.

¹¹⁵ See the tragicomic story of the fictional Drone family in John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956).

¹¹⁶ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 132. See also Richard Harris, *Unplanned Suburbs: Toronto’s American Tragedy, 1900-1950* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 221.

¹¹⁷ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 132. See also Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window*, 13-17, for a satirical summary of the legal yet immoral business practices of American postwar large builders who provided faulty suburban communities and overpriced houses to their millions of clients without adequate infrastructure. See also Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 140-1, for a summary of the “devious but not illegal” business practices of the builders of Lakewood, California, a classic postwar tract housing community in suburban Los Angeles.

¹¹⁸ For a detailed discussion of the pros and cons of these two planned model postwar suburbs, see Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 138-46. The history of Lakewood is memorably portrayed by D. J. Waldie in his award-winning *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (New York: Norton, 2005).

needs directly and not via a distant county government (which was the pattern of Levittown's management). In the case of Park Forest, it became dubbed "the GI Town," whose many house owners, as veterans, "believed they were entitled to this [middle-class suburban] way of life."¹¹⁹ In 1948 the first tenants started moving into the new Park Forest dwellings, first into the multi-family houses, later, single-family houses were also built and sold. As in Lakewood, there was an adjacent shopping center to cater to the needs of the inhabitants. Within a few years, Park Forest would become the subject of an influential sociological study by William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man*.¹²⁰ While a large part of Whyte's study analyzes the influence of the corporate culture upon postwar American white-collar workers, in several chapters Whyte provides a detailed analysis of the suburban lifestyle, as is evident from his careful observation of the routine of the inhabitants of Park Forest.¹²¹ Levittown too would get its sociologist chronicler and defender, Herbert J. Gans, whose *The Levittowners* was another landmark study of postwar suburbia by a participant observer.¹²² Gans argues that the 1950s critical pattern of suburban vilification does not reflect reality. He concludes his magisterial study of a model postwar American suburb with a rather positive evaluation of the community, despite claiming that there are minor problems in the suburbs, including

the difficulty of its citizens to cope with conflict [...] the inability to deal with pluralism [...] and the failure [of Levittowners] to establish a meaningful relationship between home and community and to reconcile class-cultural diversity with government and the provision of public services.¹²³

On the other hand, Gans claims that all the negative opinions about postwar planned suburbs are exaggerated since "whatever its imperfections, Levittown is a good place to live" and the majority of Levittowners have always thought so.¹²⁴

The most famous dismissal of postwar planned suburbs is by Lewis Mumford, a leading urban historian, who by the early 1960s complained that, in these mass-produced suburbs, conformity and consumerism prevailed as

¹¹⁹ An anonymous GI quoted in Studs Terkel, *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War Two* (New York: Ballantine, 1984), 134.

¹²⁰ See William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002). First published by Simon and Schuster in 1956.

¹²¹ See Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 268-392.

¹²² See Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967). The history of the Levittowns is as follows—1/ Levittown, New York (1947-51), 2/ Levittown, Pennsylvania (1952-8), 3/ Willingboro Township, New Jersey (started 1958, the focus of Gans's famous book mentioned above), and 4/ Levittown, Puerto Rico (1964). Other Levittown-inspired communities would be developed by the Levitts elsewhere in the United States and later in Europe.

¹²³ Gans, *The Levittowners*, 413-15.

¹²⁴ Gans, *The Levittowners*, 432.

a new kind of community was produced [in the new postwar suburbs], which caricatured both the historic city and the archetypal suburban refuge: a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis. Thus the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible.¹²⁵

In “Suburbia, Of Thee I Sing,” a humorous article with a serious message, poet Phyllis McGinley complains about the fact that for many writers, to “condemn Suburbia has long been a literary cliché” which it is her ambition to demolish.¹²⁶ Interestingly, McGinley claims the stereotypical portrait of the postwar suburbanite husband as the uncultured conformist “Babbitt who knows all about Buicks but nothing about Picasso” while his homemaker wife “plays politics at the local P.T.A. and keeps up with the Joneses”¹²⁷ is false. She disagrees with such stereotypization and proudly claims that “for the best fifteen years of my life I have lived in Suburbia, and I like it.”¹²⁸ In the rest of her humorous diatribe, she argues that the critics who condemn the suburbs as conformist and dull miss the mark since “there is nothing really typical [or Jones-like] about any of our friends and neighbors here” and “the true suburbanite needs to conform [in suburbia] less than anyone else” and is able to pursue an amazing diversity of exciting hobbies and leisure-time activities in their suburban home, garden, or community.¹²⁹ Through her mock-serious defense of the diversity of suburban living, McGinley manages to provide a viable alternative to the suburbia-bashing voices of the social critics of her time. It is, of course, fair to add the fact that what Mumford dismisses in the above quote and what McGinley praises in “Suburbia, Of Thee I Sing” are two different types of American suburbs. While Mumford focuses his critique on the postwar mass-produced communities like one of the several newly-built Levittowns, McGinley’s defense of the fictional Spruce Manor community is based on an early 20th

¹²⁵ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (Sand Diego: Harcourt, 1961), 486.

¹²⁶ Phyllis McGinley, “Suburbia, Of Thee I Sing,” in *The Province of the Heart* (New York: Dell, 1959), 113. The original article was published in 1949 in Harper’s magazine, I use its later reprint in *The Province of the Heart*, a book-length collection of the author’s essays on diverse topics.

¹²⁷ McGinley, “Suburbia, Of Thee I Sing,” 113.

¹²⁸ McGinley, “Suburbia, Of Thee I Sing,” 114.

¹²⁹ McGinley, “Suburbia, Of Thee I Sing,” 114-121.

century suburb such as Larchmont, New York, where she lived in the late 1930s and 1940s.¹³⁰

Hayden calls postwar planned suburban communities such as Levittown, Lakewood, and Park Forest the “sitcom suburbs,” reflecting their prominent representation in such seminal 1950s and 1960s TV sitcoms as *Leave It To Beaver*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, and *Father Knows Best* and paying attention to the role of television as the prime medium of entertainment in postwar suburban homes.¹³¹ Regarding the life in these suburbs, Hayden notes several prevailing trends at this point of American suburbanization. The sitcom suburbs “complicated class relationships rather than erasing them.”¹³² This goes against the traditional notion of postwar suburbs as communities of social equals with little or no class differences who socialized and mixed easily. Moreover, traditional discrimination on the basis of race, “usually managed through deed restrictions, was now enforced by government loan policies and local bankers’ red-lining.”¹³³ Other characteristic features of the sitcom suburbs, whose impact upon American society has changed remarkably little since the 1950s, include the continuing gender and ethnic discrimination in bank lending for house purchasing purposes. Jackson lists five common characteristics of the postwar suburbs in terms of their impact upon the American people.¹³⁴ First, the postwar decades were marked by a higher degree of suburban growth than that of the inner cities. Second, the postwar suburbs were notable for their low population density. Gone was the row house of the nineteenth-century urban fashion; postwar suburbia heavily favored the detached single-family house; these were built, nation-wide, on lots whose size varied between one fifth and one tenth of an acre, a fraction of the lots from the era of the picturesque suburbs. Third, the postwar “sitcom suburbs” were marked by architectural similarity. With the exception of the rare communities for the affluent, the mass-produced postwar suburbs such as Levittown and Lakewood featured a limited mix of several basic designs such as the Cape Cod cottage, Colonial Revival house, and the rancher home.¹³⁵ Fourth, postwar suburbanization was marked by the easier access to home acquisition than ever before or after, which in turn influenced the social impact of new suburban communities on issues such as class and social

¹³⁰ See Christian Bradley Long, “The Wages of Sprawl: The Experience of the Suburban Form in American Film and Fiction” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2008), 82.

¹³¹ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 128.

¹³² Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 147.

¹³³ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 147. The practice of red-lining, or, in other words, of discriminating against certain urban areas, especially poor and ethnic ones, had existed prior to the 1930s but was intensified following the passage of the National Housing Act of 1934, which prompted the subsequent mapping of urban areas in the United States on the basis of desirability as regards lending for use by financial institutions. The most desirable areas were marked with green; the most problematic areas regarding mortgage eligibility were marked with red. Subsequently, the red areas, unable to obtain funding from banks because deemed too risky, fell into decline.

¹³⁴ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 239-40.

¹³⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 240.

distinctions. On the one hand, most of the new suburbanites in the sitcom suburbs were predominantly happy to own their homes and thus upgrade from renting apartments in the cities, yet, on the other hand, the accessibility of suburban housing in the postwar years also caused notable social differentiation—the newly-built communities were looked down upon by the more traditional, and therefore affluent, American suburban communities which were built before the postwar boom period. Fifth, Jackson notes that the postwar suburbs perpetuated, rather than demolished, the tradition of economic and racial homogeneity.¹³⁶ Ultimately, if the positive aspects of postwar sitcom suburbs are here to stay (that is, the provision of healthy, spacious, and superior accommodation and lifestyle to millions of Americans, especially young families in which the husbands were the 1950s, “organization men”), there have also been notable negative effects. For example, the rise of consumerism which, while a mark of postwar economic prosperity, quickly developed from an “initial quest for appliances, automobiles, and new furniture after the war” into “the mass consumption of services, goods, and recreational materials.”¹³⁷ For many suburbanites, even though life in communities such as Levittown, Lakewood, and Park Forest “encouraged cooperation and volunteerism,” it also often meant “a devastating blow to individuality, diversity, and faith.”¹³⁸ While some enjoyed the newly-found sense of suburban community and belonging, others complained about the “tyranny of mindless conformity” and that “to get along, one had to go along,” so “individualism was forbidden” in the sitcom suburbs and many suburbanites who had chosen this lifestyle in the hope for getting more privacy a safe shelter from the vices the city were disappointed to find that “to read Plato or listen to a symphony instead of joining the neighborhood promenade” meant instant social ostracization.¹³⁹ Still, the sense of collective spirit in the sitcom suburbs that was portrayed as typical of the 1950s somehow evaporated in the subsequent decades, with the intensification of the effects of the drive-in culture. Jackson notes that the major victim of the American obsession with driving everywhere is

the weakened “sense of community” which prevails in most metropolitan areas [...] a reduced feeling of concern and responsibility among families for their neighbors and among suburbanites in general for residents of the inner city [and for their neighbors as well].¹⁴⁰

Robert D. Putnam argues that the increased isolation of Americans and the gradual disappearance of community spirit in the second half of the twentieth century made “the suburbs themselves fragmented into a social mosaic [...] as people fleeing the city [as part

¹³⁶ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 241.

¹³⁷ Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 119.

¹³⁸ Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 120-1.

¹³⁹ Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 121.

¹⁴⁰ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 272.

of the “white flight”] sorted themselves into more and more finely distinguished “lifestyle enclaves,” segregated by race, class, education, life stage, and [other attributes].”¹⁴¹

Another way to describe life in the postwar decades in American suburbia is in terms of its reliance on the drive-in culture. Jackson notes that despite the postwar prosperity whose material products became widely available to more Americans than ever before, the car remained the real symbol of the postwar suburbs, both as a tool for commuting and traveling everywhere, but also as a manifestation of American individualism and freedom.¹⁴² Jackson explains the extreme of isolation that the over-reliance on driving everywhere has brought in the United States by chronicling the omnipresence of the car-accessible facilities in the suburbs at the expense of facilities accessible by public transport or by walking:

By 1984 mom-and-pop grocery stores had given way almost everywhere to supermarkets, most banks had drive-in windows, and a few funeral homes were making it possible for mourners to view the deceased, sign the register, and pay their respects without emerging from their cars. Odessa Community College in Texas even opened a drive-through registration window.¹⁴³

Putnam also decries the postwar rise of the amount of time that Americans routinely spend commuting in cars as “driving alone has become [since the 1960s] overwhelmingly the dominant mode of travel to work for most Americans.”¹⁴⁴ The primacy of the suburban car commute and errand trips, while beneficial to the drivers who might use this time for working out individual problems and enjoying rare time alone in their cars, likened by poet Robert Bly to the “solitude covered with iron,”¹⁴⁵ nonetheless make the average suburbanite suffer from the negative social effects of excessive car travel.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, in the postwar period, not only did the rise of car use everywhere develop as inevitable concomitant to suburbanization, but also numerous commercial and industrial structures were, along with the residential communities in the suburbs, “redesigned to fit the needs of the motorist rather

¹⁴¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 209. For a discussion of how to reverse the extreme of community loss in American suburbia, see Peter Lovenheim, *In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time* (New York: Perigee, 2010). The latter book is a unique example that goes against many principles of American individualism and preference for the privacy of suburban homes since the protagonist, the author himself, chronicles the way he contacted the neighbors on his street and asked them to allow him to spend a night or two in their house and to talk about their lives.

¹⁴² Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 246.

¹⁴³ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 263. Other extreme manifestations of the American obsession with providing drive-in facilities include drive-in wedding chapels (in Las Vegas, NV), drive-in movie theaters, iconic places of (not only) teenage car intimacy, and drive-in churches. For a case study of a drive-in church designed in a rented drive-in movie theater, see Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 264-5.

¹⁴⁴ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 212.

¹⁴⁵ The quote comes from a poem by Robert Bly, “Driving toward the Lac Qui Parle River,” in *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, by Robert Bly (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), 20.

¹⁴⁶ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 213.

than the pedestrian.”¹⁴⁷ Other negative effects of the postwar proliferation of the car use in the suburbs included the widespread government-sponsored support of a high-speed road network that would increase the decentralization of American cities, including the decline of traditional city centers for shopping, entertainment, and socializing. Congestion and traffic jams would become the norm, as the average commuting and errand-doing time lengthened. Jackson quotes a resident of Orange County, California, who explained the extremity of the driving she had to do in order to manage her weekday duties and errands in an agglomeration with no clear sense of an urban center: “I live in Garden Grove, work in Irvine, shop in Santa Ana, go to the dentist in Anaheim, my husband works in Long Beach, and I used to be the president of the League of Women Voters in Fullerton.”¹⁴⁸ Ultimately, the postwar boom of suburban residential, industrial, and commercial construction meant a massive decentralization of traditional American cities, the displacement of urban residents and their dispersal into the car suburbs, and the decay of the downtown business districts which also moved outside the city centers to the suburbs. Traditional shops, even big emporiums such as the J. L. Hudson Company of Detroit, went out of business as they lost to the outlying shopping centers to which customers drove, instead of walking or using public transit to downtown-based stores of the past.¹⁴⁹ Hayden explains that commercial interests in the postwar period often reacted to the growing need of suburbanites, whose single-zoning residential enclaves craved the proximity of stores and services and yet had to rely on driving to a different part of the suburb in order to get them: “Private developers [thus] responded to the lack of planned centers, public space, and public facilities in suburbs by building malls, office parks, and industrial parks as well as fast-food restaurants and motels.”¹⁵⁰

The history of American suburbia in the last thirty-plus years is marked by the growth of suburban edge nodes and fringes.¹⁵¹ Joel Garreau calls these new developments “edge cities,” which he claims represent

the third wave of [American] lives pushing into new frontiers in this half century. First, we moved our homes out past the traditional idea of what constituted a city. This was the suburbanization of America, especially after World War II. Then we wearied of returning downtown for the necessities of life, so we moved our marketplaces out to where we lived. This was the malling of America, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, we have moved our means of creating

¹⁴⁷ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 269.

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 265.

¹⁴⁹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 260-1.

¹⁵⁰ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 163.

¹⁵¹ See Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 154-97.

wealth, the essence of urbanism—our jobs—out to where most of us have lived and shopped for two generations. That has led to the rise of the Edge City.¹⁵²

By the early 1990s, most American suburbanites would no longer make the traditional daily commute from the suburb to an office downtown since most of the employers of the suburbanites had moved to the edge cities which had sprung up around every major American city and which would include “tall buildings, bright lights, office space that represents white-collar jobs, shopping, entertainment, prestigious hotels, corporate headquarters, hospitals with CAT scans, even population.”¹⁵³ The edge cities changed American suburbia in profound ways because they made “the old-fashioned *Ozzie and Harriet* commute from a conventional suburb to downtown” all but obsolete as from the 1990s on most suburbanites would typically drive from their suburban home to an edge city where they worked, ate, and had fun, and not to the downtowns of cities any more.¹⁵⁴

The twentieth century, widely regarded as “the American century,” has also been nicknamed “the suburban century.”¹⁵⁵ Thomas J. Vicino further subdivides this period in US history into four broad categories.¹⁵⁶ First, the period from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century was still dominated by the myth of suburbia as a healthy and pleasurable environment, an utopia offering an ideal lifestyle to the upper and middle class Americans who could escape the problems of urban industry and inner-city slums.¹⁵⁷ Second, suburbs in the period 1945-1960 are marked by an atmosphere of growing conformity that affected construction and life in these communities. After WWII, “an unprecedented shift occurred whereby residents of the city migrated outward, thus leading to the decentralization of jobs.”¹⁵⁸ Third, in the 1960-1980 period, the racial, class, and ethnic divisions became a major problem in many American suburbs. Last, from about 1980 to the present, a proliferation of outer suburbs, including edge cities and residential communities, has ruled the day at the same time as many older suburbs have suffered from decline.¹⁵⁹

The flight to the suburbs which many Americans undertook in the 1950s to 1980s was, according to Jackson, “almost self-generating,” for, as “large numbers of affluent

¹⁵² Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Anchor, 1992), 4.

¹⁵³ Garreau, *Edge City*, 5.

¹⁵⁴ See Garreau, *Edge City*, 5.

¹⁵⁵ See Mark Clapson, *Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the United States* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

¹⁵⁶ See Thomas J. Vicino, *Transforming Race and Class in Suburbia: Decline in Metropolitan Baltimore* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 7.

¹⁵⁷ Vicino, *Transforming Race and Class in Suburbia*, 8.

¹⁵⁸ Vicino, *Transforming Race and Class in Suburbia*, 8.

¹⁵⁹ Interestingly, it would be the old, prewar American suburbs that would experience a gentrification boom in the 2000s and 2010s; see the rise of prewar suburbs of Cleveland as portrayed in Michael Ruhlman, *House: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 2005); and Leigh Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs: Where the American Dream Is Moving* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 10-14, for an account of the author growing up in Media, PA, an upscale, traditional prewar suburb of Philadelphia.

citizens moved out [of cities], jobs followed. In turn, this attracted more families, more roads, and more industries.”¹⁶⁰ In the cities, a reverse trend of decline followed the exodus of people to the suburbs. In the history of American suburbanization, crucial questions such as “the provision of schools, sewers, utilities, and police and fire departments” would have to be solved.¹⁶¹ There different approaches to solving the problem. First, cities “could simply expand their boundaries by annexing newer sections into the municipal corporation.” A second option was the creation of new municipalities within the suburban ring. Third, special taxing districts “could be established to provide for one or more important functions [for the provision of services and utilities],” and, last, the county governments could expand their power to the new suburbs and become “like cities themselves.”¹⁶² In the nineteenth century, as Jackson notes, the choice of the annexation of new suburbs by American cities was predominant, while with the progress of the twentieth century, especially in its second half, it was marked by an increased turning away from the annexation of suburbs by cities in favor of maintaining the suburbs’ independence as small towns within local (such as county) government.¹⁶³ Speaking from the vantage point of the mid-1980s, Jackson predicted that while the United States had become the quintessentially suburban nation par excellence, its future would slow down in the next half-century, and yet its realization of the American Dream of suburban house ownership and community affiliation, coupled with “the national cultural preference for privacy” that has come to dominate the suburban identity of recent decades, are here to stay, however, modified by the increase of urban gentrification and other architectural and demographic developments.

In the period from the 1970s to the 2000s, the growth of American suburbs was most notable in areas located further away from metropolitan centers, reflecting the realtors’ adage of “drive until you qualify [for a mortgage].”¹⁶⁴ The further away the prospective suburban house buyer drove from the city center and from the adjacent top-priced residential areas, the more affordable the suburban or exurban housing they could get, at the cost of lengthening the daily commute to the city or, more recently, to an edge city where they worked.¹⁶⁵ Whatever the shortcomings of such bedroom community housing, in this period many Americans chose to buy an affordable but big house with a large lot. Hayden lists the

¹⁶⁰ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 284-5.

¹⁶¹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 138.

¹⁶² Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 138.

¹⁶³ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 148-56.

¹⁶⁴ For an explanation of this slogan, see, for example, Janet Kennedy, “Lessons Learned: Doing Things Differently at the Local Level,” *Journal of Affordable Housing & Community Development Law* 20, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 225-7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41429170>.

¹⁶⁵ The exurb, an abbreviation for “extra-urban,” was first used by A. C. Spector in his book, *The Exurbanites* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1956). Later, more recent usage came to affix the meaning of “located farther than suburbs, in semi-rural areas” to the term. On edge cities, see Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Anchor, 1992).

example of a San Jose suburb, San Carlos, as having a median house price of about \$680,000 in the 1990s, so people employed in Silicon Valley would instead opt for more distant bedroom communities sixty miles away, with median house prices of about \$225,000.¹⁶⁶ The problems of long-haul commuting became obvious, since “after a year or two [of long-distance commuting], burnout was common” and many Californian suburbanites learned the hard way that if “the dream was peaceful family life, the reality was the road.”¹⁶⁷ Leigh Gallagher recounts the story of Diane Roseman, a suburban mother whose dream of owning a big house came true, but at the great price of her becoming a constant driver for her family, complaining that she stays in the car from morning till night.¹⁶⁸ In a seminal study on the effects of stress induced by car commuting, Swiss economists Alois Stutzer and Bruno S. Frey argue that “traveling longer distances to and from work is only chosen if it is either compensated by an intrinsically or financially rewarding job or by additional welfare gained from a pleasant living environment.”¹⁶⁹ In the United States, a partial remedy to the traffic congestion created by a multitude of cars occupied mostly by single suburbanite drivers driving to and from work has been addressed by the widespread adoption of high-occupancy vehicle lanes (HOV) which may be used during the weekday peak hours to overtake the single-occupancy cars in the other lanes. Overall, these attempts at alleviating the traffic congestion that has plagued many American metropolitan areas for decades have proved ineffective, as has the practice of building more road lanes to reduce congestion. As Adam Mann explains, “you can’t build your way out of congestion. It’s the roads themselves that cause traffic.”¹⁷⁰ There seem to be only two solutions to the congestion problem, both problematic. First, many Americans have tried to arrange their driving so as to avoid the peak hour traffic. Second, there has been an upsurge in the number of “walkable” communities in American cities, suburbs, and towns which rely on walking, cycling, or public transportation at the expense of car travel.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 185. Californians have often been willing to cope with long commuting distances.

¹⁶⁷ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 185.

¹⁶⁸ Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, 81. She further argues that a “shiny new four-bedroom in the hinterlands is cheap. Getting there and back [by car] is not.” This calculation includes not only the material costs but also human capital (stress, fatigue, other problems induced by long commuting) and the tear and wear on the cohesion of the suburban family.

¹⁶⁹ Alois Stutzer and Bruno S. Frey, “Stress That Doesn’t Pay: The Commuting Paradox,” *Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 110, no. 2 (2008): 339, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25195346>.

¹⁷⁰ Adam Mann, “What’s Up With That: Building Bigger Roads Actually Makes Traffic Worse,” *Wired*, June 17, 2014, <http://www.wired.com/2014/06/wuwt-traffic-induced-demand/>. For a more persuasive and vitriolic version of this argument, see a classic indictment of American car culture in John Keats, *The Insolent Chariots* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1958).

¹⁷¹ More about the history and development of “walkable” communities is given later in this chapter.

Another suburban trend that became widespread in the 1990s and 2000s is telecommuting. While the practice of white-collar professionals working from their suburban homes via various online systems and web clients proved to have certain advantages over a long daily commute to the office, it nonetheless presents “a potential spatial conflict” as “earning and nurturing” come to collide in many suburban families and the impromptu home-office arrangement also raises many other related social challenges within the suburban family itself and in relation to one’s neighbors.¹⁷² As a result, while telecommuting and home office use for suburbanites have solved the problem of daily commuting and the related challenges to health, they have created new difficulties in relation to the legality of working from home and approaches to workplace safety standards whose monitoring in the part-time home offices of telecommuters has posed an unforeseen challenge since “paid work spilled into family life in new and anxious ways.”¹⁷³

The fringe suburbs of the 1980s to 2000s were of three major types. First, average middle-class suburbanites would move to existing small towns that would be “overwhelmed by new construction” and by the influx of suburban newcomers to the old public facilities of the city such as schools, churches, and shops which would render these facilities unable to cope with the high volume of usage by automobile traffic.¹⁷⁴ The second kind of residential suburban fringes have been called “hot towns,” that is, affluent new suburban communities whose growth has excelled the national average by two to four times.¹⁷⁵ These new “hot town” communities of largely working-at-home (traders, writers, and so forth) would drive out “the mom-and-pop grocery, the diner, and the agricultural agent,” while new businesses would spring up in their area to cater to their needs, such as malls, office supplies stores, and trendy restaurants and cafés.¹⁷⁶ The third type, representing the most upscale of the new suburban fringe communities, would be called “Valhallas,” mythic expensive mansions for the wealthy, such as the 2000s dot-com millionaires, whose demands upon small-town facilities and outdoor recreation (including private jet/helicopter access to their country residences) brought rapid change to the local communities as the prices of housing, as well

¹⁷² See Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 185-8. One immediate problem is the legality of working from one’s home in single-use residential communities which officially do not allow suburbanites to use their homes for work purposes. This chapter was written before the COVID-19 pandemic made the use of “home office” suburban strategies for American (and international) office workers a widely practised necessity in the early 2020s.

¹⁷³ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 186, 188.

¹⁷⁴ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 188. For more on the problem with financing new suburbs with tax money and the frequent failure to do so, see also Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, 53-61, where she shows, quoting urban planner Charles Marohn, how “most suburban municipalities [...] are [...] unable to pay the maintenance costs of their infrastructure, let alone replace things when they inevitably wear out after twenty to twenty-five years.” See Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, 58-9.

¹⁷⁵ See Peter Wolf, *Hot Towns: The Future of the Fastest Growing Communities in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

¹⁷⁶ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 189.

as services, in these areas went up rapidly, resulting in the locals' inability to afford housing in the area and in the gradual disappearance of many traditional shops and restaurants, while the new residents hired locals to provide these services for them on a private basis.¹⁷⁷

A crucial characteristic of American suburbanization from the 1970s to the 2000s is the gradual enlargement of the ground area of the average suburban house and lot size. An average 1950s suburban house for a nuclear family of husband, wife, and their three children had a ground area of about 800 square feet and would utilize a lot of about 5,000 square feet.¹⁷⁸ In the 1970s and after, "smaller households became the norm, including single parents, childless couples, single people, retirees, and couples with fewer children."¹⁷⁹ Ironically, these smaller households would tend to buy new houses that were almost three times larger than the 1950s houses which accommodated mostly young families with several children. By 1999, the average floor area of a new house in the US was 2,250 square feet and the average lot size had increased to 12,910 square feet. Such lots would, of course, primarily be found farther away from cities, in the exurban bedroom communities that are farther away from the cities than suburbs. To cope with the extra travel distance, a typical suburban family in this period needed more than one car as "both adults and teenagers needed cars to drive in different directions to work and school."¹⁸⁰ The rise in the number of cars owned by the average suburban family also meant greater demands upon garage space. The proliferation of home office work in the last decades has meant a further increase in the average house size, giving rise to the popular classification of such ungainly house structures that accommodated the increased demand for office and garage space as "houses on steroids" or "McMansions," whose aesthetic quality of design, and often also the use of cheap materials to convey a sense of superior house design without the accompanying quality, has taken the place of pragmatic, even if ungainly, utilization of extra floor space added to older house designs.¹⁸¹

From the 1970s onwards, American suburbia has also been marked by the widespread entry of suburban women into the workforce. While the 1950s suburban ideal still included stay-at-home women who were supposed to find their fulfillment in the roles of wives and mothers, by the 1970s, a large percentage of these women were taking up jobs to supplement the income of their husbands. As Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen document, the 1960s and the adoption of some ideas of the women's liberation movement about gender equality in the workplace, together with the declining US economy of the 1970s, "made a

¹⁷⁷ See Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 190; and Joel Kotkin, *The New Geography: How the Digital Revolution is Reshaping the American Landscape* (New York: Random, 2000).

¹⁷⁸ See Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 190.

¹⁷⁹ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 190.

¹⁸⁰ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 190

¹⁸¹ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 190-1.

second income [for the typical American suburban family] necessary in most cases.”¹⁸² Tamar Lewin has shown the trend of an ever-increasing number of American women, including mothers with children, who have taken up working and thus defy their traditional suburban role of exclusive homemakers. She notes that by the late 1990s, both spouses were employed in over 50 percent of American households, compared to just over 30 percent in the mid-1970s.¹⁸³ The pattern of two-income suburban families has brought new challenges, though. These include increased isolation and disconnection for the suburban children, and more demands on American women, who have had to work a “second shift” taking care of their children and husbands and the elderly.¹⁸⁴ Hayden also documents the proliferation of the suburban “taxi parent” phenomenon, as many American women in the fringe suburbs of the 1980s to 2000s would double the mileage driven doing shopping and taking other family members, especially children, to their extracurricular activities or playdates. While the phenomenon of taxi parenting had been a fixture already in the sitcom suburbs of the 1950s, in the rural fringe suburbs of the 1980s and after, as the distances anywhere increased, the effect of “each added mile from the old central city” rendered life in the spacious but distant fringe suburbs increasingly “less tenable” by taking its toll on the physical, emotional, and social well-being of American suburbanites.¹⁸⁵

Since the recent recession of the US economy (2008-12) and the related housing market crisis of the late 2000s, the average house size in American suburbia has been decreasing as new suburban home owners have embraced the principles advocated by New Urbanism, as well as ideas about sustainable development and environmentalism. This movement, which began in the United States in the 1980s, has proved to be “an ongoing experiment to see whether our thirst for great community life outweighs our hunger for private backyards, discount megamalls, and easy parking.”¹⁸⁶ If the maximum average suburban house size in 2007 (i.e., before the housing market crashed) was in 2,521 square feet (ca. 234 square meters), by the early 2010s the size was expected to drop back to about 2,100 square feet (ca. 195 square meters).¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 213.

¹⁸³ See Tamar Lewin, “Now a Majority: Families With 2 Parents Who Work,” *New York Times* October 24, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/24/us/now-a-majority-families-with-2-parents-who-work.html>. Surprisingly, the percentage of women who worked in the United States did not change much between the 1950s and 1970s—it was just above 30 percent, which means that the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s did not have immediate effect in making a large number of American women assume roles as secondary (or, in many cases) primary breadwinners within their families.

¹⁸⁴ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 192.

¹⁸⁵ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 193.

¹⁸⁶ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 408.

¹⁸⁷ Gallagher, *The End of the Suburbs*, 136.

The most pressing problem of contemporary American suburbs has been the effect of suburban sprawl, namely, the psychological, environmental, and architectural impact of the excessive suburban expansion upon Americans and their mental and physical health. While urban historians such have shown that sprawl has been, to a degree, part of urban history since ancient times, its postwar dimension in the drive-in age has come under frequent attack from urban planners, architects, and culture critics. Bruegmann defines suburban sprawl as the proliferation of “unplanned, scattered, low-density, automobile-dependent development at the urban periphery.”¹⁸⁸ Dolores Hayden explains how the United States became, in the second half of the twentieth century, a country where sprawl, or “unregulated growth” of suburban areas, contributes to the production of “landscapes at a scale more suitable for automobiles and trucks than humans, landscapes characterized by wide highways, endless commercial strips, large pods of isolated single-use development (such as malls or residential subdivisions), and little public open space.”¹⁸⁹ There is even a medical interpretation of the negative effects of suburban sprawl. Howard Frumkin, Lawrence Frank, and Richard Jackson document, in *Urban Sprawl and Public Health*, that the uncontrolled growth of American suburban fringes in the last couple of decades has brought a range of negative developments, for example, the

heavy reliance [of the suburbanites] on the automobile for transportation results in more air pollution, which contributes to respiratory and cardiovascular disease. More driving also means less physical activity, contributing to a national epidemic of overweight and associated diseases. More time on the roads means a greater risk of collisions with other cars and with pedestrians, with associated injuries and deaths. Sprawling cities affect the quality of drinking water sources and the availability of green spaces. Even mental health and the network of social interactions and trust known as “social capital” may be affected.¹⁹⁰

In *Suburban Nation*, Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck provide a useful summary of the New Urbanist criticism of postwar suburban sprawl in the United States, a process of land development into suburban communities during whose history America has grown into “a placeless collection of subdivisions, strip centers, and office parks,” while the higher standard of living that the growth of suburbia in the United States promised “has somehow failed to result in a better quality of life.”¹⁹¹ While the overblown mansions offer good value in terms of the size of private space and facilities that may fit in

¹⁸⁸ Robert Bruegmann, *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.

¹⁸⁹ Dolores Hayden, *A Field Guide To Sprawl* (New York: Norton, 2004), 7-8.

¹⁹⁰ Howard Frumkin, Lawrence Frank, and Richard Jackson, *Urban Sprawl and Public Health: Designing, Planning and Building for Healthy Communities* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2004), 2-3.

¹⁹¹ Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream, 10th Anniversary ed.* (New York: Farrar, 2010), xxii.

the homes, most suburbanites, as soon as they leave the refuge of their houses, “are confronted by a tawdry and stressful environment” of “repetitive [residential] subdivisions, treeless collector roads, and vast parking lots,” all of which contribute to a stressful and unpleasant commuting and driving experience.¹⁹²

Some writers have also praised the impact of sprawl in the United States. According to Thad Williamson, “sprawl is, by and large, a good thing because it fulfills Americans’ preferences for privacy and mobility and provides a spatial context in which millions of citizens can access the American dream of a comfortable private home in a safe, pleasant neighborhood.”¹⁹³ Alan Ehrenhalt documents the way American suburbs in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries radically changed in terms of demographic make-up, since “the poor and newcomers are living on the outskirts,” while the well-to-do have started moving back from suburban bedroom communities to city centers, a development which he calls the “demographic inversion” of the dominant twentieth-century pattern of out-of-the-city-to-the-suburbs migration.¹⁹⁴ Robert Fishman has similarly argued that “a fifth great migration” of Americans has been happening since the 2000s, causing a return of well-to-do suburbanites to walkable inner-city communities, contributing to the gentrification and rejuvenation of “precisely those inner-city districts that were previously depopulated.”¹⁹⁵ Ehrenhalt further argues that the United States and its history of suburbanization, which had been the story of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with its “massive outward migration of the affluent,” is coming to an end and alternatives to the suburban sprawl will have to be found.¹⁹⁶

There have been viable alternatives to mindless construction of new suburbs that would address the problems of suburban architecture and sprawl head-on. For example, Christopher B. Leinberger sees a solution to the problems of contemporary urban and suburban America in the widespread implementation of architectural procedures that would enhance the proliferation of “walkable urban development,” which he compares to the “next

¹⁹² Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck, *Suburban Nation*, 41.

¹⁹³ Thad Williamson, *Sprawl, Justice and Citizenship: The Civic Costs of the American Way of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4. See also Robert Bruegmann, *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); William T. Bogart, *Don’t Call It Sprawl: Metropolitan Structure in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and David Brooks, *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) In The Future Tense* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

¹⁹⁴ See Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Great Inversion and the Future of the American City* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 3-4.

¹⁹⁵ See Robert Fishman, “Longer View: The Fifth Migration,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71, no. 4 (2005), 357-66. Quoted in Ehrenhalt, *The Great Inversion*, 230. Ehrenhalt further explains the previous four waves of migration in US history—first, the westward migration in the nineteenth century, second, the migration from farms to factory towns, third, to the great metropolitan centers around the beginning of the twentieth century, fourth, from the cities to the suburbs for much of the twentieth century.

¹⁹⁶ Ehrenhalt, *The Great Inversion*, 7.

American Dream” in real estate ownership.¹⁹⁷ He argues for the rejection of “drivable suburb-urbanism,” that is, of the government-sponsored system that favors automobile suburbs, built by private companies, over any other residential development. To deal with the challenges of sprawl in the American landscape, he calls for the refurbishment of city downtowns and suburban shopping malls into new, upscale, walkable communities that would enjoy the traditional mixture of residential, commercial, and professional facilities whose heyday dates to the pre-single-zoning period of American urban development.¹⁹⁸

A detailed recent theoretical guidebook and evaluation of American suburbia and urban planning ideas for dealing with its problems is *Retrofitting Suburbia* by Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson.¹⁹⁹ The authors focus on three major principles that might help suburbia overcome the sociocultural challenges of sprawl and the decline of certain single-zoning areas. These include “the adaptive re-use of existing structures for more community-serving purposes” (i.e., re-inhabitation), “replacing existing structures and/or building on existing parking lots, generally with a compact, walkable, connected mix of uses and public spaces that supports a less auto-dependent and more socially engaged lifestyle,” (i.e., redevelopment), and the “demolition of existing structures and revitalization of land, as either parks, community gardens, or reconstructed wetlands” (i.e., regreening).²⁰⁰

Any transformation of the privately-owned suburban communities faces challenges of ownership and ideology that go beyond mere structural solutions for architectural and landscaping transformation. In *Suburban Nation*, Duany, Platter-Zyberk, and Speck come up with the New Urbanist manifesto, an urgent call for a revolution in American urban design as the solution to the problem of the architectural and sociocultural debasement of American society at the end of the twentieth century:

No more housing subdivisions!

No more shopping centers!

No more office parks!

Neighborhoods or nothing!²⁰¹

The New Urbanists thus argue that American Dream, polluted by the effects of heedless suburban expansion and sprawl, might be redeemed with the widespread adoption of life in new, mixed-use suburban neighborhoods whose design would mark a return to the livable and sociable design of traditional small towns of the prewar era where the shopping could

¹⁹⁷ See Christopher B. Leinberger, *The Option of Urbanism: Investing in a New American Dream* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2008), 151.

¹⁹⁸ Leinberger, *The Option of Urbanism*, 151.

¹⁹⁹ See Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson, *Retrofitting Suburbia, Updated Edition: Urban Designs Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011).

²⁰⁰ Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson, *Retrofitting Suburbia*, viii.

²⁰¹ Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck, *Suburban Nation*, 243.

be done on foot and one could make use of the walking-distance accessibility of neighbors, shops, services, schools, and entertainment without the necessity of using the car to get anywhere.²⁰² However, any new design of American suburbs is apt to be tricky since, as John Archer argues, “the American dream [of single-family suburban house ownership] is a project centered on the individual,” whereas the collectivist designs for new urban and suburban communities by the New Urbanists seem to go flatly against the individualist, self-reliant element of American identity, suggesting an arrival of totalitarian regulations and the relinquishment of many basic American civic freedoms in communities that would embrace such innovations.²⁰³

According to Archer, many American “householders across suburbia already lead hybrid lives every day, across a broad range of ethnicities, incomes, social classes, and other demographic criteria.”²⁰⁴ Understanding the range of options that suburbanization has brought to American culture, including issues of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and identity, it might be a truly enriching experience for the scholar and suburbanite alike to continue the participation in the suburban dream since, as Bennett M. Berger has shown, “there are no grounds for believing that suburbia has created a distinctive style of life or a new social character for Americans.”²⁰⁵ It is also useful to realize the fallacy of attributing all social ills to a particular segment of society and architecture, such as postwar suburbs and tract housing communities, rather than acknowledging the fact that the problems that plague suburbanites, including isolation, loneliness, and conformity, already existed before the postwar suburbanization and sprawl. Criticism of suburbia as the cause of many problems of twentieth-century urbanization has been fashionable, and yet this approach seems of dubious validity and use. Michael Ruhlman wonders why suburbs have been “so consistently bad-mouthed [for their] conformity, mediocrity, [and] consumerism,” trends which may dominate the suburbs but which “also happen everywhere else.”²⁰⁶ The suburban sprawl and effects of prolonged commuting upon suburbanites of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries might thus be seen as an extension of the (sub-)urban identity of Americans and its

²⁰² An example that many new suburban and urban designs return to is a “walkable city”; see Jeff Speck, *Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step At a Time* (New York: Farrar, 2013); Edward Glaeser, *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier* (New York: Penguin, 2012). Two other essential volumes on the contemporary trends in American urbanism are Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Great Inversion and the Future of the American City* (New York: Vintage, 2012); and Charles Montgomery, *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design* (New York: Farrar, 2013).

²⁰³ See John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690-2000* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 349.

²⁰⁴ Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia*, 364.

²⁰⁵ Bennett M. Berger, “Suburbia and the American Dream,” *Public Interest* 1 (1966): 82.

²⁰⁶ Michael Ruhlman, *House: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 29-30.

realization through architecture and design, rather than the cause of social and environmental problems per se.²⁰⁷

One recent trend is the gradual ethnicization of American suburbia. Wei Li explains that the traditional myth of American suburbia as predominantly (or exclusively) white, Protestant, and upper to middle-class is no longer reflects reality as in recent decades, “many suburban areas have transformed to multiracial and multicultural ones under the influence of international geopolitical and global economic restructuring.”²⁰⁸ These new communities represent “the spatial expression of a unique set of ethnic relations [...] characterized by a unique spatial form and internal socioeconomic structure [...] an ethnoburb is a multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural community in which one ethnic minority group has a significant concentration but does not necessarily comprise a majority of the total population.”²⁰⁹ Li also further defines this development as conducive to the rise of “ethnoburbs,” or multiethnic suburbs, whose openness to “sociocultural, economic, and political interactions with the outside world,” as well as their demographic diversity, refute the traditional stereotypes about the racial and ethnic homogeneity of American suburbia.²¹⁰ As Robert D. Putnam, Lewis M. Feldstein, and Don Cohen argue, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the American sense of community had undergone “profound social and cultural changes” which had effectively come to mean that Americans no longer seem to build “the dense webs of encounter and participation so vital to the health of ourselves, our families, and our polities.”²¹¹ The battle for a happy, walkable, eco-friendly urban and suburban culture in the United States is not lost, however. A sign that a lot of positive development in terms of the improvement of the quality of urban life has already happened has been the rise of suburban (and urban) neighborhood community-building, and other collective, community-fostering activities such as urban gardening, suburban homesteading, interfaith community civic work, and many other grassroots activities that aim to achieve, from the level of individual residents of urban and suburban communities, what the New Urbanists have been prescriptive about from the vantage point of urban architecture. Hayden reminds that the authorities will have to increase their say in making the suburban and urban

²⁰⁷ The issue of how criticism of the suburban lifestyle reflects the real problem suburbanites face in their lives is examined in more detail in the fifth chapter which provides an analysis of five suburban novels by Richard Yates.

²⁰⁸ Wei Li, “Introduction: Asian Immigration and Community in the Pacific Rim,” in *From Urban Enclave to Ethnic Suburb: New Asian Communities in Pacific Rim Countries*, edited by Wei Li (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 1.

²⁰⁹ Li, “Introduction,” 12.

²¹⁰ Wei Li, “Spatial Transformation of an Urban Ethnic Community: From Chinatown to Ethnoburb in Los Angeles,” in *From Urban Enclave to Ethnic Suburb: New Asian Communities in Pacific Rim Countries*, edited by Wei Li (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 74.

²¹¹ Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, with Don Cohen, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 294.

communities, built by private companies, subscribe to the principles of the sustainability of their services and utilities: “The role of federal, state, and local government should be to counterbalance the influence of the private market, to protect the young and the elderly, and to sustain decent shelter, services, jobs, and public places for all.”²¹² The structural problems in the design of contemporary suburbs might be remedied, for example, by promoting architecture and communities that foster a pleasant lifestyle in an environment that may be private and quiet, public and lively, or, a mixture of these extremes. However, even if the radical changes in the design of suburban communities that recent planners call for were implemented, it would not mean the end of master-planned and monotonous suburban architecture as we know it.²¹³

While new communities that counter the problem of sprawl with living-friendly design of private and public space have sprung up across the United States since the 1980s, it remains to be seen whether these changes in urban architecture might find a representation in literature, film, and the arts, in order to revise the mythology of the white, middle-class, conservative sitcom suburbs as a place of conformist ennui, isolation, and architectural uniformity.²¹⁴ According to Archer, the task of suburban planners of the future, as well as of suburbanites and their civic groups of the present, is to “recognize the built environment as an apparatus for implementing and enacting social capital, no longer simply as an instrument for representing and fashioning the self.”²¹⁵ After all, the United States, as a quintessentially urban nation, now needs to recognize the achievement of suburbanization in the area of architecture and community involvement while paying attention to the challenges of the formation of identity that the traditional and new patterns of urban design inevitably bring. Matthew Arnold observed that “through culture seems to lie our way, not only to perfection, but even to safety.”²¹⁶ If Americans of the last two centuries have become, or have dreamed of becoming suburbanites, the time has now come for them to realize that the American

²¹² Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 248.

²¹³ Another, rather pessimistic scenario for which I do not have the space in the argumentation of my last chapter is the peak oil theory, whose proponents claim that American suburbia will soon collapse after oil prices rise and oil supplies dwindle. See James Howard Kunstler, *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005). See also a recent documentary film on the subject, *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of The American Dream* (dir. Gregory Greene, 2004).

²¹⁴ In some cases, this representation of new suburban trends has already happened. For example, *The Truman Show* (1998, dir. Peter Weir), whose protagonist is Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey), the only real person in the staged utopia of the planned suburban community of Seahaven, who discovers that he is an actor in a real-time TV show and tries to break free from the show (the real-life planned town of Seaside, FL, an early New Urbanist project from the 1980s). Ironically, the film showed the undesirable potential of master-planned urban communities such as Seaside to invoke an Orwellian sense of a dystopian world in which the authorities’ control over individual lives and the private space of the town’s citizens becomes intrusive, unpleasant, and frightening. To my knowledge, the New Urbanists have not addressed the psychological effect of the loss of private space in their designs.

²¹⁵ Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia*, 367.

²¹⁶ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 148.

Dream of an individual identity to thrive in a diverse suburban community means going beyond the traditional myths of suburban racial and class exclusivity towards the implementation of new designs and means of socialization that make urban, suburban, and rural communities more desirable places to live and work in for all. Suburbanites need to recognize the flaws of American suburbanization but also to celebrate its achievement; as the suburbs are likely to remain, for better or worse, a hybrid environment in which the old and new, public and private, collective and individual, should coexist, develop, and enrich each other. One of the critical evaluations of postwar American suburbs that takes into account “the sunny and noir versions” of the suburban myth, or, rather, the notion of what constitutes the suburban way of life depends on the eye of the beholder, is defined by Becky M. Nicolaides who explains that while the suburban way of life after WWII resembles “the ultimate embodiment of the middle-class American dream [of] upward mobility, expanding opportunity, rising standards of living and income, and the latest technologies of the good life” on the one hand, it also includes, on the other hand, “conformity, excessive sociability, and unhealthy family life.”²¹⁷

Perhaps a recent prediction by John Archer might serve as a fitting closure to this attempt at understanding and interpreting American suburbanization and its sociocultural role. He argues that the challenge for the architecture and culture of the suburbs in the United States is to find ways of allowing for

greater hybridization: [for making possible the existence of] more diverse identities and more counterpublics, capable of necessary and desirable change over time with more flexible design, providing strengthened physical and social fabric through an open spatial syntax that is amenable to many ways of reading, and many ways of living.²¹⁸

The interpretation of suburban identity as essential, diverse, vigorous, and viable is, however, more easily imagined than accomplished. It remains up to the architects, city planners, politicians, critics of culture, and artists to persuade the American people, especially the developers of new communities and their subsequent residents, of the need for new identity narratives and approaches to suburban culture within the public sphere of community life, as well as within the private realm of private residential housing.

Many Americans are tired of the growing physical distance of suburban communities the design of which has changed dramatically over the years to gradually make people live farther and farther apart from one another and from the things they like to do, making them increasingly reliant on their cars. The historical development of American suburbs

²¹⁷ Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*, 216.

²¹⁸ Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia*, 373.

documents the reasons why suburbia came to dominate the cultural consciousness and search for identity of America from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. As Kenneth J. Gergen explains, participation in the process of identity formation is a necessity as in order “to live in any culture is to absorb its perspectives and implicit evaluations.”²¹⁹ This is not to say, however, that the interpreter of American suburbs and suburbanization is to wholeheartedly embrace the poetics of suburban space and domesticity. On the contrary, an objectivizing distance from the suburban lifestyle is at times necessary for a comprehensive evaluation of the suburban identity narratives and for the production of new ones. In response to the effect of the quintessentially American setting that the suburbs represent, many authors have produced important literary representations. The golden age of American suburbs may now have come to its end, yet the contemporary trends and patterns in residential and commercial architecture show that the suburbs, however problematic, exciting, pleasant, or detestable, are going to remain a major part of the American cultural landscape, a dynamic setting which helps to shape the Americans’ sense of identity as a composite of the self and society within the dynamic framework of the suburban family and community.

²¹⁹ Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 230.

Chapter 3

The Life of Richard Yates

It is not usually necessary to need to know too much about a fiction writer's life and career since, as the New Critics and other schools of criticism have argued, the writing itself should speak for itself and provide sufficient information about the characters, conflicts, setting and other elements that are vital in good fiction.¹ In the case of Yates, however, this dictum does not hold since much of his fiction appropriates elements of thinly-disguised autobiography, therefore, a knowledge of his biography enriches an interpretation of his fiction.² As David Castronovo and Steven Goldleaf emphasize, Yates "wrote no autobiography, no memoirs" while he was not opposed to using a limited set of autobiographical facts and events in his fiction to such a degree that "his biography can be deduced from patterns that recur in novel after novel and story after story."³ It seems as if Yates himself put some of the people and events he knew into his fiction, even if his only clearly autobiographical piece that he published, an essay in *The New York Times*, deals not with his life but, rather, with his favorite literary models and influences on his writing.⁴ He admits that he "wasn't a bookish child; [and] reading was such hard work" for him that he "avoided it whenever possible," while he credits the movies of the 1930s with providing essential inspiration on how to cultivate a socially-acceptable masculine persona and "how to think like a writer."⁵ Truly enough, in Yates's stories and novels, the male and female characters often compare their behavior and looks with the idealized identities and actions of Hollywood movie actors and try to apply the film postures and identities in real-life situations.⁶ As regards his literary influences, Yates admits to being consciously inspired by his readings in 19th and 20th century realist fiction, especially by the autobiographical fiction of Thomas Wolfe, by the spare realism of Ernest Hemingway, by the exuberant celebration of urban and suburban life in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and by Gustave Flaubert's masterful portrait of the unhappy married woman protagonist in *Madame Bovary*.

¹ For example, see Alfred J. Drake, Rick Armstrong, and Shep Steiner, eds., *The New Criticism: Formalist Literary Theory in America* (Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars, 2013); Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, tr. Benjamin Sher (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2009); and René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (London: Cape, 1954).

² Numerous stories and characters from Yates's life found their way into his novels and short stories. The most comprehensive coverage of the autobiographical elements in Yates's fiction is by Blake Bailey in *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates* (New York: Picador 2003).

³ David Castronovo and Steven Goldleaf, *Richard Yates* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 20.

⁴ See Richard Yates, "Some Very Good Masters," *New York Times*, April 19 (1981), Section 7, 3.

⁵ Yates, "Some Very Good Masters," 3.

⁶ The preoccupation with observing one's image in the mirror and practising a cool pose there is typical for Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*, Gloria, Phil and Rachel Drake in *Cold Spring Harbor*, and many other examples can be found in other Yates writings.

Flaubert's masterpiece served as an acknowledged thematic model for Yates's first novel, *Revolutionary Road*, in which he tries to recreate Flaubert's "kind of balance and quiet resonance on every page, that kind of foreboding mixed with comedy, that kind of inexorable destiny in the heart of a lonely, romantic girl."⁷ Fitzgerald's novel provided "a stunning illumination of the world" in which characters are repeatedly caught "in the act of giving themselves away."⁸

Yates was born in 1926 in Yonkers, New York, as the second child of Vincent Matthew Yates and Ruth Maurer Yates.⁹ He had an older sister Ruth, born in 1921. While his mother was a child of German immigrants who claimed that she "married beneath her,"¹⁰ Yates's father Vincent, although an unassuming man of average looks and intelligence, was actually a descendant of William Bradford, a prominent early governor of Plymouth Colony and author of the Mayflower Compact. As a son of a Methodist clergyman, Vincent "spent most of his adult life as an assistant regional sales manager for General Electric (Mazda Lamps Division); who was patient and reliable in meeting the demands of a flamboyant, profligate ex-wife; and who had a fine singing voice but at some point gave it up for good."¹¹ Yates's mother Ruth studied art but after marriage to Vincent she agreed to become a homemaker with the unrealistic ambition to pursue sculpture full-time for a living and become famous with her art. Yates's parents married in 1920. In 1921, Yates's older sister Ruth was born. The personalities of Yates's parents soon clashed in multiple ways. Regarding politics, his father was a liberal Democrat who was sympathetic to the working class while Yates's mother, despite her modest family background, claimed to love the Republican Party, the rich, and the American aristocracy.¹² Regarding the views on life, Yates's father was a practical, down-to earth realist while his mother was a romantic dreamer capable of pathetic pretension and life-long delusion in her pursuit of a career and lifestyle that were beyond her financial means and art talent. What both parents agreed upon, however, was a love of the drink, a problem which both their children inherited and suffered

⁷ Yates, "Some Very Good Masters," 3.

⁸ Yates, "Some Very Good Masters," 3.

⁹ The facts of Yates's life are drawn from Martin Naparstek, *Richard Yates Up Close: The Writer and His Works* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 25-29; Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 20-35, and Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 7-603. The first sixteen years of Yates's life and his early family background is also portrayed by Yates himself, in the thinly-disguised autobiographical foreword to *A Good School* (New York: Picador, 1978), 1-8, in a novel which chronicles the prep school years of Bill Grove, an alter-ego of the adolescent Yates.

¹⁰ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 11.

¹¹ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 14. The abandoned singing career of Yates's father is portrayed in "Lament for a Tenor," an early uncollected story by Yates. See Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 116; and Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 143-4.

¹² A wonderful satirical portrait of Yates's pretentious sculptor mother, one of several that appears in his fiction, is the character of Helen in "Oh, Joseph, I'm So Tired," a short story included in Richard Yates, *Liars in Love* (London: Vintage, 2007), 1-33.

from as well.¹³ The Yates family lived in rented housing in the picturesque suburban village of Hastings-on-Hudson until 1929, when the parents divorced. Yates's sister Ruth, portrayed as Edith, the sister of the boy protagonist of Yates's story "Oh, Joseph, I'm So Tired," later claimed that the time spent in Hudson "had been the happiest in her life,"¹⁴ while young Richard, aged three when the divorce of their parents and subsequent move away from suburban Hudson happened, could remember nothing of that presumed family idyll. As Yates later wrote in *A Good School*, a novel devoted to his prep school years, he grew up, like the novel's protagonist Bill Grove, to be his mother's son while his father preferred his sister as the child to love and support:

I had been given over to my mother. There was pain in that assumption—for both of us, I would guess, though I can't speak for him—yet there was an uneasy justice in it too. Much as I might with it otherwise, I did prefer my mother. I knew she was foolish and irresponsible, that she talked too much, that she made crazy emotional scenes over nothing and could be counted on to collapse -in a crisis, but I had come to suspect, dismally, that my own personality might be built along much the same lines. In ways that were neither profitable nor especially pleasant, she and I were a comfort to one another.¹⁵

Following the divorce of his parents, Yates's mother went to study sculpture in Paris for a year, taking little Richard along, and later she "became a sculptor who longed to have rich people admire her work and accept her into her lives,"¹⁶ while his father worked hard through the Depression years, to be able to afford his ex-wife's unrealistic financial requirements for the life of an artist whose home in a sequence of rented suburban houses and New York apartments also doubled up as a sculptor's studio.¹⁷ As Castronovo and Goldleaf explain, Yates's mother was a bohemian artist in the 1930s and 1940s and thus a strange subject of her son's admiration. She considered her poverty and professional failure as "temporary and illusory" and she "would tell anyone who would listen that her values were patrician."¹⁸ In 1941, when Yates was 15, his mother had him enroll in Avon Old Farms School, a private

¹³ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 15.

¹⁴ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 16.

¹⁵ Yates, *A Good School*, 2. The affection of Yates's father for Yates's sister Ruth is portrayed in *The Easter Parade* as the preferential treatment that Sarah, the older of the Grimes sisters, gets from their absent father while her younger sister Emily is tied up in the care of their ineffectual mother, one of several fictional portraits of Yates's mother Ruth. (see Richard Yates, *The Easter Parade*. In *Revolutionary Road; The Easter Parade; Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, 291-475. New York: Knopf, 2009).

¹⁶ Yates, *A Good School*, 3. The relative highlight of his mother's career came when she got the commission to sculpt the head of president-elect Roosevelt, and, later, a bust of boxer Joe Louis.

¹⁷ This section of Yates's life is well chronicled in the thinly disguised autobiographical fiction of the second chapter of Richard Yates, *A Special Providence* (New York: Vintage, 2009), 111-220, and in two stories from *Liars in Love*, namely, "Oh, Joseph, I'm So Tired," and "Trying Out for the Race." (See Yates, *Liars in Love*, 1-34, 63-92).

¹⁸ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 23.

prep school which she could barely afford.¹⁹ Yates was at first miserable there, suffering from social ostracization and from the fact that he was the poorest boy in the school, but he grew to enjoy the experience, becoming an experienced editor and fledgling writer during his stay at Avon.²⁰ In the middle of his Avon studies, in 1942, Yates's father suddenly died, arguably of exhaustion, after years of having to work extra hard to be able to support his ex-wife's increasingly demanding lifestyle (and Richard's expensive education at Avon). When Yates graduated from Avon Old Farms in 1944 and joined the Army, he had been a mother's boy who was stifled by her overbearing affection for years, and he grew to feel a vague hatred towards his absent (and later prematurely dead) father, a feeling similar to the ambivalent attitude towards his parents that Bobby Prentice experiences in *A Special Providence*.²¹ Towards his mother, Yates would feel a mixture of "sympathy with resentment,"²² a feeling he tried to suppress during his stint in the army that he hoped would make him a man and provide ample material for his writing. As an infantryman, Yates proved an inept soldier but after his training was complete, he was sent to Europe and took part, as a member of the 75th Infantry Division, in the final stages of the liberation of Western Europe, desperately trying to fit in and make his mark. He was not very successful at first, making all sorts of clumsy blunders (portrayed in sections 1 and 3 of *A Special Providence*) but towards the end of his 1945 involvement in the European theater of the war, he succeeded in "running messages [...] as mortar shells burst around him, until he was all but dead with exhaustion."²³ After being treated for pneumonia, he returned to combat and survived the bloodbath of the allied crossing the Dortmund-Ems Canal on April 4 1945, soon after which the war ended.²⁴ After spending time in the occupation forces in Europe, Yates was honorably discharged and returned to the US in 1946. He chose to skip the inviting option of attending college on the GI Bill (his lack of education was actually something he would bitterly regret for the rest of his life), instead, he set out to earn enough money as a free-lance PR writer, first for United Press, later for Remington Rand for much of the late

¹⁹ Financial problems accompanied Yates's Avon stay throughout, from the early pathetic but successful attempts of his mother to have his tuition fee reduced to later problems Yates faced with being denied a graduation diploma when it became known that his tuition had been left unpaid since his father's death in 1942. For more details, see Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 45-74.

²⁰ This experience is reflected in two characters whose growth beyond the influence of the mother is chronicled in two novels by Yates—*A Good School* (the story of Bill Grove) and *Cold Spring Harbor* (the side story of Phil Drake).

²¹ In the novel, protagonist Bobby Prentice suffers from the suffocating influence of his mother Alice (as well as from her itinerant nature and artistic and social pretension) until he is able to break free of these by first joining the army and, second, by staying in Europe after the war, thereby severing the link to his mother.

²² Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 24.

²³ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 81. See for a most complete coverage of Yates's war time, see the story of Bobby Prentice in Yates, *A Special Providence*, 23-108; 223-305.

²⁴ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 83.

1940s, while trying to write fiction like his models Hemingway and Fitzgerald in his spare time as the real profession.²⁵ He grew to live to the stereotype of the haunted writer who smoked constantly despite tuberculosis, emphysema, and repeated bouts of pneumonia; he was an alcoholic who, when unable to write, would sometimes start the day with martinis at breakfast; he rarely exercised (indeed could hardly walk without gasping), and ate red meat at every meal if he could help it.²⁶

Despite such a lifestyle Yates proved entertaining company whose early shyness with women was gone by the time he returned to the US after the war. In 1948, he married Sheila Bryant, and their first daughter Sharon was born in 1950. In the same year, Yates was diagnosed with advanced tuberculosis and spent a total of eight months years in a TB hospital where he got a late headstart with reading the classics of 19th and 20th century realist fiction, marking a beginning of “a lifelong process of autodidactic recompense” of his missing college education.²⁷ Around this time, Yates also became “an even more devoted reader of *The New Yorker*,” in which he sought out stories of J. D. Salinger whose “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” became a model of stylistic perfection for Yates including “the subtle accumulation of meaningful details, the elliptical dialogue, and above all the revelation of character through action.”²⁸ In 1951, using the modest funds from his veteran’s disability pension, Yates and his young family moved to Paris for an expatriate year that was to mimic the European years of Yates’s literary heroes. He himself says of the European stay that he was able to live “in Europe with nothing to do but write short stories and try to make each one better than the last. I learned a lot.”²⁹ Later that year, Yates and his family moved from Paris to the French Riviera, but the glamour of the Lost Generation had been “long gone” by that time and the meagre housing away from the city which they could afford dramatized the irreconcilable differences between Yates and his wife. He was like “a clinging, doe-eyed invalid who resented his wife’s unabashed enjoyment of the beach, the countryside, the long bike rides into town with the baby in tow for a pleasant day’s marketing” while he, tall, handsome but surprisingly unathletic, looked like “a man on death’s door” as he stayed at home, trying to write while “smoking like chimney” despite his serious lung condition.³⁰ In 1952, Yates’s fiction came to the attention of experienced literary agent Monica McCall who

²⁵ This career choice is portrayed, for example, through Michael Davenport in *Young Hearts Crying* who works as an advertizing writer while trying to become a serious poet and playwright as his real calling. Similarly, in *Revolutionary Road*, Frank Wheeler is attempts to find his real profession while he hates his well-paying office job. Unlike Davenport, however, Wheeler is no writer and has no alternate career to showcase his real identity in.

²⁶ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 75.

²⁷ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 114.

²⁸ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 109.

²⁹ Yates, “Some Very Good Masters,” 3.

³⁰ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 122. The acquisition of the smoking habit as a way to look cool is described in *A Good School*, 93-4.

would become his strongest literary supporter and a valuable friend for life, a woman “whose support—professional, moral, and otherwise—would never flag, no matter how rocky the road became.”³¹ In late 1952, Yates moved to London where to stay at his wife’s quirky English aunt proved cheaper than the French Riviera. The situation in England reversed as Yates grew to love London while his wife came to hate the city which, to her, was

big and drab and unwelcoming; you could work or ride a bus for miles without seeing anything nice, and the coming of winter brought an evil-smelling sulphurous fog that stained everything yellow, that seeped through closed windows and doors to hand in your rooms and afflict your wincing, weeping eyes.³²

It was in London that Yates experienced his literary breakthrough as his agent McCall managed to sell a story of his, “Jody Rolled the Bones,” to *The Atlantic* magazine for \$250, a windfall which marked the beginning of a wave of short stories about Yates’s youth, war experience, and life in the city that he managed to publish in prestigious, well paying American magazines.³³ In a short-lived separation, his wife and daughter returned to the US while Yates stayed on in London for a few more months. Their separation worked to bring them back together and when he returned to the US in 1953, he rekindled his marriage and resumed working as a free-lance technical writer to finance his fiction writing, splitting each month from 1953 to 1959 into writing PR copy in the first half of each month, and his own fiction in the second half. Yates’s reputation as a promising author of several quality stories was cemented by this time, and he began to receive queries about his first novel. The PR work arrangement proved very productive, as Bailey documents, since it made possible “a routine that resulted in one novel, a handful of stories, at least five hundred ghost-written articles, many executive speeches, and almost every word of Remington Rand’s internal house organ.”³⁴ From about 1954 to 1959, the Yateses lived in several upscale suburbs of New York while Yates kept working on his novel. In 1957, Yates’s second daughter Monica was born. The novel Yates tried to complete was slow in coming and the early version was rejected as a too sentimental and bad copy of Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*.³⁵ By 1959, Yates’s drinking and violent temper caused his marriage to collapse, and he moved alone back to the city. In order to supplement his PR writing income, he took up teaching writing, and finally completed his first novel, *Revolutionary Road*, in 1960. The teaching was a novel job that Yates would intermittently pursue until the end of his life, and while it

³¹ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 122.

³² Yates, *Liars in Love*, 95.

³³ These magazines included *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *Cosmopolitan*, and others, the one notable exception of a magazine that would not publish a Yates story during his lifetime was, much to the author’s chagrin and anger, *The New Yorker*.

³⁴ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 159.

³⁵ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 178.

provided him with partial income and ample company for drinking, he also claimed it “drew energies away from his writing.”³⁶ When *Revolutionary Road* was published the next year, it brought only modest sales, but won and respect from writers as diverse as William Styron and Tennessee Williams, got solid reviews, a lot of media attention, prospects of a film adaptation, and helped Yates land a screenwriting job.³⁷ In 1962, Yates worked in Hollywood on a screenplay adaptation of William Styron’s *Lie Down in Darkness* and would return to do more screenwriting jobs through the 1960s.³⁸ Yates’s post-*Revolutionary Road* literary career faltered, however. After publishing a collection of his best short stories written during the 1950s, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, in 1962, his second novel took several more years to write and by the time it was published in 1969 as *A Special Providence*, it was dismissed as a belated example of realist war fiction, a work in a dated tradition that suddenly faced competition from a plethora of more daring, experimental writers.³⁹ However, thanks to Styron’s influence, Yates landed the job, in 1963, of principal speech writer for Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, an interesting as well as exasperating experience which he later explored in *Uncertain Times*, his last, unfinished novel. Between 1964 and 1971, Yates taught at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, and it was in Iowa that he met Martha Speer, a student, and later married her. In 1972, their daughter Gina was born but by 1974, his second marriage also collapsed due to Yates’s alcoholism and mental problems including bouts of manic psychosis; a divorce followed the next year. Since 1960, Yates had experienced a series of mental breakdowns that marred his marriages as well as found a way into his fiction.⁴⁰ Although Yates failed to be a good husband to his two wives, he “worked hard at being a good father” and “was particularly proud of the fact that his three daughters got along well even though Gina was 15 years younger than Monica and had a different mother than Sharon and Monica.”⁴¹ As Castronovo and Goldleaf document, when Yates’s second marriage was breaking up by the early 1970s, his former publisher Seymour Lawrence rekindled the publishing relationship with his writer friend and arranged for Yates to get monthly advance payments of \$1,500 that were meant for him to complete his next novel. This string of payments stretched “from 1973 to through the early 1990s” and made possible

³⁶ Naparstek, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 26.

³⁷ The manuscript of *Revolutionary Road* was read, before publication, by Alfred Kazin, Tennessee Williams and William Styron, among others, they gave advance praise of unusual intensity. Especially the praise from Styron proved very important for Yates’s career.

³⁸ The 1962 Hollywood sojourn of Yates is portrayed in his later story, “Saying Goodbye To Sally,” the longest short story in *Liars in Love*. Although he was able to imitate the screenwriting stint of one of his idols, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Naparstek explains that the Hollywood experience left Yates “embittered toward the movie industry for the rest of his life.” See Naparstek, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 27.

³⁹ See Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 394-400.

⁴⁰ Most notably, an early breakdown that happened in 1960, and subsequent breakdowns in later years, are dramatized in *Disturbing the Peace*, a novel whose protagonist John Wilder is another alter-ego of Yates. See Richard Yates, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Delta, 2008).

⁴¹ Naparstek, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 27-8.

Yates's most productive writing period since, in the Lawrence-funded years, between 1975 and 1984, Yates published "over half of his life's work,"⁴² specifically, four novels (*Disturbing the Peace*, *The Easter Parade*, *A Good School*, and *Young Hearts Crying*) and a volume of short stories (*Liars in Love*). After his second divorce, Yates lived in New York City, Boston, Los Angeles (where he briefly worked on TV pilots for a former student) and finally in Tuscaloosa, taking short-term teaching or visiting writer positions while writing more autobiographical fiction. His peripatetic life in these years resembled his idol F. Scott Fitzgerald with whom Yates shared the impulse to move "practically every year," thinking that "getting out of where I am has seemed an appealing idea."⁴³

The late 1980s were a time of creative decline for Yates as he still suffered from the effect of a malicious, reputation-destroying review of his 1984 novel *Young Hearts Crying* by Anatole Broyard.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Yates managed to revisit (and transform) his suburban youth one more time in *Cold Spring Harbor*, a short novel which is set on the Gold Coast of Long Island in the 1930s and early 1940s. By this time, Yates had "kept himself on a steady schedule, writing each morning and afternoon, seven days a week," with regular drinking each night.⁴⁵

Yates spent the last several years of his life working on another novel, *Uncertain Times*. It is an autobiographical novel featuring Bill Grove, an alter-ego of Yates, as Bobby Kennedy's speechwriter during much of the year 1963, or, as he put it in a letter to Sam Lawrence, his long-time publisher, he planned

a novel about that period, with Bobby serving as one of the characters and even Jack [Kennedy] having a walk-on part. [...] I've been collecting notes and sketches for it over the past several years; I know how it's going to begin and develop and where it will go from there. I'm planning to call it *Uncertain Times* unless a snappier title comes along.⁴⁶

When Yates died in 1992, following complications from a minor hernia operation, the manuscript of *Uncertain Times* was found stored in Yates's freezer. Later attempts to edit the text into publishable form came to nothing, so only an excerpt was published in the 1995 issue of *Open City*, a literary magazine.⁴⁷ At a memorial service held for Yates in New York by Sam Lawrence and Kurt Vonnegut, praise and gratitude were the dominant topics in the memories of Yates's friends and writer colleagues. Lawrence kindly evaluated his friend's

⁴² Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 30.

⁴³ Quoted in Naparstek, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 35.

⁴⁴ See Anatole Broyard, "Two-Fisted Self Pity," *New York Times Book Review*, October 28, 1984, section 7, 3.

⁴⁵ Naparstek, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 28.

⁴⁶ From a letter by Yates to Sam Lawrence, August 30, 1983, quoted in Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 528.

⁴⁷ See Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 146-150. A long excerpt from *Uncertain Times* was published as Richard Yates, "Uncertain Times," *Open City* 3 (1995): 35-71.

troubled life and career as follows: “[Yates] drank too much, he smoked too much, he was accident-prone, he led an itinerant life, but as a writer he was all in place [...] he wrote the best dialogue since John O’Hara [...] and like John O’Hara he was a master of realism, totally attuned to the nuances of American behavior and speech.”⁴⁸ As such, Yates was a writer’s writer, appreciated by other writers as a master realist while ignored by the wider audience until the 1990s. None of his books sold well during his lifetime.

Two major things that Yates wanted to achieve with his fiction, that is, to have a short story published in *The New Yorker* magazine and to see *Revolutionary Road* turned into a movie, both happened, but too late for Yates to enjoy them when he was alive. In 2001, after several decades of biased editorial rejections from *The New Yorker* fiction editors, which made Yates hurt since the magazine routinely published stories by his writer models, peers and even by his students, *The New Yorker* finally published “The Canal,” an early story from the 1950s.⁴⁹ In 2008, a film based on *Revolutionary Road* was finally made, causing a major revival of Yates’s literary reputation, his books to be reissued in large print runs, multiple translations and foreign editions to be done, many critics to return to his work or deal with it for the first time.⁵⁰ As Andre Dubus, a student of Yates’s and later a writer friend, says in a tribute, Yates didn’t want money, he wanted readers.⁵¹ In the thirty years since his death, it seems that he [or his estate] has received more of both as the critical attention to his work has been on the rise since the 1990s.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 607.

⁴⁹ See Naparsteck, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 152-3; and Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 611.

⁵⁰ For details on the rise of Yates’s reputation since the 1990s, see Monica Yates, “Afterword,” in *Dismembering the American Dream: The Life and Fiction of Richard Yates*, by Kate Charlton-Jones (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 221-3.

⁵¹ Andre Dubus, *Broken Vessels* (Boston: Godine, 1999), 96.

Chapter 4

The American Suburban Novel Tradition Up to Richard Yates

In this chapter, I will introduce the American literary tradition of the suburban novel which leads up to Yates's suburban novels whose analysis is the focus in the next chapter. Arguably, reading Yates within the historical context of American suburbanization and his own life and career is useful, yet, localization of his work within the American literary tradition of the suburban novel adds another important angle for the critic on the way toward a complex appreciation of Yates's work. Richard Chase argues that the American novel "tends to rest in contradictions and among extreme ranges of experience," attempting to resolve these contradictions "in oblique, morally equivocal ways [...] either in melodramatic actions or in pastoral idyls."¹ The American suburban novel tradition outlined below negotiates the extremes of both modes in interesting ways that influenced Yates's fiction.

Although the first notable American suburban novel is *Babbitt* (1922) by Sinclair Lewis, there is at least one notable precursor in the American literary canon that introduces the suburban setting in American fiction, *Suburban Sketches* (1871) by William Dean Howells.² By including a diverse range of short stories about the people of Charlesbridge, a fictional community that is based on Cambridge, Massachusetts, Howells introduces the American horse-car commuter suburb of the late 1860s, featuring himself as the unusual figure of the male breadwinner who stays at home on weekdays and observes the life on his street, unlike "all other husbands and fathers" who have "eaten their breakfasts at seven o'clock, and stood up in the early horse-cars to Boston, whence they will return, with aching backs and quivering calves, half-pendant by leathern straps from the roofs of the same luxurious conveyances, in the evening."³ Although Howells gets to criticize aspects of the suburban lifestyle in the stories, his portrait of Charlesbridge is primarily positive. He considers the suburban community

a kind of Paradise. The wind blew all day from the southwest, and all day in the grove across the way the orioles sang to their nestlings. The butcher's wagon rattled merrily up to our gate every morning; and if we had kept no other reckoning, we should have known it was Thursday by the grocer. We were living in the country with the conveniences and luxuries of the city about us.⁴

¹ Richard Chase, *The American Novel And Its Tradition* (London: G. Bell, 1962), 1.

² W. D. Howells, *Suburban Sketches* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1871), <https://ia800901.us.archive.org/12/items/suburbansketches00howerich/suburbansketches00howerich.pdf>.

³ Howells, *Suburban Sketches*, 47.

⁴ Howells, *Suburban Sketches*, 12.

For Howells, Charlesbridge is a rapidly developing residential space within commuting distance to the city center, yet, its proximity to nature and country are also among its undeniable charms. The Howellsian suburb is thus a symbolic frontier between the city and country where

the horse-cars [...] went by the head of our street [...] while two minutes' walk would take us into a wood so wild and thick that no roof was visible through the trees. We learned, like innocent pastoral people of the gold age, to know the several voices of the cows pastured in the vacant lots, and, like engine-drivers of the iron age, to distinguish the different whistles of the locomotives passing on the neighboring railroad.⁵

According to George Lanum, *Suburban Sketches* marks a development of Howell's writing toward realism that goes beyond his earlier travel writing style that he perfected in *Venetian Life* (1866) by using the viewpoint of participant observer to describe the commonplace and domestic rather than the foreign and exotic.⁶ Therefore, suburbs in Howell's work had played a significant role as the dynamic setting against which the human relationships and observations of one's living environment are portrayed. Of importance is also Howell's identification with the identity of a suburbanite who feels happy and fulfilled to live in this environment, which is a very different response to the suburban experience from the ambivalence felt by protagonists of early to mid-twentieth century suburban novels that will be discussed below.⁷

Although H. C. Bunner published a volume of suburban comic stories and a play in *The Suburban Sage* (1896)⁸ wherein he treats suburban facts of life with light-hearted undercutting of a master humorist who also makes memorable social commentary on late nineteenth-century suburbs, the first major representation of suburbia in American fiction is by Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951). Within the large oeuvre of this major American realist of the 1920s to 1940s, two early novels are important for this survey, *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922). While *Main Street* is primarily a small-town masterpiece of a realist novel, its secondary suburban setting should not be overlooked. Carol Kennicott, the novel's protagonist, is a free-spirited woman who has big dreams of changing the world and succeeding as a city-planning professional at a time when women were supposed to devote

⁵ Howells, *Suburban Sketches*, 13-14.

⁶ George Lanum, "The Evolution of Howells's Realism: "Suburban Sketches"," *American Periodicals* 12 (2002), 36, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20770890>.

⁷ Characters such as George Babbitt of Sinclair Lewis's 1922 novel, Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Tom Rath in Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* are vocal critics of American suburbanization, conformity, and other problems associated with the twentieth-century proliferation of suburban communities in America.

⁸ See H. C. Bunner, *The Suburban Sage: Stray Notes And Comments On His Simple Life* (New York: Keppler and Schwarzmann, 1896).

their lives to the cultivation of marriage, family, and domesticity. According to Catherine Jurca, Lewis succeeds in dramatizing the effect of “the self-satisfied smalltown bourgeoisie” upon Carol, an idealistic “woman from the big city whose gender and geographical differences motivate her to resist and transform her environment.”⁹ Carol becomes obsessed with the dream of redesigning urban communities that would follow the more livable examples of European country architecture. During her college studies, she stumbles upon a book which influences her career ambition, “a treatise on village-improvement” which inspires her to try to pursue a career in urban planning:

That’s what I’ll do after college! I’ll get my hands on one of these prairie towns and make it beautiful. Be an inspiration. I suppose I’d better become a teacher then, but—I won’t be that kind of a teacher. I won’t drone. Why should they have all the garden suburbs on Long Island? Nobody has done anything with the ugly towns here in the Northwest except hold revivals and build libraries to contain the Elsie books. I’ll make ‘em put in a village green, and darling cottages, and a quaint Main Street!¹⁰

After graduation, she lives in Chicago for a year and has a chance to visit the suburbs of Wilmette and Evanston, which rekindles “her desire to recreate villages.”¹¹ Even though Carol’s pursuit of her dream and independent professional life ultimately fails as she runs into the impassable barriers of bureaucracy, small-mindedness, and male-chauvinism, she remains resilient and hopeful for the future as she comes back to the small town to rejoin her physician husband whom she abandoned for a time but now is happy to return to: “I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous than Europe! I do not admit that dishwashing is enough to satisfy all women! I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith.”¹² *Main Street* is a protosuburban novel as well as a feminist novel featuring a vigorous, convention-defying woman protagonist whose professional aspiration and dreams of social and architectural reform run against the rigid conventions and social roles available to women in 1910s America.

If *Main Street* focuses on the iconoclasm of Carol Kennicott as protagonist, *Babbitt* is a satirical novel that deals with two middle-age years in the life of George F. Babbitt, a real-estate broker in his late forties who is “prosperous, extremely married and unromantic,” and whose professional achievement as successful realtor is presented with Lewis’s typical

⁹ Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 46.

¹⁰ Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street & Babbitt* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 9.

¹¹ Lewis, *Main Street*, 14.

¹² Lewis, *Main Street*, 486. Gopher Prairie is the fictional small town that Carol Kennicott moves to after marriage and fights, in vain, against the narrowmindedness of its foremost citizens. It is based on Sauk Centre, Minnesota, Lewis’s hometown.

humor as being “nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay.”¹³ Babbitt is a successful businessman and ultimate conformist whose achievement is presented with ironic understatement—he has an office in the center of Zenith, a stereotypical midsize town in the Midwest, and lives in a fashionable suburb called Floral Heights. He has three children, Verona, Ted, and Tinka, and a wife Myra who adores and respects him to the limits of Babbitt’s patriarchal ability to perceive such things. The distance between Babbitt’s house in suburban Floral Heights and his office in the center of Zenith is just enough for him to behold “the Second National Tower, an Indiana limestone building of thirty-five stories” in the morning as it beckons to him “as a temple-spire of the religion of business.”¹⁴ Babbitt, a loud-talking but kind father whom his family regards with patient condescension as if he were a child, is excited to commit a private transgression in the morning by wiping his face in the guest-towel that is never used, proving to himself he is still able to rebel against the conformist life which he craves yet which also bores him to no end.¹⁵

The suburban house of the Babbitt family is “five years old,” having “the best of taste, the best of inexpensive rugs, a simple and laudable architecture, and the latest conveniences” that includes plugs for the electric lamps, percolator, toaster, and vacuum cleaner.¹⁶ Lewis undercuts the portrait of Babbitt’s house with the claim that “there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house: It was not a home.”¹⁷ The author’s ambivalence about the real value of Babbitt’s materialist achievement is explained by Catherine Jurca who claims that “the materiality of suburban life [...] in Babbitt [...] generates a definitively white middle-class affect—the feeling of homelessness—that is characterized by an irresolvable psychic split between the material delights of affluence and its corresponding spiritual horrors.”¹⁸

The suburban neighborhood where Babbitt lives is a typical example of an early 1920s automobile suburb, a few miles from the city where the male breadwinner works. Babbitt’s house, a Dutch Colonial, is just “one of three in the block on Chatham Road.”¹⁹ Babbitt is portrayed as a good-natured “family tyrant” whose “nagging [of the children and his wife] was as meaningless as it was frequent.”²⁰ Conformity seems to govern the Babbitt family life. For example, reading the morning paper is an everyday unspoken minor struggle between Babbitt and his wife as to who gets to read the paper first as “in the twenty-three

¹³ Lewis, *Babbitt*, in *Main Street & Babbitt* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 490.

¹⁴ Lewis, *Babbitt*, 499.

¹⁵ Lewis, *Babbitt*, 493.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Babbitt*, 501.

¹⁷ Lewis, *Babbitt*, 501.

¹⁸ Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 47.

¹⁹ Lewis, *Babbitt*, 509.

²⁰ Lewis, *Babbitt*, 501.

years of married life, Mrs. Babbitt has seen the paper before her husband just sixty-seven times.”²¹ Through chronicling such little details of everyday domesticity, Lewis portrays the plight of the henpecked male breadwinner who may be the boss at work but his family and social life is run by his wife and determined by the social expectations about proper behavior that suits his class.

Jurca argues that in *Babbitt*, Lewis is “preoccupied with the intricacies of middle-class identity and affiliations in a literary environment where suburban homogeneity along racial and class lines is basically established.”²² Lewis’s protagonist is, moreover, caught between the extremes of “allegiance to the safe, standardized middle-class world he inhabits and his resistance to it.”²³ In an early review of *Babbitt*, H. L. Mencken praised the universality of Lewis’s protagonist, a character representing the typical American businessman of the early 1920s, a person who “has a great clownishness in him, but he never becomes a clown” since even “in the midst of his most extravagant imbecilities he keeps both feet upon the ground” as a pragmatist whose actions seem “plausible and natural,” a prototype of the average suburbanite whose real-life copies are to be found all over America as “every American city swarms with his brothers.”²⁴ Every attempt that Babbitt makes to break free from his conformist lifestyle fails, including a short escape to the woods with a friend and an affair with Tanis Judique, a young widow. Throughout his attempted rebellions, Babbitt remains a conventional person who is always concerned about “what the folks about him will think of him,” and his short-lived escapades are, for Mencken, mere “orthodox debaucheries of a sound business man”²⁵ who tries to rebel against the social norms for a while but returns to the comfort of conformity as he is too afraid to remain a rebel for too long. When Babbitt refuses, as an act of childish defiance, to join the Good Citizens’ League, then publicly disagrees with a visiting lecturer and stops going to church, the whole town starts to snub him. His business contracts are taken over by a rival company, and his self-imposed marginalization becomes the subject of town gossip. Babbitt becomes afraid as his “independence seeped out of him and he walked the streets alone, afraid of men’s cynical eyes and the incessant hiss of whispering.”²⁶ When Babbitt’s wife becomes seriously ill with appendicitis, he rekindles his love for her, and the people who shunned him suddenly show concern for his wife’s health and allow him a second chance to rejoin their social clubs and his church, which he happily does, “almost tearful with joy at being coaxed instead of bullied, at being permitted to stop fighting, at being able to desert without injuring

²¹ Lewis, *Babbitt*, 505.

²² Jurca, *White Diaspora*, 45.

²³ Jurca, *White Diaspora*, 45-6.

²⁴ H. L. Mencken, “Portrait of an American Citizen,” *Smart Set* 69, no. 2 (October 1922), 139.

²⁵ Mencken, “Portrait of an American Citizen,” 139.

²⁶ Lewis, *Babbitt*, 825.

his opinion of himself, cease utterly to be a domestic revolutionist.”²⁷ By the end of the novel, Babbitt is “pleased in the realization that the last scar of his rebellion has healed,” yet he starts to feel that “he had been trapped into the very net from which he had with such fury escaped.”²⁸ In a moment of self-analysis, Babbitt thinks of his future and puts off further rebellion, deciding to “run things and figure out things to suit myself” only after he retires.²⁹

Babbitt’s conformity is tested one more time when his son Ted comes back home from a dance with his girlfriend Eunice and proudly shows the fact that they got married the previous night without bothering to notify their parents. When Babbitt takes his son for a father-son talk, he voices his displeasure at Ted’s refusal to finish his university studies and for marrying too early and without parental consent, yet he admires his son’s stubborn independence, complaining of his own inadequacy in this department: “I’ve never done a single thing I’ve wanted to in my whole life! I don’t know I’ve accomplished anything except just get along.”³⁰ It is thus Babbitt’s son who succeeds where his father failed—Ted quits university study and defiantly takes a manual job in a factory to feed his family even if it means social disgrace to the conformist middle-class parents of his and his young wife’s. Edith Wharton, to whom *Babbitt* was inscribed, did not share Mencken’s enthusiasm about the success of Babbitt as a realist method of fictionalizing suburban conformity. In a 1927 essay about the search for great American novels, she complains that the “Main Street” phenomenon had come to signify

the common mean of American life everywhere in its million cities and towns, its countless villages and immeasurable wildernesses. It stands for everything which does not rise above a very low average in culture, situation, or intrinsic human interest; and also for every style of depicting this dead level of existence.³¹

Wharton considers the culture of progress in the 1920s as detrimental to the writing of great novels since American writers like Lewis have chosen to write about “a dead level of prosperity and security” while modern America “has reduced relations between human beings to a dead level of vapid benevolence, and the whole of life to a small house with modern plumbing and heating, a garage, a motor, a telephone, and a lawn undivided from one’s neighbor’s.”³² Arguably, Wharton’s criticism of the way Lewis celebrates conformity and intellectual deadness in *Babbitt* is misplaced since his portrait of these elements of 1920s suburban America is satirical rather than admiring. Interestingly, Babbitt’s short-lived and

²⁷ Lewis, *Babbitt*, 833-4.

²⁸ Lewis, *Babbitt*, 840-1.

²⁹ Lewis, *Babbitt*, 841.

³⁰ Lewis, *Babbitt*, 844.

³¹ Edith Wharton, “The Great American Novel,” *Yale Review* 16 (July 1927), 649.

³² Wharton, “The Great American Novel,” 650.

unsuccessful rebellion against conformity is in itself a mark of his social and professional achievement. He rebels, but only as long as he can afford to do so, and the only drawback of Lewis's lengthy novel is the melodramatic turn of events in Babbitt's favor after he finds himself rejected by the community. As Jurca explains, Babbitt enjoys his rebellion since it comprises "the luxury of experimenting with resistance to his privileges [...] with nothing much left to work for or fight against, he turns his critical energies inward and comes up with discontent."³³ It is thus only when Babbitt returns to his ordinary socially acceptable lifestyle that things again go right for him. He feels that "he had been trapped into the very net from which he had with such fury escaped and, supremest jest of all, been made to rejoice in the trapping."³⁴ Wharton concludes her essay with the claim that greatness in American novel tradition is a mysterious element that does not depend on the writer's expatriate stay in Europe, nor does it rely on the formulaic exploration of the stereotypical "tales of the little suburban house at number one million and ten Volstead Avenue."³⁵ Such rejection of writing that explores American suburbs seems misplaced as the suburb in *Babbitt* is much more diverse in terms of architecture and layout than Wharton's criticism accounts for. However, her prescient definition of what might go wrong about the suburban lifestyle and domesticity, proved relevant in the social criticism and suburban fiction of the 1950s.

The next influential American suburban novel, also published in the 1920s, is *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by Francis Scott Fitzgerald.³⁶ While it is considered the tragic story of Jay Gatsby, a quintessential Jazz Age bootlegger with dreams of upward social mobility, a nouveau riche man with a shady past who believes in the impossible dream of winning social respect and the heart of the rich and glamorous Daisy Buchanan until the pursuit of that dream kills him, it is also useful to consider the novel as a prime example of suburban fiction, an aspect that has been mostly ignored.³⁷ Although the novel is set in the early 1920s, it more broadly describes the suburbanization of the United States in the historical period from the late 19th century up to the 1920s, a time when many wealthy Americans chose to move from the city to the suburbs to escape the growing chaos, filth, and corruption of urban life. The principal characters in the novel, including Nick Carraway who also functions as the narrator, have recently moved to the New York suburbs from the Midwest. As Milton R. Stern explains, "Fitzgerald was acutely aware that the idea of the self had been relocated,

³³ Jurca, *White Diaspora*, 75.

³⁴ Lewis, *Babbitt*, 841.

³⁵ Wharton, "Great American Novel," 650.

³⁶ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner's, 2003). First published 1925.

³⁷ A notable exception is the second chapter of Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 23-63, wherein the author examines Fitzgerald's 1925 novel as an influential tale whose suburban and urban setting contributes to the dramatization of "circumscribing roles and identities" of social-climbers in the Jazz Age.

from the 1880s on, in the shining wealth of the growing, magnetic cities in the East.”³⁸ The fashionable suburbs on the Atlantic coast are presented as the new frontier of possibility after the West as frontier had lost its charm by the 1890s.³⁹ New York City functions as the metropolis where people go to work (Nick Carraway) or to have fun (Tom Buchanan). The only person in the novel who still dreams of moving West in the traditional direction of American pioneer explorers is Mrs. Wilson, the cruel and pretentious mistress of Tom Buchanan. She is bored and unhappy in her marriage to George, a henpecked failure of a car mechanic whose crumbling business is situated in a grey area between the city and the suburban privilege of both Eggs.⁴⁰ In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald portrays the two North Shore suburban communities as follows:

Twenty miles from the city a pair of enormous eggs, identical in contour and separated only by a courtesy bay, just out into the most domesticated body of salt water in the Western hemisphere, the great wet barnyard of Long Island Sound. They are not perfect ovals—like the egg in the Columbus story, they are both crushed flat at the contact end—but their physical resemblance must be a source of perpetual confusion to the gulls that fly overhead. To the wingless a more arresting phenomenon is their dissimilarity in every particular except shape and size.⁴¹

Robert Beuka explains that the mansions in the Eggs, built by millionaires and industry tycoons, “both utilized and reshaped the natural geography of the region, signifying social class through elaborate architecture and appropriation of the rural, seaside landscape.”⁴² It is the more prestigious suburb of East Egg where the Buchanans (ie Tom and Daisy) live, representing the old money American upper class with a history of family wealth. They do not work for a living and spend their lives in the blasé pursuit of pleasure and entertainment. Stern explains that the localization of the new dream frontier in the 1920s is “bound up with the historical idea of America as the released new world, and [...] with the promise of the vast Golden West,” whose early 20th century direction turned back on the Gold Coast of

³⁸ Milton R. Stern, “On the American Dream and Fitzgerald’s Romantic Excesses,” in *F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2006), 103.

³⁹ On the symbolic meaning of closing the Western frontier in the late 19th century, see Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 lecture, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in which he analyzes American history in terms of the perennial pursuit of a frontier to be settled by pioneers, a process arguably fostering the spread of democratic principles of society and government. (See Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, 1920), 1-38, https://archive.org/details/frontierinameric00turn_3/page/n3/mode/2up. In *The Great Gatsby*, the new frontier of the early 1920s is the North Coast of Long Island, recently settled with lavish mansions of the new and old money upper class Americans who no longer move westward but head in the opposite direction, to the Atlantic coast.

⁴⁰ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 130.

⁴¹ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 9.

⁴² Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 30.

Long Island, among other Atlantic coastal locations.⁴³ When Nick Carraway first sees the Buchanan house, he responds with admiration:

Their house was even more elaborate than I expected, a cheerful red and white Georgian Colonial mansion overlooking the bay. The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sundials and brick walks and burning gardens—finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run. The front was broken by a line of French windows.⁴⁴

The layout of the Buchanan mansion and grounds suggests architecture of stylish opulence, symbolizing the ultimate social prestige and wealth of its owners as the house is not only lavish and tasteful, it is even separated from the water front by an expansive lawn to provide more privacy and distance from any public view from the Long Island Sound. In their mansion, the Buchanans cherish their privileged privacy and comfort while they travel to the city or abroad for pleasure and entertainment.⁴⁵ The house suggests exquisite taste and permanence which is, surprisingly, undercut by Tom Buchanan's restless nature of a man who is always nervously moving about to affirm his physical and social superiority over the people he meets, "forever seeking [...] the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game."⁴⁶ In contrast, West Egg, where Jay Gatsby lives, is a less prestigious suburb where the mansions of the newly rich, such as Gatsby, are built for their owners to be as close to New York City and to rival the more traditional community across the bay with opulent displays of architectural tastelessness. Again, Fitzgerald presents the community where Nick and Gatsby live though Nick's description:

I lived at West Egg, the—well, the less fashionable of the two, though this is a most superficial tag to express the bizarre and not a little sinister contrast between them. My house was at the very tip of the egg, only fifty yards from the Sound, and squeezed between two huge places that rented for twelve or fifteen thousand a season. The one on my right was a colossal affair by any standard—it was a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on

⁴³ The summer 'cottages' of the wealthy Americans such as the Astors and Vanderbilts, built at the turn of the 19th and 20th century in Newport, Rhode Island, are another example of this trend. However, while the Gold Coast of Long Island might be considered a suburban area for the New York City elite, towns which came to host the summer residences of the American upperclass such as Newport might not qualify as suburban—to reach these required travel that was outside the scope of daily commuting to the city (unless the owners of the Newport residences commuted to the nearby city of Providence).

⁴⁴ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 11.

⁴⁵ An exception to this pattern is, of course, the polo playing of Tom, which he indulges in around his home as the ultimate sign of careless display of wealth as well as a manifestation of his athleticism.

⁴⁶ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 10.

one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming-pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden. It was Gatsby's mansion.⁴⁷

The contrast between the East and the West Egg is not so much in terms of wealth (rich people who can easily afford to rent or buy huge mansions live in both communities), rather, the difference is in the taste of the architecture and social prestige of each community. While Gatsby's house is larger than the Buchanans' mansion, it is designed as an incongruous mixture of architectural styles which boasts the owner's wealth but betrays his lack of taste. Nick even calls the Gatsby mansion "that huge incoherent failure of a house."⁴⁸ According to Beuka, despite the architectural and class difference between the two Eggs, they are both portrayed "as havens, fantasy worlds seemingly protected from violence and decay by their very distance from the urban center."⁴⁹ Besides the impalpable but important difference in social prestige, West Egg and East Egg are both examples of "a bustling suburb in the making, a lapsed Eden characterized by a merely illusory sense of rootedness."⁵⁰ The mansions of both Eggs feel solid but the attachment of their owners to their houses and communities is volatile, dependent on the whims of their changeable social and financial fortune. When Nick pays one more visit to the shore at Gatsby's house the night before he leaves the area for good, he observes the way the moonlit houses of both Eggs "began to melt away" until he has a vision of the virgin American continent prior to the modern development, "a fresh, green breast of the new world" which the early Dutch explorers of the area could have seen, an unspoiled landscape of endless opportunity.⁵¹ Nick's vision implicates the notion of modern America, including its Long Island suburbs such as East and West Egg, as an environment full of selfish and prestige-seeking people, a community in which an honest person cannot survive for very long without being corrupted. While the mansions of East and West Egg upper class suburbanites in *The Great Gatsby* suggest wealth and permanence, Fitzgerald is perceptive to the way any single house (or life, such as Gatsby's) might come to disappear instantly in the fast-paced, changeable, ruthless society in 1920s America. It is only fitting that Nick, the only honest and moral character in the novel, grows sick of the superficial glamor of the Eggs that he used to fancy earlier, as the suburban communities for him, after Gatsby's death, become haunted, "distorted beyond my eyes' power of correction."⁵²

In summary, the suburban setting in *The Great Gatsby* serves for the author's dramatization of the Jazz Age era of jarring social inequality and selfish disregard for other

⁴⁷ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 9.

⁴⁸ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 188.

⁴⁹ Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*, 40.

⁵⁰ Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*, 40.

⁵¹ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 189.

⁵² Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 185.

people's suffering. It is only Nick Carraway who emerges as a character worthy of the reader's sympathy as somebody who does not really belong to the West and East Egg suburbs since he wants to work his way from the bottom to the top by his own wits, not by virtue of using inherited his wealth or acquiring it in illegal ways. When Nick decides to go back home to the Midwest he came from, it is a symbolic move meant to reclaim his sense of idealism that got corrupted during his stay in suburban Long Island and his work in the New York City financial sector. The Gold Coast suburb in the novel is a microcosm of ostentatious wealth, large parties where alcohol flows freely in the era of the Prohibition, and people who go to the parties behave in cruel and selfish ways. Ironically, the solidity of the Gatsby and Buchanan mansions is undercut by the impermanent nature of their owners' identity as the novel ends with Gatsby dead and the Buchanans on the brink of leaving again in their pursuit of another exciting location abroad, or, to "wherever people played polo and were rich together."⁵³ Barry Gross explains the role of the East (and its suburban community of the Eggs) in the novel as "not so much as geographic locales but as states of mind," wherein "West is the past, East the future."⁵⁴ The Eggs are, then, internalized suburban landscapes which subject the people who live in them to "moral indifference, chaos and corruption, dishonesty and decadence,"⁵⁵ and while such decline of morality and values exposes the selfish, sanctimonious Buchanans and Jordan Baker (the immoral and dishonest golfer who becomes Nick's girlfriend before he dumps her), this attitude becomes inimical to more idealistic characters such as Gatsby and Nick Carraway. With Gatsby's death and Nick's departure at the end of the novel, the symbolic suburban frontier of the Gold Coast communities of East Egg and West Egg becomes the closed space wherein spiritual transformation is no longer possible as Nick, unlike the Dutch explorers of the region who he evokes, is unable to relate the Eggs to an explorer's "capacity for wonder."⁵⁶ Through Nick's perspective, Fitzgerald critiques the materialist values of the wealthy upper class and their obsession with entertainment, pretension, and prestige. Nick, who only rents a modest cottage between two nouveau rich mansions of West Egg, is the outsider to the Gold Coast suburban culture of excess and while fascinated by this world at first, he grows to become a staunch critic of the Jazz Age selfishness and profligacy. Since the interpretation of the American Dream as an honorable pursuit of wealth and social recognition becomes incompatible with the selfish cruelty and immorality of people such as the Buchanans and Jordan Baker, he decides to leave the East and pursue his dream elsewhere.⁵⁷ Ironically, as

⁵³ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 10.

⁵⁴ Barry Gross, "Back West: Time and Place in *The Great Gatsby*," *Western American Literature* 8, no. 1/2 (Spring and Summer 1973): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43017685>.

⁵⁵ Gross, "Back West," 3.

⁵⁶ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 189.

⁵⁷ This impulse to pack up and leave for a better horizon is a classic American situation. See, for example,

D. H. Lawrence prophetically explains in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, the attraction of the American impulse to pack up and leave for the West (or any other horizon of opportunity) is not a manifestation of liberty and freedom to do as one chooses but an example of one's lack of identity and freedom since people "are free when they are in a living homeland [...] when they belong to a living, organic, believing community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose. Not when they are escaping to some wild west."⁵⁸ In *The Great Gatsby*, then, Nicks' symbolic departure from the Gold Coast suburban selfish individualism of the Eggs toward an idealized community he hopes to rediscover in his home region of the Midwest, is a typical American identity-seeking move, both physical and spiritual, a move that is doomed to fail since, as Lawrence implies, until one searches deep down within oneself and discovers one's true identity and ambition to be realized anywhere, without having to rely on exercising the freedom to escape one's current existence for another region and community, this move will not succeed.⁵⁹

The survey of major American suburban novels preceding Yates's first has to end with a discussion of *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1955) by Sloan Wilson.⁶⁰ The story of Tom and Betsy Rath is a quintessential 1950s tale of upward social mobility in the suburbs. The novel focuses on Tom, who works as a public relations writer in New York City and struggles to adapt to postwar civilian life after his traumatic wartime experience, and Betsy, his beautiful, energetic wife and mother of three small children who has a lot of social-climbing ambition.

As Catherine Jurca explains, despite the persistence of the narrative of suburbanization as the white flight from the city to the suburb as an ideal move for young families who could afford it, "ownership of a suburban house is treated [at the beginning of Wilson's novel] as a sign of economic weakness, suspended ambition, the failure of the American dream instead of its fruition."⁶¹ The Rath family house of seven years might look as the space where the dream had come true, yet it seems to have

a kind of evil genius for displaying proof of [the Rath's'] weakness and wiping out all traces of their strengths. The ragged lawn and weed-filled garden proclaimed to passers-by and the neighbors that Thomas R. Rath and his family disliked "working around the place" and couldn't afford to pay someone else to do it. The interior of the house was even more vengeful. In the living room

⁵⁸ D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Tomas Seltzer, 19280), 9, https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Lawrence_Studies_in_Classic_American_Literature.pdf.

⁵⁹ See Lawrence, *Studies*, 10-11.

⁶⁰ Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), first published 1955.

⁶¹ Jurca, *White Diaspora*, 134.

there was a big dent in the plaster near the floor, with a huge crack curing up from it in the shape of a question mark.⁶²

The discontent the Rathes feel about their small and decaying house seems based on their negative attitude and rather than on the physical inadequacy of their house. They are not typical 1950s suburbanites who were happy to undertake do-it-yourself repair and home improvement tasks on their own at a time when, according to Steven M. Gelber, taking care of one's house and improving its design and decoration "would become a virtual obligation for the suburban homeowner."⁶³ Instead of fixing their current house, the Rathes just dream of moving to a bigger one where their dissatisfaction with suburban life might magically disappear. The projection of one's marital discord and do-it-yourself inability onto one's house is something that is also explored by Richard Yates in *Revolutionary Road* (which will be dealt with in the next chapter). "I don't know what's the matter with us," says Betsy Rath once, admitting that her husband's job is "plenty good enough. We've got three nice kids, and lots of people would be glad to have a house like this."⁶⁴ Still, Betsy's annoyance with their house is portrayed as justified since when she thinks of her neighborhood, she realizes that the uniformity of their neighborhood community borders on the unbearable as

almost all the houses [on their street] were occupied by couples with young children, and few people considered Greentree Avenue a permanent stop—the place was just a crossroads where families waited until they could afford to move on to something better. The finances of almost every household were an open book. Budgets were frankly discussed, and the public celebration of increases in salary was common. The biggest parties of all were moving-out parties, given by those who finally were able to buy a bigger house.⁶⁵

Opposed to the collectivist ethos of the postwar suburban socializing of the adults, the Rathes feel superior to their neighbors, ironically, without having anything to support such a claim.⁶⁶ As Jurca documents, the new postwar suburbs like the one in which the Rathes live early in

⁶² Wilson, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, 1. The symbolism of the crack in the Rathes' house wall also used by up by John Keats, who used it as a metaphor of what was wrong in the 1950s hastily completed suburban subdivisions where problems with sloppy craftsmanship in the houses and insufficient utilities and services in the neighborhoods coupled with unexpected social and financial problems that new suburbanites like the protagonist Drone family could face. See John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956).

⁶³ Steven M. Gelber, "Do-It-Yourself: Constructing, Repairing and Maintaining Domestic Masculinity," *American Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (March 1997): 89.

⁶⁴ Wilson, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, 3.

⁶⁵ Wilson, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, 109.

⁶⁶ This is an aspect in which there is a slight difference between the suburban identity of the Rathes of Wilson's novel and that of the Wheelers of Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (to be discussed in detail in the next chapter). The Rathes feel socially superior to their neighbors but are really not and they suspect this to be the case (hence the basis of Betsy's restless dissatisfaction with their home) whereas the Wheelers in *Revolutionary Road* feel intellectually superior to their neighbors but are just as conformist as their friends and neighbors who they choose to despise during their drinking parties with their friends the Campbells.

the novel, represents “a breeding ground of alienated homeowners who need only to capitalize on their dissatisfaction to move up and out.”⁶⁷ The bulk of the novel chronicles Tom’s trying to get a better-paying job for a media magnate and how to succeed in this career advancement without losing his mind and family in the gamble. In the meantime, his wife keeps nagging about the need for Tom to earn more so that their family might move to a bigger, more expensive house. Ironically, the Rathes do not realize that their dissatisfaction with the suburban lifestyle and the collectivist way of forced socialization with their neighbors might not be different in a more upscale neighborhood. To be able to move, Tom has to make more money, since “money is the root of all order,” yet he finds earning enough to meet his wife’s expectations of upward mobility hard to do “especially when one has a job which consists of sitting behind a desk all day doing absolutely nothing.”⁶⁸ Tom is portrayed as the typical “organization man” of the 1950s, that is, a conformist male breadwinner, a WWII veteran who got his education on the GI Bill benefits, got married after the war, started a family, and now works for a large corporation in an office job that he despises but needs in order to finance his family’s comfortable life in the new postwar suburbs. William H. Whyte defines exactly such a man as crucial to the functioning of 1950s American corporate world, adding an elaboration of the collectivist social ethic of the organization man to the definition, namely, “a belief [of the organization man] in the group as the source of creativity; a belief in “belongingness” as the ultimate need of the individual; and a belief in the application of science to achieve that belongingness.”⁶⁹ As Jurca documents, when the organization man identity of the American 1950s conformist employee of a big corporation is related to the suburbs of the time, “the suburb is the residential analogue of the corporation,”⁷⁰ however, the perception of the suburban home is that of a safe haven for the organization man (male breadwinner) as well as the scene of achievement for the organization woman (female homemaker), a setting that might provide the suburbanite with the safety and comfort that drowns out the anxiety that relates to one’s dynamic and unstable position in the workplace. According to David Riesman, postwar American suburbs emphasized the cult of domesticity in order to downplay the meaninglessness of the corporate world.⁷¹ Ironically, the “rat race” of the job-advancement seeking is duplicated in the suburban race as families seek to upgrade to larger houses at more prestigious addresses as soon as they can afford it.

⁶⁷ Catherine Jurca, “The Sanctimonious Suburbanite: Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*,” *American Literary History* 11, No. 1 (Spring, 1999): 92, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/490078>.

⁶⁸ Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, 164.

⁶⁹ William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1957), 7.

⁷⁰ Catherine Jurca, “The Sanctimonious Suburbanite,” 85.

⁷¹ David Riesman, “The Suburban Dislocation,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 314 (1947): 144.

Tom Rath's nature of an average man who acts in a conventional way in order to survive is best portrayed in the conformist the way he dresses for work. Once he describes his appearance as follows:

I'm just a man in a gray flannel suit. I must keep my suit neatly pressed like anyone else, for I am a very respectable young man [...] I will go to my new job, and I will be cheerful, and I will be industrious, and I will be matter-of-fact. I will keep my gray flannel suit spotless. I will have a sense of humor. I will have guts—I'm not the type to start crying now.⁷²

As Jurca documents, Tom's assumption that "a nicer house will solve his problems collapses under the revelation that the home is not a shelter from the anxieties of working for a corporation but is implicated in them."⁷³ Early in the novel, Tom also muses on the complexity of inhabiting "four completely unrelated worlds in which he lived," namely, that of his parents and grandmother, his war past of a traumatized paratrooper, the corporate world where he works and the world of his wife and children.⁷⁴ Interestingly, when Tom inherits the dilapidated mansion he grew up in after his grandmother dies, he reacts with fear since the property, in its poor condition, poses not a welcome opportunity to for upward mobility but, rather, "simply one more false threat to his financial security."⁷⁵ It is his wife Betsy who rises to the occasion and persuades Tom to embrace the ambitious plan of tearing down grandmother's mansion and building a new suburban subdivision on the property. To start the project, the Raths have to win local approval of their plan and also to push forth community funding for a new school for the local children. According to Tim Foster, the suburban identity of Tom and Betsy Rath is based on their connection to the troubled past (Tom later learns he fathered a son during the war in Italy and decides to tell Betsy about it, which creates a short-lived crisis in their relationship that they get over by the end of the novel) and "is a direct reaction to personal concerns rather than an expression of a more abstract 'traditional' American culture," and the final melodramatic happy resolution of all the problems that Tom and Betsy have faced reflects the notion that "the basis of a fulfilling suburban existence lies in the extent to which it is directly conceived as being built on other experiences, rather than as an escape from them."⁷⁶ It is thus only after Tom and Betsy stop wishing to move somewhere else, to an imagined suburban retreat from the lowbrow suburban community they have grown annoyed with, that their fortune turns for the better

⁷² Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, 98.

⁷³ Jurca, *White Diaspora*, 139.

⁷⁴ Wilson, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, 22.

⁷⁵ Jurca, *White Diaspora*, 143.

⁷⁶ Tim Foster, "Escaping the Split-Level Trap: Postsuburban Narratives in Recent American Fiction" (PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2012), 73-4, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/33565636.pdf>.

as their adopted suburban home at South Bay becomes “the site of [their] future economic and spiritual growth.”⁷⁷

As Jurca explains, the Rath’s real estate project of “turning [the South Bay] suburb into a family enterprise” is a way in which the protagonists might be able “to create an environment that is as exclusive as they are.”⁷⁸ The notion that the Rathes are socially superior to their neighbors is, of course, ironic in the light of the way they do not even manage to maintain their modest first house in the Westport postwar suburb in good condition and working order.

Wilson’s novel ends with the unlikely celebration of the possibility of 1950s suburbanites to find their true calling in community service (by fighting for the new school in South Bay to be funded from taxpayer money) as well as in the commercial development of a new suburban subdivision (to solve their own family housing problem and make profit in the undertaking too). Tom Rath, as Wilson’s reincarnation of the organization man, unwittingly turns into a real estate developer in his spare time while his wife moves beyond the confines of 1950s female suburban domesticity to mastermind the upcoming development project herself. Despite the stylistic inability of Wilson to convey description, dialogue, and action with adequate brevity and speed, the novel is a crucial and multifaceted reflection of 1950s issues involving the generation of postwar suburbanites who faced many identity problems that were mentioned by prominent social critics of the time.⁷⁹

The American suburban novels, from *Babbitt* to *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, provide male-focused yet important portraits of twentieth-century suburbs as a setting in which the gender roles are on the brink of redefinition while interpretations of suburban domesticity continue to elude the grasp of the male and female characters. As a contested space that lies between the country and the city, the American suburb in these novels functions as a uniquely American setting in which the American Dream is both realized and questioned. The novels mentioned here provide a complex portrait of suburbia as an environment that is open to many interpretations and possibilities for personal as well as communal identities to evolve. The suburban lifestyle, a curious mixture of private individualism and community involvement is portrayed as possible yet challenging to negotiate in relation to the demands of work and leisure time of the nuclear families. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, a new generation of fiction writers such as John Updike, Philip Roth, and Richard Yates would develop the themes and issues of this tradition to also deal with the problem of incomplete families, racial, ethnic, and class conflict in American

⁷⁷ Foster, “Escaping the Split-Level Trap,” 74-5.

⁷⁸ Jurca, “The Sanctimonious Suburbanite,” 101.

⁷⁹ Besides Whyte’s *Organization Man* (mentioned above), the era that saw the publication of Wilson’s novel is also when works such as C. Wright Mills’ *White Collar* and David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (for more details on these, see footnote no. 69 in the next chapter).

suburbs as well as the with the more traditional challenge of portraying the gender-based conflicts within suburban families.

Chapter 5

A Reading of Yates's Five Suburban Novels

I don't suppose picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities.

—Frank Wheeler, a protagonist of *Revolutionary Road*—

A man could rant and smash and grapple with the State Police, and still the sprinklers whirled at dusk on every lawn and the television droned in every living room.

—Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road*—

Even at night, as if on purpose, the development held no looming shadows and no gaunt silhouettes. It was invincibly cheerful, a toyland of white and pastel houses whose bright, uncurtained windows winked blandly through a dappling of green and yellow leaves. Proud floodlights were trained on some of the lawns, on some of the neat front doors and on the hips of some of the berthed, ice-cream colored automobiles.

—Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road*—

"Suburbia!" Bill Brock cried as dramatically as a man discovering the shore of a new continent.

—Richard Yates, *Young Hearts Crying*—

The thematic range of Yates's fiction seems rather narrow and repetitive. His novels and short stories explore what Robert Tower calls "the same half-acre of pain."¹ Not only is his dramatization of the story of human struggle, failure, and loneliness what recurs in story after story, there are just two major themes that his long as well as short fiction seems to explore. As Kate Charlton-Jones explains, these themes are the realist presentation of "failed or failing relationships and [the pursuit of] misplaced dreams."² Yates's characters dream, struggle to make their dreams become realities, make mistakes, get unlucky, repeat their mistakes, and ultimately fail in their wish to succeed and to resolve or accept their inner conflicts. Jennifer Daly considers the doomed striving of Yates's characters to be typically American since they

¹ Robert Tower, "Richard Yates and His Unhappy People," *New York Times*, November 1, 1981, section 7, 3.

² Kate Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream: The Life and Fiction of Richard Yates* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 209.

struggle to fit into a [highly competitive, American] society that demands they be successful in every facet of their lives, that they be content to conform to the social and cultural mores of the time; and all this they must somehow do without ever compromising their own sense of individuality. [...] His characters try too hard to be what they are not, [and this achievement is] something that is always, infuriatingly, just out of reach for them.³

Richard Price explains that to read Yates and thus experience repeatedly the effect of the stories and conflicts of characters who dream, try hard, and fail is never boring or banal since Yates's craft renders these stories interesting through his mastery of "deft and miraculously weightless prose," and while Yates's style might be characterized as "a levitation act of declarative sentences, near-neutral observations and unremarkable utterances" which surprisingly convey "the slow-motion train wreck of the lives to come," the tone of his fiction "eerily mirrors the muffled helplessness of the characters themselves."⁴ Although Yates's characters, from Frank Wheeler to Lucy Davenport, are victims as well as destroyers of their own suburban illusions, it is more fitting to call them deluded neurotics who misunderstand the meaning of their actions and fail to recognize what they want. According to Price, what redeems the inadequacies of the characters is the way Yates portrays their problems and choices with "no-exit, unblinking honesty" and with "bone-deep, sorrowful conviction that loneliness is our inescapable lot" and that the job of the writer is to portray the characters' long path toward awakening to this painful fact of life, in a memorable, realistic manner.⁵ For this reason, it seems fitting to situate Yates's work within the tradition of notable American naturalists like Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis. As Charlton-Jones reminds, these writers believed, like Yates, "that people are victims of circumstance, powerless to act against social and environmental forces that constrain them."⁶ However, unlike those naturalist predecessors, Yates allows his characters to enjoy the possibility of being in control of their lives, only to have their hopes and dreams dashed by a combination of bad luck, naivety, ignorance, and wrong decisions taken on the basis of their illusory sense of who they are and what they need to do in order to lead interesting and pleasurable lives.

Yates's characters typically think of themselves as memorable and having a bright future ahead, and it is the author's skill at using dramatic irony that makes their failures evoke the reader's sympathy and interest. As David Castronovo and Steven Goldleaf

³ Jennifer Daly, "Introduction," in *Richard Yates and the Flawed American Dream: Critical Essays*, edited by Jennifer Daly (Jefferson: NC: McFarland, 2017), 1-2.

⁴ Richard Price, "Introduction," in *Revolutionary Road; The Easter Parade; Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, by Richard Yates (New York: Knopf, 2009), ix.

⁵ Price, "Introduction," ix.

⁶ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering*, 138.

explain, there is also an element of social criticism present in Yates's fiction that should not be overlooked since he

takes his place in a long tradition of social evaluation that has brought in evidence about the tyranny of social conventions, the smallness of American ambition, the blighting of hopes in a mass society, the burden of false individualism, and the loneliness built into democratic culture. The narrower places of the American spirit are Yates's territory. [...] His more famous contemporaries who experimented with form [...] had their own flamboyant images of what was happening to the American spirit; he patiently believed in his set of devastating discoveries.⁷

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson's grotesque characters are trapped within their lonely, ostracized identities whose oppressive bind they are unable to escape, while in Yates, by contrast, the characters seem always in control of their fate and in possession of the ability to make the right choices in life.⁸ In *Babbitt*, Lewis's most famous protagonist is trapped in a stifling network of conformist choices and comes to the realization that he has never lived the way he wanted.⁹ By contrast, in Yates's fiction, the fact that the characters do not succeed in their struggle is to be attributed not to their Babbitt-like conformity or lack of courage but, rather, to their own errors of judgement and unrealistic decisions they make which are based on their delusions regarding the way to achieve authenticity fulfilment in life.

Yates is one of the unacknowledged masters who work in the suburban tradition of American realist fiction. The major American suburban novels up to the late 1950s were mentioned in the previous chapter, and it is within this framework that I will now situate and discuss Yates's fiction.¹⁰ While *Revolutionary Road* has received considerable critical attention, Yates's other suburban novels and stories have been largely ignored by critics, even though the majority of Yates's fiction from the mid-1950s onwards utilizes the suburban setting and themes. To a degree, Yates's suburban fiction is an exercise in thinly-disguised autobiography. He grew up in the New York metropolitan suburbs of the 1920s and 1930s. In *A Special Providence*, the 1969 novel chronicling his troubled relationship with his mother, the autobiographical protagonist Robert J. Prentice is portrayed as "the only new boy and the only poor boy, the only boy whose home smelled of mildew and cat

⁷ David Castronovo, and Steven Goldleaf, *Richard Yates* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 6.

⁸ See Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg Ohio* (New York: Modern Library, 1919).

⁹ For example, consider the moment at the end of the story when Babbitt realizes that he has accomplished nothing in his life "except just get along," with conformist choices for the middle-class suburbanite of the early 1920s being presented as the only viable ones by the author. See Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*, in *Main Street & Babbitt* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 844.

¹⁰ One could speak of little thematic and stylistic development of Yates's fiction beyond the late 1950s, after he completed his first novel. While American literature through the 1960s was affected by the rise of postmodern fiction, Yates wilfully ignored any such developments and stuck to the realist exploration of stories and characters, both increasingly autobiographical, for the rest of his career. For details, see Blake Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates* (New York: Picador, 2003).

droppings and plastilene, with statuary instead of a car its garage; the only boy who didn't have a father."¹¹ The suburban experience in the 1930s in itself would make Yates a veteran suburbanite who experienced the suburban lifestyle first-hand. However, Yates's suburban childhood was far from idyllic and typical as he suffered from social ostracization while his divorced sculptor mother with social-climbing pretension and unrealistic dreams of pursuing an artist's lifestyle in suburbia often struggled to make ends meet and steered her fatherless family to a sequence of rented houses in several suburban communities. This nomadic and unstable existence which the family could barely afford had a destabilizing effect upon Yates and his older sister Ruth.¹²

For several years in the 1950s, as a married man, Yates again lived in the suburbs of the New York metropolitan area while he worked on his first novel and tried to live the suburban version of the American Dream with his own nuclear family.¹³ For better or worse, his own suburban experience of the 1930s and 1950s would reappear in more or less fictionalized form in several novels and short stories that he wrote from the late 1950s up to the mid 1980s.¹⁴ In these publications, the suburban setting either serves as an idealized environment in which upward social mobility could be realized for the ambitious mother character (as in *A Special Providence* and *Cold Spring Harbor*), or as the locus of domestic struggle and conflict of the young couple (in *Revolutionary Road*, *The Easter Parade* and *Cold Spring Harbor*).

While Yates published a total of seven novels and two volumes of short stories, only five of them could be called suburban based on the primary role of the suburban setting, themes, and conflicts.¹⁵ The suburban novels utilize the suburban setting as the principal element of the story or use it in contrast with the urban environment of New York City. Typically, the flight to the suburbs is portrayed while the protagonists work in the city and experience a wide range of domestic conflicts and challenges in their suburban homes. Another strategy that Yates often explores in his fiction is the contrast of the urban and suburban environment through which he differentiates the lifestyle choices of the characters.

¹¹ Richard Yates, *A Special Providence* (New York: Vintage, 2009), 7-8.

¹² Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 7-36.

¹³ For details on the 1950s suburban experience of Yates, see Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 168-194.

¹⁴ The list includes *Revolutionary Road* (1961), *A Special Providence* (1969), *The Easter Parade* (1976), *Liars in Love* (1981), *Young Hearts Crying* (1984), and *Cold Spring Harbor* (1986).

¹⁵ I leave out *Disturbing the Peace*, a 1975 novel that focuses on the mental breakdown of John Wilder, and *A Good School*, a 1978 novel chronicling the growing-up of Bill Grove and his stint at Dorset Academy, a fictional prep school in Connecticut. These novels also marginally use the suburban setting, but it is of very minor importance in contributing to the plot of these novels and their characterization. I also skip discussing Yates's final novel, *Uncertain Times*, for thematic reasons, since it covers the year 1963, when Yates worked as a speechwriter for Bobby Kennedy. For more details, see Martin Naparstek, *Richard Yates Up Close: The Writer and His Works* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 144-151.

I first survey two suburban novels by Richard Yates with particular focus on the role of the suburban setting in the construction of gendered identity. Another focal point is the role of family and social roles of the protagonists that seem to reflect their social class affiliation and numerous historical trends in 20th century American suburbanization. The first focus in this chapter is thus on a pluralistic reading and subsequent comparison of two major suburban novels by Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (1961) and *Young Hearts Crying* (1984).¹⁶

The representation of American suburbia in Yates's fiction is recurrent throughout his career from the mid-1950s up to its end in the early 1990s, yet the coverage of this setting is far from chronological Yates's his work. The earliest extended use of the suburbia as a setting for the dramatization of the struggle of the characters to achieve their dreams is in Yates's first novel, *Revolutionary Road* (1961).¹⁷ There are four principal inspirations for the novel—*Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* by Sloan Wilson, and Yates's own experience of living in the suburbs in the late 1950s. The Flaubert and Fitzgerald inspiration is what Yates admits to in his 1981 article on his literary models and technique. In his first novel, Yates

wanted that kind of balance and quiet resonance on every page, that kind of foreboding mixed with comedy, that kind of inexorable destiny in the heart of a lonely, romantic girl [such as Emma Bovary]. And all of it, of course, would have to be done with an F. Scott Fitzgerald kind of freshness and grace.¹⁸

The influence of Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* on Yates's first novel seems is considerable, best shown in Yates's usage of Frank Wheeler, the male protagonist who feels superior to his neighbors and seeks to escape the community while his wife responds with suburban unhappiness of her own. However, the shared usage of the Connecticut suburban setting in both novels and a focus of both Wilson and Yates on the protagonists as a dissatisfied suburban couple is where the similarity between the two novels also ends. Unlike Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*, a man who loves to talk his friends or wife to death with his witty denigration of suburban conformity and corporate-world deadness, Tom Rath in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* is no intellectual or attractive social talker, just a bland conformist organization man who vaguely dislikes his office job of PR writer but goes along

¹⁶ See Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road*, in *Revolutionary Road; The Easter Parade; Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, by Richard Yates (New York: Knopf, 2009), first published 1961, hereinafter referred to as *RR*; and Richard Yates, *Young Hearts Crying* (New York: Vintage, 2009), first published 1984, hereinafter referred to as *YHC*.

¹⁷ Yates first appropriated the suburban setting for his fiction around 1955 by which time he had made his mark as a promising young writers of short stories and was asked by many in the literary establishment to produce a first novel. For the progression of work on *RR*, see Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 176-202.

¹⁸ Richard Yates, "Some Very Good Masters," *New York Times*, April 19 (1981), Section 7, 3.

with it to pay the bills and pacify his wife's ambition. What both novels share is the way authors have the protagonists try to escape from their initial suburban existence to something better. The Raths are after a bigger house, the Wheelers dream of selling their house and moving to Europe. It might be said that Yates's *Revolutionary Road* is a dramatic rewriting of the relatively melodramatic plot of *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (however much Yates himself hated comparisons between the two novels, he started his novel with Wilson's book entrenched in his mind) to include the element of suicidal obsession of the woman protagonist of *Revolutionary Road* with aborting her pregnancy. There are many differences between the two novels as well—for example, whereas Wilson's novel ends on a note of happy affirmation of suburban life of the Raths in a new suburban setting, *Revolutionary Road* ends in despair as the tortured, unhappy lives of the Wheelers disappear from the community with hardly a trace in the neighborhood portrayed as “a toyland of white and pastel houses” which look “invincibly cheerful.”¹⁹

The story of *Revolutionary Road* is localized within a single year, from spring 1955 to spring 1956. The primary setting is the new suburb in “a part of western Connecticut where three swollen villages had lately been merged by a wide and glamorous highway called Route Twelve.”²⁰ A parallel secondary setting of the novel is New York City where Frank Wheeler, one of the protagonists, works at Knox Business Machines in a well-paying white-collar job that he chooses to despise, claiming it stifles his real identity.²¹ By the beginning of the story of *Revolutionary Road*, the Wheelers have lived in their nice detached suburban house in a good neighborhood for two years.

Revolutionary Road is divided into three parts. The plot is linear, with flashback episodes inserted to the main narrative in order to provide background information about the protagonists' childhood, courtship, and marriage.²² The Wheelers are about thirty, attractive, intelligent, educated, suburban, respectable, and restless in their seemingly ideal life situation. April Wheeler is a housewife and mother of two young children, Frank Wheeler has a well-paying job in the in New York City. The first section starts with the opening night of an amateur production of *The Petrified Forest* by the Laurel Players, a group of Connecticut adult suburbanites, with April in the lead role of Gabrielle. This opportunity seems to fulfil April's unspoken ambition as she, according to David Castronovo, “has pretensions to being an actress and enjoys nothing more than finding and playing a romantic

¹⁹ *RR*, 277.

²⁰ *RR*, 8.

²¹ Ironically, Frank's real identity is that of a seductive talker without any definite plans as to how realize his potential. For details, see my discussion of the novel below.

²² Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 37. Yates's flashbacks in the novel also provide essential background information on minor characters such as Shep Campbell and Mrs. Givings who serve as reflectors of the actions of the protagonists.

role.”²³ The much-expected performance is a failure, caused by the actors’ lack of skill, talent, and inadequate time for rehearsal which causes the cast to make a series of embarrassing blunders until even April, the one mildly talented person in the cast, “loses her grip” and finishes her performance alternating “between false theatrical gestures and a white-knuckled immobility.”²⁴ Joseph George argues that the theater production in the novel functions as “a smaller type of planned [suburban] community” that introduces the suburban community, setting and characters through Yates’s description of “the quick establishment and dissolution of a group devoted to a single ethos,” and the way the characters in the novel react to the unexpected disappointment of the play serves as a condensed “study of suburban associations in miniature.”²⁵ Frank’s subsequent evaluation of the performance hurts and insults his wife who becomes angry and withdrawn.²⁶ During the drive back home, Frank annoys April further with an obsessive need to discuss the performance further while she wants to be left alone. Their quarrel develops into a physical fight at the curbside in which April mocks Frank’s manhood and he almost hits her.²⁷ Their discord following the play deepens, April stays withdrawn and vindictive as she goes about doing her domestic chores while Frank feels humiliated and angered by April’s behavior and searches for ways in which to maintain his sense of self-worth. Martin Naparstek claims that acting in itself is always a metaphoric activity and when April has lost the stage outlet for her acting after the Laurel Players production failure, her theatrical skill focuses on managing the household while Frank’s performance is limited to acting “superior to their neighbors and friends.”²⁸ When a woman like April Wheeler wants to live an authentic life and cannot find ways to do so, she reaches a state that Simone de Beauvoir describes as being

confined in denial [of her needs], in cynicism, she lacks a positive use of her strength, as long as she is passionate and living, she finds ways to use it: she helps others, she consoles, protects, gives, she has many interests; but she suffers from not finding any truly demanding job, from not devoting her activity to an end. Often eaten away by loneliness and sterility, she ends up by giving up, destroying herself.²⁹

²³ David Castronovo, *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s that Made American Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 192.

²⁴ *RR*, 12.

²⁵ Joseph George, *Postmodern Suburban Spaces: Philosophy, Ethics, and Community in Post-War American Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3.

²⁶ The fatal, insensitive evaluation of the Laurel Players opening night performance by Frank Wheeler reads: “Well, [...] I guess it wasn’t exactly a triumph or anything, was it?” See *RR*, 16.

²⁷ *RR*, 24-27.

²⁸ Naparstek, *Richard Yates Up Close* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 47.

²⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2009), 584, https://ia600307.us.archive.org/13/items/1949SimoneDeBeauvoirTheSecondSex/1949_simone-de-beauvoir-the-second-sex.pdf.

Jennifer Daly explains the worsening atmosphere in the Wheeler household after the failure of April's performance as the result of Frank and April being "exposed as apparent frauds"³⁰ and hypocrites whose habitual feelings of being superior to other people are shattered by the play's fiasco—they both had high hopes for the performance and their conformist neighbors did come to April's performance "with a surprisingly generous openness of mind, and had been let down."³¹ George emphasizes the fact that Yates presents the very conformist neighbors who are the subjects of Frank's habitual anti-suburban critique, the people who put their faith in the Laurel Players production as a community-building project "in which everyone [including the cast and the audience] had gathered in pursuit of a particular goal, whose pursuit [and failure] corrupted their community."³² The lofty ideals that the suburbanites had of starting "a really good community theater right here, among themselves," are shattered for good by the end of the opening night performance of the Laurel Players as "nobody in the auditorium knew how to look or what to say" and "most of the people were silent and stiff, fingering packs of cigarettes as they rose and turned to the isles."³³ As Paola Golinelli and Nicolino Rossi explain, from the psychoanalytical perspective, the failure of the play and April's humiliation in the lead role foreshadows the realization of both April and her husband Frank that they are incapable "to conceive a life project together. And, instead of opening a potential space for communication in the couple, the play closes it up."³⁴ April's refusal to talk the problem over with Frank, which is a symptom of what Golinelli and Rossi call "narcissistic withdrawal,"³⁵ makes Frank respond with the frantic conversationalist's attempt to talk the problem through, which only intensifies the degree of his wife's sullen refusal to communicate with him as she retreats into her own private world.

Yates's skill in plotting is evident with the presentation of three major events that happen on Frank's thirtieth birthday.³⁶ First, Frank starts an affair with Maureen, a sexy secretary from his office with whom he spends the lunch and afternoon. Second, when he returns home from Maureen, full of guilt, April surprises him with a birthday dinner and carefully chosen presents. Finally, after the dinner, April tells Frank of her radical new idea for their family's relocation to Paris. It is a naïve delusion, something that has no practical basis. Moreover, it is a plan whose implementation would subvert the gender roles of both

³⁰ Jennifer Daly, "Why Is Your Brand Crisis? Challenging the Representation of Masculinity in the Work of Richard Yates, Richard Ford, and Jonathan Franzen" (PhD diss., University of Dublin, 2016), 51.

³¹ *RR*, 64.

³² George, *Postmodern Suburban Spaces*, 4.

³³ *RR*, 13.

³⁴ Paola Golinelli and Nicolino Rossi, "An entire life in one glance: a psychoanalytic reading of *Revolutionary Road*" *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 93, no. 6 (2012): 1497.

³⁵ Golinelli and Rossi, "An entire life," 1496.

³⁶ See *RR*, 78-101.

partners since April plans to work as a secretary in Paris to provide for the family while Frank might take the time off to think and find his true vocation—something he has been talking about ever since they met but never really getting to do. Frank first resists the idea, then embraces its promise along with rekindling the sexual dimension of their marriage.³⁷

In the second section of the novel, Frank and April are reconciled, riding on the wave of blissful and happy ignorance, putting their earlier quarreling behind and trying to plan the details of their European sojourn and to share the news of their upcoming relocation with their friends and (in Frank's case) colleagues. The couple hold endless night discussions during which they plan the future, but only after their children are safely put away to sleep: "Then they would take their places in the living room—April curled attractively on the sofa, usually, and Frank standing with his back to the bookcase, each with a cup of black Italian coffee and a cigarette—and give way to their love affair."³⁸ Ironically, the Wheelers are at their social best when acting like single lovers, after having put aside their parental roles. The second section is marked by the excitement and promise for both Frank and April that is in stark contrast with the stifling vindictiveness and constant conflict that dominated their relationship in first section of the novel. At work, Frank drops his habitual disdain of the corporate culture and his job and becomes, much to his surprise, an effective "demon of energy" who skillfully solves all work challenges, goes through the motions of his job with unusual swiftness and skill, managing to save his best for the excited night conversations with April about the European plan and its potential to redeem their conformist life in the suburbs.³⁹ This new attitude justified since Frank and April believe that their notion of themselves as the only two authentic people who indulge in sanctimonious dismissal of their suburban lifestyle and environment does not matter any more since "they were going to be new and better people from now on."⁴⁰ Frank even calls the European plan a liberation since he feels they had been "encased in some kind of Cellophane for years without knowing it, and [are now] suddenly breaking out."⁴¹ As Scott Donaldson argues, the cellophane bag image aptly suggests the prevalence of consumer products in the consciousness of 1950s suburbanites "the inhibiting conformity" of suburban life which may feel nicely-packaged and inviting, yet is stifling underneath the glittering surface, or, in this case, beneath the cellophane cover.⁴²

Frank and April tell of their European plan to the Campbells, their best friends in the suburbs, and Frank also confides to his world-weary colleague Jack Ordway. Everyone

³⁷ *RR*, 100-101.

³⁸ *RR*, 110.

³⁹ *RR*, 105-119.

⁴⁰ *RR*, 111.

⁴¹ *RR*, 114.

⁴² Scott Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 188.

reacts to the plan with polite reservation.⁴³ The most telling response, however, is by Jack Ordway who punctures the whole plan with a touch of sobering realism: “Assuming there is a true vocation lurking in wait for you, don’t you think you’d be just as apt to discover it here as there?”⁴⁴ The greatest sympathy for the European relocation plan comes, improbably, from John Givings, an institutionalized son of Mrs. Givings, the real estate broker who early on sold the suburban house to the Wheelers. Wishing to have her insane son interact with normal people, she invites herself to the Wheelers and takes John and her husband along, hoping for John to socialize with people while he is on a rare leave from the asylum.⁴⁵ As Castronovo and Goldleaf explain, John “has rebelled against his obnoxiously controlling and genteel mother and his inert father” and during the visits to the Wheelers he “asks blunt questions, drinks sherry out of a tumbler,” and refuses to act in the same falsely polite way as his mother.⁴⁶

Much to the Wheelers’ surprise, John reacts with genuine interest and enthusiasm to the European plan and shares the Wheelers’ opinion of suburbia as conformist hell.⁴⁷ However, as Castronovo and Goldleaf argue, John Givings is not a “mentally disturbed truth-teller” that is worthy of the readers sympathy. Rather, he is portrayed as “rude and cruel and destructive” in the way he exposes the Wheelers’ “inability to act” upon their dreams.⁴⁸ Ironically, now that Frank no longer puts any serious thought to succeeding in his corporate job at Knox, he starts being praised and respected as never before, and when he hints to his boss that he is leaving, the boss tries to pacify him with a better job and salary offer, fearing Frank’s departure is to a rival company. The second part of the novel ends with April’s realization that she is pregnant again. Angrily, she informs Frank of her decision to abort the pregnancy at all costs, in order to save their European dream from being ruined, ignoring Frank’s pleas to be reasonable and keep the child.⁴⁹

The third part chronicles the weeks and months of Frank’s ingenious argumentation with April as he tries to persuade her to complete her pregnancy.⁵⁰ While Frank is able to imagine the European relocation plan to be postponed or done even with their third child, April refuses to give up on her dream and stubbornly persists in her right to have an abortion to achieve that dream. In his job, Frank tells his bosses that he is going to stay at Knox after all, which they interpret as a sign of loyalty and offer him a salary rise and a promotion to a different unit. Frank thus becomes a successful conformist, something he used to despise,

⁴³ *RR*, 129-133; 146-149.

⁴⁴ *RR*, 147.

⁴⁵ *RR*, 138-145.

⁴⁶ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 46.

⁴⁷ *RR*, 159-167.

⁴⁸ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 46.

⁴⁹ *RR*, 178-181.

⁵⁰ See *RR*, 185-257.

almost against his will. According to Elaine Tyler May, the postwar suburban family “seemed to be the one place where people could control their destinies and perhaps even shape the future.”⁵¹ When April’s pregnancy becomes a fact, it quickly turns into a subject on which April and Frank are unable to agree. As a result, the domestic idyll portrayed in second section changes into an arena of perennial conflict and argument in the third. The tension between Frank’s increasingly conformist views on the family situation and April’s stubborn decision to have an abortion rises until April seemingly agrees to Frank’s view to keep the baby. At this point, the Wheelers notify all of their friends and acquaintances of their change of mind regarding the European relocation plan.⁵² The Campbells and Jack Ordway praise the wisdom of dropping the plan. When Frank comes home and tells his wife of his salary rise and of prospects for his career advancement, she reacts with indifference, unlike Betsy, wife of Tom Rath in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, who actually pushes her husband into getting a better-paid job that would enable them to move to a bigger, more expensive and prestigious suburban house.⁵³ When fall comes, the date for a safe abortion passes and Frank is deceived into thinking he has persuaded April to be reasonable. Then follows the catastrophe—during another visit of the Givingses, John becomes furious to learn of the European plan termination, accuses Frank and April of betraying their dreams, and insults Frank’s masculinity, to which Frank reacts by throwing the Givingses out.⁵⁴ Another vicious quarrel with April follows, with Frank getting drunk and falling asleep alone. During the night, April realizes, in a crushing fit of epiphany, that her love for Frank had always been based on a falsely positive image of him and that he could never provide what she needs. The following morning, April puts on the best performance of her life, playing the shy, submissive wife who pretends to be genuinely interested in Frank’s crucial job meeting to take place later that day.⁵⁵ Yates’s skill in dramatic irony is evident in this scene, which, according to Charlton-Jones, showcases Frank’s bashful confidence in his marriage having finally taken a solid turn for the better while the reader is aware that April has become, unbeknownst to her husband, “a person who has removed herself and given up not just on [her marriage] but also on life.”⁵⁶ On the last morning, Frank is pacified by April’s masterful performance and leaves for work. After seeing Frank off, April puts her things in order and administers her self-abortion which causes her to die in hospital later that day.⁵⁷ Initially, the shocked Frank is cared for by his friend and neighbor Shep Campbell who

⁵¹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 26.

⁵² *RR*, 203-212.

⁵³ See Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 1-22.

⁵⁴ *RR*, 241-8.

⁵⁵ See *RR*, 254-7.

⁵⁶ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 28.

⁵⁷ *RR*, 258-267.

revives his wartime resolve, “the old combat feeling, the sense of doing exactly the right thing, quickly and well,”⁵⁸ and manages the traumatic situation for Frank. After April’s death, Frank moves out, sells the house, and puts his children to the care of the family of an elder brother while he gets the new job at a higher salary, working for Bart Pollock, a former Knox manager who wins him over to the new company. The account of what happens after April’s death and Frank’s breakdown and subsequent change into what Shep Campbell sees as a “walking, talking, smiling, lifeless man,”⁵⁹ the final commentary on the Wheeler’s tragic suburban period, is given by two outsiders who observe the tragic downfall of the Wheelers from a distance—Milly Campbell and Mrs. Givings who give their versions of the story to the new buyers of the Wheeler house.⁶⁰

The plot of *Revolutionary Road* focuses on the dramatic presentation of the tumultuous relationship of April and Frank Wheeler. According to Castronovo and Goldleaf, they are “a well-educated and attractive couple [who] set out to satisfy their vague but deep yearnings for personal authenticity.”⁶¹ Regarding the theme of the novel, Yates himself claimed *Revolutionary Road* is about different kinds of abortion, namely, about “an aborted play, several aborted careers, any number of aborted ambitions and aborted plans and aborted dreams – all leading up to a real, physical abortion, and a death at the end.”⁶² In terms of narrative structure, Yates claims he started the novel with the ending and constructed the plot as building up toward that catastrophic event.⁶³ The Wheelers, especially Frank, keep complaining about the deadness and monotony of suburban life yet they are also defined by it and it is Yates’s supreme skill in presenting the Wheelers as people whose delusions and suburban sanctimoniousness are necessary for their making sense of who they are. Their ideas also function as agents of their undoing as the aspects of suburban lifestyle that ultimately break them are not the conformity they keep criticizing but, rather, their inability to live their lives where they are, which is in the suburbs. The supreme irony of *Revolutionary Road* is, of course, in the fact that the Wheelers are their own worst enemies who fail to see their rebellion is, indeed, without a cause and their sanctimonious dismissal of their lifestyle rings hollow since they have a nice house in a good, diverse neighborhood, are healthy, admired by their friends the Campbells, and seem to have no material or emotional want but a vague dissatisfaction with life which they invent themselves. Yates is thus doubtful about the validity of the postwar narrative of portraying suburbs as what John

⁵⁸ *RR*, 270.

⁵⁹ *RR*, 283.

⁶⁰ *RR*, 280-289.

⁶¹ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 37.

⁶² DeWitt Henry, and Geoffrey Clark, “An Interview with Richard Yates,” *Ploughshares* 1, no. 3 (1972): 67, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40349860>.

⁶³ Henry and Clark, “An Interview with Richard Yates,” 66.

Archer calls “insidious, pernicious, homogenizing, and commodity-bound” environment which causes the people who live in it to become conformist or go mad.⁶⁴ By presenting the Wheelers as the self-appointed social critics of postwar suburban lifestyle in the novel, Yates is able to undermine the argument about suburban conformity and deadness more efficiently than the 1950s social critics like Lewis Mumford, David Riesman, and John Keats. By following the thinking about the matter done by Frank and April Wheeler during their habitual night discussions, one is made aware of the fact that their suburban community is far being the principal reason for their marital problems and unhappiness and even if it were, as Bennett M. Berger argues, such victimization would be misplaced since there is no obvious relationship “between the physical structure of the esthetic shape of a residential environment [such as the Wheelers’ house and neighborhood] and the sort of values and culture it can possibly engender.”⁶⁵

By the end of the novel, April is dead, Frank is crushed by her death and has to go through analysis to cope with the bereavement, and John Givings, the madman who exposes the Wheelers’ pretension, is again institutionalized with no prospect of further visits to the outside world. Yet the suburbs are not to blame for the misfortune of these characters. As Tim Foster explains, these three characters who act as “anti-suburban ‘truthtellers’ [...] fall victim, not to the suburban environment they so despise, but to their inability to tell truth to themselves.”⁶⁶ Arguably, Yates was correct in voicing his annoyance at the way early critics misread his novel as a conventional diatribe against suburbia and against marriage. In an interview, Yates confesses that such misreading of *Revolutionary Road* proved disappointing to him since

the Wheelers may have thought the suburbs were to blame for all their problems, but I meant it to be implicit in the text that that was their delusion, their problem, not mine. [...] during the Fifties there was a general lust for conformity all over this country, by no means only in the suburbs – a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price.⁶⁷

However much Frank and April Wheeler keep vilifying life in the 1950s American suburbia, the effect Yates achieves through the criticism of suburban conformity that his characters undertake is to highlight their generic marital problems and neurotic symptoms that are not suburban by nature but products of their traumatic childhoods and their inability to function

⁶⁴ John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690-2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 340.

⁶⁵ Bennett M. Berger, *Working-Class Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969), xxi.

⁶⁶ Tim Foster, “Escaping the Split-Level Trap: Postsuburban Narratives in Recent American Fiction” (PhD diss. University of Nottingham, 2012), 63, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/33565636.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Henry and Clark, “An Interview with Richard Yates,” 66.

as partners in a harmonious relationship.⁶⁸ By presenting the tragic development of the protagonists' pursuit of fatally naïve delusions, the novel avoids embracing the critique of suburbia that proliferated in the the social studies of the 1950s.⁶⁹ A fitting example of the way the suburban way of life was denigrated at the time comes from Lewis Mumford who examines not only the history of suburbanization but also its psychological effect on the people who live in the suburbs. In *The City in History*, Mumford claims that the postwar American exodus to the suburbs, exemplified in *Revolutionary Road* by the move of the Wheelers to the Connecticut community in the early 1950s, is often marred by the suburbanites' "temptation to retreat from unpleasant realities, to shirk public duties, and to find the whole meaning of life in the most elemental social group, the family, or even in the still more isolated and self-centered individual."⁷⁰ It is exactly in the area of family and individual identity that the problems of Frank and April Wheeler originate. Not being family-oriented people, they resort to crafting their identities on the basis of artistic performance (in April's case) or fireside anti-establishment wisecracking (in Frank's case). Morris Dickstein argues that *Revolutionary Road* is a period-bound literary response to the 1950s in American literature as well as in society as he considers Yates's first novel to be a rewriting of Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (which is a melodrama wherein all problems of the protagonists in suburbia turn out all right by the end) as a suburban tragedy and as a mirror image of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*.⁷¹ Unlike Tom Rath and Sal Paradise, protagonists of the Wilson and Kerouac novels, Frank Wheeler is dishonest without knowing it, a suburban "would-be rebel, the imagined free spirit, who never leaves home, never quits his job – the man who [...] seeks his pastoral Utopia not in the American West but in the suburban towns of Connecticut."⁷² It is Yates's success as realist that he manages to convey the incongruity of Frank Wheeler's hypocritical intellectualism while sustaining the reader's sympathy for such a pretentious character whose sanctimony makes him unbearable yet exciting to follow. As Dickstein further emphasizes, Frank Wheeler is hopelessly "unable to be frank [ie honest] with anyone, not even himself," and resorts to endless tirades that are full of "glib clichés attacking conformity, adjustment, security, and togetherness" as he

⁶⁸ For more on the psychological interpretation of Frank's and April's character, see this chapter below.

⁶⁹ For more specific example of the sociological analysis of the problems of postwar suburban lifestyle, see, for example, William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), first published 1956; David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), first published 1950; Richard E. Gordon, Katherine E. Gordon, and Max Gunther, *The Split-Level Trap* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1960); and John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956).

⁷⁰ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1961), 494.

⁷¹ Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945-1970* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 136.

⁷² Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple*, 136.

“maneuvers his wife into a suburban domesticity that shields him from his own sense of diminished horizons.”⁷³ In a way, however, Frank does see through his pretension when he tries, without success, to make April complete her pregnancy since he realizes that a third child would not have to be an obstacle to their European relocation plan.⁷⁴

It is also useful to compare the protagonists of *Revolutionary Road* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Like Jay Gatsby, Frank Wheeler “wants to be an authentic self and a memorable character”⁷⁵ who would be admired and respected. Unlike the dreamer protagonist of Fitzgerald’s novel, however, Frank lacks a clear vision of how he wants to achieve this goal, remaining “an unconventional man who is too cool to be involved with American life and too sheepish to live against the grain.”⁷⁶ For this reason, Frank becomes at first frightened by April’s European plan since its implementation would expose the vacuity of his anti-suburban posturing which he cannot replace with any solid alternative that would keep his privileged role of the male breadwinner and sustain his wife’s admiration.

Frank Wheeler’s identity problem in *Revolutionary Road* might also be explained as the manifestation of a general crisis of male identity in postwar America. When American families in the 1950s moved in great numbers to the suburbs as part of an upwardly mobile exodus to a better environment and living conditions compared to the stress and overcrowding in rented city apartments, the men of these families would come to face new and unexpected challenges to their masculinity. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan claims that “the old frontiers have been conquered [in the 1950s suburbs], and the boundaries of the new are not so clearly marked. More and more young men in America today suffer an identity crisis for want of any image of man worth pursuing, for want of a purpose that truly realizes their human abilities.”⁷⁷ For the male characters in *Revolutionary Road*, this problem is solved by their nostalgic reenactments of wartime bravery at parties (in the case of Frank Wheeler and his friend Shep Campbell) or by focusing on the pursuit of outdoor do-it-yourself home improvement projects that require hard labor and thus counter the predominantly feminine space of the suburban households.⁷⁸

According to Bernard J. Paris, the work of psychoanalysis theorists and practitioners such as Karen Horney, which deals with the different ways in which human development

⁷³ Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple*, 137.

⁷⁴ *RR*, 186-202.

⁷⁵ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 42.

⁷⁶ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 42-3.

⁷⁷ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1974), 71. Interestingly, Friedan does not blame exclusively the crisis of male identity for the 1950s problems of suburban life. As I will show below, her classic book primarily deals with the problem of crafting a viable female identity in postwar American suburbia and in American society in general.

⁷⁸ An example of a suburban landscaping project which aims to reaffirm the man’s masculine identity is Frank Wheeler’s stone path which is discussed below.

becomes marred with anxiety and neurosis, might be fruitfully used for literary criticism of fiction and drama since such work “provides explanations of human behavior in terms of currently existing constellations of defenses and inner conflicts that we can find nowhere else.”⁷⁹ April Wheeler is a typical example of what Horney calls a “self-effacing person”⁸⁰ whose mental problems are the product of her neuroticism which has developed as a result of her unhappy, lonely, and affectionless childhood. Through a series of flashbacks, Yates provides the family background of April and Frank Wheeler to enable the reader to better understand the problems and conflicts they experience as adults in the 1950s suburbs. In a fit of self-analysis, Frank remembers the stories which April told him of her traumatic experience of being left by her glamorous, selfish parents in the care of her relatives. As a child, she developed what Horney calls “basic anxiety,” or, “a feeling of being isolated and helpless toward a world potentially hostile.”⁸¹ April once confides to Frank that, when she was young, she used to desperately try to reach out, in vain, for human contact and affection: “I always knew nobody cared about me and I always let everybody know I knew it.”⁸² Her parents were like Yates’s literary guru F. Scott Fitzgerald and his flamboyant wife Zelda, “the Playboy and the Flapper, mysteriously rich and careless and cruel,”⁸³ always glamorous and always absent from their daughter’s life. They left April, their only child, behind, in the loveless custody of her stern aunts. April’s only childhood memories are romanticized versions of her parents’ infrequent and short visits during which the young April got to love the surface manifestations of glamour including fashionable clothes and talk, which she mistakes for real affection coming from her parents.⁸⁴ By the time April meets Frank in late 1940s New York, she has grown up to be the beautiful, glamorous woman that Frank looks for, yet she is also a highly immature and insecure person in the area of love, relationships, and marriage expectations. Not having known much love and affection in her youth, April seems to behave strangely when she is required to produce these emotions in her relationship with Frank, which Frank at first cherishes then grows annoyed with. When she falls for Frank’s wise-guy talk Hollywood-style manners and they make love for the first time, she naively calls him “the most interesting person I’ve ever met”⁸⁵ and agrees to marry him on a whim, hoping to live forever in their courtship-like relationship of “animated discussions of books and pictures and the shortcomings of other people’s personalities [...] and in [...]

⁷⁹ Bernard J. Paris, *Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 18.

⁸⁰ Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization* (New York: Norton, 1950), 230.

⁸¹ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 366.

⁸² *RR*, 19.

⁸³ *RR*, 35.

⁸⁴ *RR*, 35-37.

⁸⁵ *RR*, 24.

hours of unhurried dalliance deep in their double bed.”⁸⁶ With marrying April, Frank’s vanity is satisfied as she meets his ideal of a beautiful, classy, intelligent woman. For April, the marriage means being able to abandon her professional acting ambition, knowing herself to be “an only mildly talented, mildly enthusiastic graduate of dramatic school”⁸⁷ whose best option was to get married to a promising, yet reckless young man like Frank with whom “half the fun of being married was that it was just like having an affair.”⁸⁸ Throughout the novel, however, it becomes evident that April is not able to assume the roles of conventional wife and mother. She falls in love with Frank also because of the fact that his ability as a seductive talker and Sartrean critic of American culture fills in the spot of her own father whose worldly style and talk she used to love as a child during the father’s rare visits. In her relationship with Frank, April is portrayed as the passive recipient of his anti-establishment ranting, an unstable woman whose thoughts and dreams beyond her admiration for Frank remain a mystery. She is a person ever on the brink of leaving her husband, which seems an unintentional response to the way her negligent parents treated her as a child. April is always “ready to take off the minute she happened to feel like it [...] or the minute anything went wrong.”⁸⁹ Horney explains that a person who feels there is a “neurotic conflict” within themselves may respond by attempting “to escape facing the conflict,”⁹⁰ which is exactly how April acts when facing a difficult decision to make regarding her pregnancy or family responsibilities.

When April becomes pregnant for the first time, she responds to the situation as if her identity is threatened—she tries to avoid the obligations of pregnancy and childbirth by planning an abortion as the pregnancy comes “seven years too soon,”⁹¹ a nuisance which crushes the plans the Wheelers have made for a few more years of a married love affair that includes romantic sex without any thought given to the possibility of conceiving children. It is Frank who has to plead with his wife to keep the child, and their argument turns into a violent quarrel which “spilled outside and downstairs and into the street” until, “the next day, weeping in [Frank’s] arms, [April] had allowed herself to be dissuaded.”⁹² While Frank feels habitually emasculated by April’s verbal attacks on his manhood, his persuasion skills win April on his side of any argument by the end, but only after a vicious fight and quarrel which leaves them both physically and mentally exhausted. Even later, as a mother, April shows surprisingly little love for her children, focusing on cultivation of her tumultuous but

⁸⁶ *RR*, 43-4.

⁸⁷ *RR*, 43.

⁸⁸ *RR*, 43.

⁸⁹ *RR*, 44.

⁹⁰ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 185.

⁹¹ *RR*, 44.

⁹² *RR*, 45.

exciting love-affair-like relationship with Frank, always putting her two children aside or away to the care of babysitters or neighbors to be alone with her husband.

While providing an admiring ear to Frank's wise-guy rants about the deadness of the corporate world and later about suburban conformity, April is also a woman who constantly threatens to crush the image of Frank as the seductive talker whose charm she originally fell in love with. While it is possible to misread April's response to conjugal and parental responsibility as those of a prototypical 1950s suburban housewife who feels vaguely unhappy and depressed in her domestic roles, suffering from what Betty Friedan calls "the problem that has no name,"⁹³ her real problem is not her incompatibility with the suburban lifestyle. Rather, she is a victim of her own neurotic withdrawal from life which originated in her affection-deprived childhood and adolescence. William H. Chafe explains that in the popular culture rhetoric of the 1940s and 1950s, the suburban wife became the foundation upon which the achievement of the whole suburban family and household rested, a female "counterpart to the organization man [i.e., the male breadwinner who worked in an anonymous corporation as a part of the office machine], helping the family to achieve new levels of fulfillment and prosperity."⁹⁴ In their suburban home, April goes through the motions of being a good housewife and mother but repeatedly questions Frank's masculinity and ability to act as a good husband and father. On the one hand, she admires his anti-establishment ranting, on the other, she unwittingly sees through its artificiality and attacks Frank for being just a talker with no substance and without a vision of the family future.

Despite projecting an air of glamorous self-confidence and performative mastery, April inside feels lonely and withdrawn from life. According to Horney, this is the state of mind of "a person who craves affection and feels abused most of the time."⁹⁵ This inner feeling of April is in stark contrast with the glamorous and self-confident persona that she projects and that is perceived by others.⁹⁶ Towards her husband, her neurotic anxiety is vented in the naïve admiration which later changes into verbal abuse of his inadequacies. Towards the end of her life, when she, as an unhappy pregnant woman dances and has sex with Shep Campbell once at the end of a dancing party of the two couples, fulfilling Shep's long-term fantasy of a having an affair with her, April surprises him with admitting to habitually feeling lonely and ostracized, like "somebody who worries about life passing them

⁹³ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 11.

⁹⁴ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 124-5. For an extended explanation of "the organization man" myth of the 1950s white-collar corporate office worker and suburbanite, see William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

⁹⁵ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 230.

⁹⁶ April's best admirers include her husband Frank and Shep Campbell who harbors illicit fantasies about April as his lover.

by” while hoping that people would not “picture me being that lonely.”⁹⁷ Horney also explains that the self-effacing neurotic feels “abused when his many unconscious claims are not fulfilled—for instance, when others do not respond with gratitude to his compulsive efforts to please, to help, to make sacrifices for them.”⁹⁸ When April makes Frank listen to the long version of her European relocation plan, she is hurt by his realistic opposition to it, until his resistance dissolves in their rekindled taste for lovemaking, following their mutual assurance of being masculine (Frank) and feminine (April), while their quarreling might be put to rest, at least as long as they both fully subscribe to the European relocation plan and believe in its success.⁹⁹

Charlton-Jones has amply discussed the important role of performance in *Revolutionary Road*.¹⁰⁰ By having his characters perform on and off stage, Yates exposes their inauthenticity and “deplores the fact that most people perform to hide the truth of who they are and what they feel.”¹⁰¹ Early in the novel, as Frank keeps analyzing the failure of the Laurel Players opening night while driving home, April is hurt by his insensitivity to her suffering and she verbally strikes back at him during their vicious curbside quarrel (“*Look at you, and tell me how by any stretch [...] of the imagination you can call yourself a man!*”¹⁰²); Frank moves to hit her but changes his hitting motion at the last moment as “instead of hitting her he danced away in a travesty of boxer’s footwork and brought the fist down on the roof of the car with all his strength.”¹⁰³ Neither April nor Frank are thus able of authentic responses to the failed performance and all they manage is vicious accusations of the other about their failure to live up to the gendered expectations of being masculine or feminine, respectively. Frank is humiliated by waking up the next day to April’s angry lawn-mowing, a manly task which he was supposed to the previous week but did not. To compensate, or, as Rory Mackay McGinley aptly notes, in an effort to “out-masculinise April,”¹⁰⁴ Frank starts working on a stone path landscaping project in front of the house which helps him reaffirm his sense of being able to “do a man’s work” and to get away from the oppressive silence which April has established at home following their quarrel about her performance in the Laurel Players production.¹⁰⁵ Frank’s do-it-yourself project is actually a typical 1950s suburban pastime embraced by many a male breadwinner at the time. Steven M. Gelber chronicles the rise of suburban home improvement activity in the United States

⁹⁷ *RR*, 222.

⁹⁸ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 230.

⁹⁹ *RR*, 100-101.

¹⁰⁰ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 17-23.

¹⁰¹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 17.

¹⁰² *RR*, 27.

¹⁰³ *RR*, 27.

¹⁰⁴ Rory Mackay McGinley, “Richard Yates: Re-writing Postwar American Culture” (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2016), 165-6, <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/7797/1/2016mcginleyphd.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵ *RR*, 41-48.

at this time done by men who started to enjoy working in their basement workshops, or, chose a construction project that required manual labor and skill to “actively participate in family activities while retaining a distinct masculine style.”¹⁰⁶ By working on his stone path, Frank utilizes “the opportunity to recapture the pride that went along with doing a task from start to finish with one’s own hands.”¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the hard labor which the extraction and transport of the stones for the path entails, enables Frank to feel like a man who can do things that his wife cannot. As I will show below, Frank’s motive for working on his stone path is also an attempt to cope with the traumatic history of humiliation which he habitually experienced from his own father whenever manual tasks were to be done and Frank proved too clumsy to do them.¹⁰⁸ By working on the stone path, Frank also gets away from his sulking wife, and gets to enjoy the sight of his own front lawn for the first time, seeing it from a different perspective. Moreover, he has a chance to create something of lasting value and utility, thereby proving his sense of masculine control in his family. As a side effect, the hard work Frank does hauling stones for his path makes him reflect ruefully on the way his life has taken a conformist turn:

Wasn’t it true, then, that everything in his life from that point on had been a succession of things he hadn’t really wanted to do? Taking a hopelessly dull job to prove he could be as responsible as any other family man, moving to an overpriced, genteel apartment to prove his mature belief in the fundamentals of orderliness and good health, having another child to prove that the first one hadn’t been a mistake, buying a house in the country because that was the next logical step and he had to prove himself capable of taking it. Proving, proving; and for no other reason than that he was married to a woman who had somehow managed to put him forever on the defensive [...] who lived according to what she happened to feel like doing and who might at any time [...] of day or night just happen to feel like leaving him.¹⁰⁹

Ironically, while working on his stone path, Frank fails to realize that he has no alternative road not taken, no life without April to invent on his own, so when he moans about having wasted his life in the pursuit of conventional dreams, his rejection of his family and work accomplishments sounds false since he is unable to take a radically different course of action, neither with April nor on his own.

¹⁰⁶ Steven M. Gelber, “Do-It-Yourself: Constructing, Repairing and Maintaining Domestic Masculinity,” *American Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (March 1997): 69.

¹⁰⁷ Gelber, “Do-It-Yourself,” 68.

¹⁰⁸ *RR*, 34-35.

¹⁰⁹ *RR*, 46.

The gender roles of the Wheelers in *Revolutionary Road* are as much a subject of redefinition as the notions of masculinity of the male characters in the novel. While Frank often feels emasculated by April's verbal attacks and her silent sulking, he nonetheless works hard to retain the aura of a virile head of their household as he feels his task is to charm his wife with entertaining talk and to conquer her in bed. When April challenges Frank's manhood and refuses to sleep with him and listen to his interpretations of the suburban malaise, Frank feels helpless and threatened. By the same token, April has problems with adhering to the role of 1950s home-bound, adoring, and submissive wife even though her refusal to play such a role is not really a manifestation of feminist radicalism but, rather, a reflection of her own neurotic psychological disposition.

A very interesting and little-researched aspect of Yates's suburban fiction is the way he portrays children. Charlton-Jones argues that in *Revolutionary Road*, the two children of Frank and April, Jennifer and Michael, are "lonely, disenfranchised, loved in a remote, partial way, poorly cared for [...] at the mercy of their parents' failing marriage and subject to the vagaries, sometimes violence of their [parents'] moods."¹¹⁰ The marginalization of the Wheeler children in *Revolutionary Road* is even more striking when read in the context of the 1950s dominance of media narratives about the baby-boomer adoration of marriage, parenthood, and domesticity as part of a lifestyle centered around the wellbeing of children in postwar suburbia. Elaine Tyler May reminds that in the 1950s, many Americans believed that "parenthood was the route to happiness," while having several children was considered the socially prescribed norm for American families and a ticket to happy domesticity.¹¹¹ As a response to such myths about the virtue and bliss of parenting in the suburban 1950s, the way April and Frank always feel ambivalent about being parents and are often unwilling to attend to their children's needs is all the more disturbing. Far from acting as anti-establishment radicals with a plan, the refusal (and inability) of the Wheelers to be caring parents makes them antisocial characters whose rebellion sets them apart from their conformist but children-loving neighbors. This problem stands out when the parental role of April and Frank is compared to the Campbells, their best friends. Shep Campbell, a solid family man and father of four sons, may be apt to occasionally forget about being a parent when he indulges in lustful dreams about loving April Wheeler while he trips over his four sons, who are "identically dressed in blue knit pajamas, all propped on their elbows to stare at the flickering blue of the television screen."¹¹² However, even though Shep feels

¹¹⁰ Kate Charlton-Jones, "What About the Children?" In *Richard Yates and the Flawed American Dream: Critical Essays*, ed. Jennifer Daly (Jefferson: NC: McFarland, 2017), 123.

¹¹¹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 132.

¹¹² *RR*, 127.

momentary disgust for the four kids whose “snub-nosed blond faces, in profile, looked remarkably alike and remarkably like [his wife] Milly’s, and their jaws were all working in cadence on cuds of bubble gum, the pink wrappers of which lay strewn on the carpet,”¹¹³ his exasperation is less prominent than the proud realization of his achievement as father “when he checked [his sons] in their beds at night or when they galloped under his high-thrown softball on the lawn.”¹¹⁴ Although the Wheelers and the Campbells share stories of suburban smugness during their mutual visits, each couple is different regarding the way they act as parents. While the children are mere accidental products of an idealized love affair for April and Frank Wheeler, the four Campbell sons are a live and vigorous manifestation of a solid, even if unexciting, marriage of the Campbells who may not be so glamorous and imaginative as the Wheelers, yet it is the Campbells who survive and go on living in the postwar suburbs while Frank and April break down when they have to abandon their unrealistic dreams about a European future and act normal.¹¹⁵

According to Charlton-Jones, the reason why the parents in Yates’s fiction entrust their children to the care of TV broadcasting are a reflection of the fact that TV “weakens the thin thread of communication between children and their parents for it allows the parents to ignore their offspring.”¹¹⁶ Indeed, in *Revolutionary Road*, the television set in the Wheeler and Campbell homes is primarily used as a tool to pacify the children so that the parents may drink, smoke, discuss their plans, and entertain their guests. When April becomes pregnant for the third time, she realizes the fallacy of her beliefs in the European sojourn and the fact that her love and respect for Frank have been all naive delusions. She disposes of her children by sending them to stay for a day or two at the Campbells. Ironically, her very last sensory perception of her children, as she tries to burn the first version of her hateful good-bye note to Frank in the garden, are generic “faraway cries of children at play” and since her children have been placed with the Campbells, she no longer cares, in her withdrawal from everything, as “from a distance, all children’s voices sound the same.”¹¹⁷ The playful noise of her own children in the background of April’s final morning preparation highlights the silent drama of her suicidal mission.

Another important function of the Wheeler children in *Revolutionary Road* is their role in responding to their parents’ plans for European relocation. When told that the family would move to Europe, Jennifer and Michael react with childish alarm as their domestic security is threatened with such a radical change. Later, when the parents change their mind about the matter and the news for the children is that the plan is off, the children again resist

¹¹³ *RR*, 127.

¹¹⁴ *RR*, 127-8.

¹¹⁵ *RR*, 281-2.

¹¹⁶ Charlton-Jones, “What about the children?”, 128-9.

¹¹⁷ *RR*, 262.

such a sudden turn and react with indignation, even if the plan abandonment is going to provide them with more domestic stability. Jonathan Tran explains that the Wheeler children's reaction to the changes their unstable parents make about the family future embodies "genuine otherness that refuses to abdicate to well-laid plans."¹¹⁸ When April learns of her third pregnancy and simply informs her children that there would be no going to Europe after all, the children are at first baffled, resistant, then Michael reacts with an adorable attempt to make a shelter for himself and his sister outdoors, out of the destabilizing influence of their parents:

"Know what we can do, Niffer?" Michael said as soon as they were outside again. "Know that place up in the woods where the big tree's fallen over and it's got this little branch you can sit on and make a pretend soda fountain? We can take our cookies up there and you can be the lady coming into the soda fountain and I can be the soda fountain man."¹¹⁹

While Michael suggests a girls' game to please his sister and alleviate the tension caused by their parents' angry and uncommunicative detachment, Jennifer rejects this effort while trying to decipher what is going on inside the family house, peeking through the picture window to see her parents engaged in serious talk that she can neither hear nor understand.¹²⁰ Charleton-Jones explains that the keen imaginations of the children in Yates's fiction "can develop an interior world which will help enrich their otherwise difficult lives."¹²¹ Michael Wheeler does precisely that in a family situation that he cannot comprehend, creating a fairy-tale shelter for himself and his daughter to see them through the inexplicable tension created by their parents' decisions and their inability to present these decisions in digestible form to the children.

Tran argues that children in *Revolutionary Road*, while marginalized within the story, help Yates manipulate the narrative structure towards escalation of conflicts since Yates has the presence of children, or their conception, function as a dramatic element which ruins every plan of the Wheelers for a bright, intellectually stimulating future.¹²² For example, the idyllic city-based pre-parenthood romance of April and Frank as newly marrieds is terminated abruptly with the news of April's first pregnancy which "came seven years too soon" and thwarted the Wheelers' plan of gradually finding their direction in life, a plan

¹¹⁸ Jonathan Tran, "The Otherness of Children as a Hint of an Outside: Michel Foucault, Richard Yates and Karl Barth on Suburban Life," *Theology & Sexuality* 15, no. 2 (2009): 202, <https://doi.org/10.1558/tse.v15i2.189>.

¹¹⁹ *RR*, 204.

¹²⁰ *RR*, 204.

¹²¹ Charleton-Jones, "What About the Children?," 139. Another imaginative reaction of a child to the way her parents destabilize her life is Laura Davenport's invention Melissa, an imaginary little sister, in *Young Hearts Crying*, as will be explained below.

¹²² Tran, "The Otherness of Children," 202.

including vaguely unrealistic dreams of being authentic and having “an eventual family of four.”¹²³ While Frank overpowers April with his argumentation and prevents her from her decision to abort her first pregnancy, he later feels ambivalent about the effect of having the children had on his identity—by realizing that his life, including parenthood, “had been a succession of things he hadn’t really wanted to do.”¹²⁴ The Wheelers ultimately have two children, Jennifer and Michael, and when April becomes pregnant again, the vision of a third child “ends [the Wheeler’s] hopes of escape” to Europe, a situation in which the Wheelers, according to Tran, despicably “come to loathe their kids.”¹²⁵ The Wheeler children in *Revolutionary Road* thus serve as helpless and vulnerable reflectors and victims of their parents’ unstable personalities and the parents’ inability to forge meaningful communication and family leisure time activities that would engage all of them. There is no sense of the family spending time together during the weekend in *Revolutionary Road*. Life, for April and Frank Wheeler, really starts only when their children are put to bed and the parents can start dreaming of a nonconformist future in Europe or berating their conformist neighbors. Being an average suburbanite with average dreams and thinking is anathema to Frank’s notions of himself as a “decent but disillusioned young family man, sadly and bravely at war with his environment,”¹²⁶ and after some initial resistance he embraces April’s naive plan of relocating to Europe to make a fresh start. As they passionately discuss the plan every workday night, after the children are first “silenced by television,” then put “in bed with their door firmly shut for the night,” the parents resume the “conversational intensity” and “give way to their love affair” that ignores the needs and well-being of their children.¹²⁷ When April tries to communicate the European plan to her children, Jennifer reacts with wishing to take along all her bulkier toys including a dollhouse, “and my doll carriage and my ear and my three Easter rabbits and my giraffe and all my dolls and all my books and records, and my drum,” while her mother tries to reason with her daughter to limit the number of the toys. When this fails, April reacts with exasperation: “Oh. Well, I don’t feel much like explaining everything fifteen times to somebody who’s too bored and silly to pay attention, either. So that’s that.”¹²⁸ Communication between parents and children is limited or nonexistent in the Wheeler family, suggesting the parents’ lack of empathy and self-centeredness.

One of the problems that Frank and April Wheeler have is their immaturity as parents and their quick-blooded annoyance with the natural curiosity of their children. Early in the

¹²³ *RR*, 44.

¹²⁴ *RR*, 46.

¹²⁵ Tran, “The Otherness of Children,” 202.

¹²⁶ *RR*, 85.

¹²⁷ *RR*, 110.

¹²⁸ *RR*, 155.

novel, when the children ask Frank to read the funnies to them, he does, but soon grows impatient and restless, feeling “like a man in quicksand,” until he stands up angrily, “making tight fists in his pockets to restrain himself from [...] picking up a chair and throwing it through the picture window.”¹²⁹ When April’s third pregnancy becomes a fact, April views her situation and her children as detrimental to the vague notions of fulfilment which she and Frank have localized in Paris where Frank briefly lived during his army service after the war. However, the plan for relocation to Europe is based exclusively on Frank and April’s own needs and passions, ignoring the fact that such a radical change might upset the emotional stability of their children.

Yates portrays the destabilizing effect of the parents on their children through the reaction of their daughter Jennifer who, being sensitive to the neglect of their parents during their preoccupation with working out the details of the European plan, “would sometimes go off quietly by herself and suck her thumb” while her little brother realizes he could make all sorts of infantile noises and meal interruptions without any parental reproach.¹³⁰ In the limited way that befits their age, the Wheeler children in *Revolutionary Road* act as agents of family cohesion by being normal children in an unstable household, which is in ironic contrast to the destructive attitudes toward family life and childcare that are held by their parents. In a family where their needs are habitually neglected, Michael and Jennifer do the best they can to survive and amuse themselves, winning the reader’s sympathy while exposing the selfish cruelty and immaturity of their parents.

It is also important to consider the role of the suburban setting in *Revolutionary Road*. When Mrs. Givings introduces the house which the Wheelers would later buy as boasting “simple, clean lines, good lawns, marvelous for children,” Yates adds the critical assessment of its privileged location behind “the spindly trunks of second-growth oak [...] small and wooden, riding high on its naked concrete foundation, its outsized central window staring like a big black mirror.”¹³¹ Contrary to the early readings of the novel, the Wheeler house and neighborhood are not part of the identical “little boxes” style of mass-produced tract housing represented by the postwar suburban subdivisions such as Levittown and Lakewood that came under so much critical fire in the 1950s. In the words of Mrs. Givings, the Wheeler house was built “right after the war [...] before all the really awful building [of the little boxes in American suburbs] began.”¹³² The Wheelers have bought the house on Revolutionary Road as it was a conventional thing to do in their station of life once Frank had got a decent white-collar job and they had children (“buying a house in the country

¹²⁹ *RR*, 51.

¹³⁰ *RR*, 112.

¹³¹ *RR*, 28-29.

¹³² *RR*, 28.

because that was the next logical step and he had to prove himself capable of taking it”¹³³). With the move to the suburbs, the Wheelers try “to keep up with the Joneses,” or, to make the move from a small rented apartment in the city to a large house in a fashionable suburb to prove their upward social mobility and achieve the material dimension of the American Dream. Jim Cullen argues that the American suburbs developed as a mixture of the Jeffersonian emphasis on “the beneficent influence of nature, small communities, and home ownership” and the Hamiltonian notions about “the centrality of cities as the source of Americans’ livelihoods.”¹³⁴ The result was a hybrid of the pastoral idyll of the country life coupled with the amenities of the progressive city, also known as American suburbs, or, in other words, “a managed geography that combined human effort and repose.”¹³⁵ It is to such a promising environment that the Wheelers move, hoping that their shaky marriage would improve with the arrival to a community of like-minded young families whose houses reflect their social and material achievement and also suggest ways in which to feel as participants in the realization of the American Dream. Besides the usual attraction of offering more space, more privacy, safety, cleaner environment and better playing options for the children, the flight of the Wheelers to the suburbs held the promise of mending “the gathering disorder of their lives” which might still be “sorted out and made to fit these rooms, among these trees.”¹³⁶ Instead, their problems and demons are what they come to project onto the house, blaming it and its design as well as furnishing for their own inadequacies and problems.¹³⁷

There are only three rare occasions in *Revolutionary Road* on which Frank Wheeler really enjoys his house as the bulk of the novel is spent on portraying the ways in which the house evokes the negative feelings of dispossession, alienation, and sanctimony. First, during a period of April’s domestic sulking, as Frank works on his stone path on the front lawn, he suddenly sees “his house the way a house ought to look on a fine spring day, safe on its carpet of green, the frail white sanctuary of a man’s love, a man’s wife and children.”¹³⁸ This feeling is, strangely, something Frank has never experienced inside his house which functions as oppressive space that encourages conflicts with his wife. Second, driving home once from a successful working day, Frank finds his house

¹³³ *RR*, 46.

¹³⁴ Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 144.

¹³⁵ Cullen, *The American Dream*, 144.

¹³⁶ *RR*, 29.

¹³⁷ This is evident, for example, in the instant dislike the Wheelers take to the picture window of the house which they take as an element that invades their privacy. See *RR*, 29.

¹³⁸ *RR*, 41.

very neat and white as it emerged through the green and yellow leaves [...] It looked, as John Givings had once said, like a place where people lived [...] where the difficult, intricate process of living could sometimes give rise to incredible harmonies of happiness and sometimes to near-tragic disorder [...] a place where it was possible for whole summers to be kind of crazy [...] to feel lonely and confused in many ways and for things to look pretty bleak from time to time, but where everything [...] was going to be all right.¹³⁹

The third occasion is at the end of the novel, after April's death, when Frank runs away from the Campbells to his empty house, allowing "his dizzy, jogging mind to indulge in a cruel delusion: it had all been a nightmare; he would round this next bend and see the lights blazing in his own house; he would run inside and find her at the ironing board, or curled up on the sofa with a magazine."¹⁴⁰ Frank's hope is, however, dashed on entering the house since his house has just turned into haunted space, looming "long and milkwhite in the moonlight, with black windows, the only darkened house on the road."¹⁴¹ As Foster explains, it is ironic that Frank is only able to appreciate the safety and comfort of his suburban house "through a literal separation from his domestic arrangements" and only after his wife's death which releases him "from the ideological hostility he feels towards the suburban environment."¹⁴² His change of mind, however, comes too late since the happy domesticity he failed to construct and appreciate while April was alive is gone forever with her passing. Since the neighborhood where the Wheelers live "had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy" and Frank, "running down these streets in desperate grief was indecently out of place," Yates conveys a sense of Frank's way of dealing with the trauma of fresh bereavement by the way he obsessively cleans up the house to remove any traces of April's fatal act, imagining her voice that gives him cleaning instructions that guide him through the task.¹⁴³ His head continues "to ring with the sound of her voice," until Shep Campbell stops by and looks for Frank inside the house. Like a child, Frank hides in a closet but when Shep leaves, Frank discovers that April's voice is gone, the illusion of feeling her presence in the house is lost.¹⁴⁴ Afterward, he and his children move away as April's absence is too crushing to bear.

Frank's and April's denigration of the suburban house and community to which Yates devotes so much coverage in the novel seems a conventional nod of the author to the dominant 1950s pattern of suburbia-bashing in multiple works of social criticism and fiction.

¹³⁹ *RR*, 235-6.

¹⁴⁰ *RR*, 277.

¹⁴¹ *RR*, 277.

¹⁴² Foster, "Escaping the Split-Level Trap," 61.

¹⁴³ *RR*, 277-8.

¹⁴⁴ *RR*, 278-9.

According to John Archer, such formulaic dismissal of 1950s suburbia as conformist hell is not tenable despite the fact such views on

suburban homogeneity appeared to demonstrate a connection between the built environment and how the identities of those who lived there were shaped. It is a connection that, while largely fallacious, has remained remarkably potent in the evaluation of suburbia up to the present day: [namely, the claim] that standardized housing and demographic uniformity [of postwar suburban communities] produce a populace that is at best drearily homogeneous, or at worst made up of morbidly conformist, compliant drones.¹⁴⁵

Elsewhere, Archer makes a more sustained case for the defense of the promise of American suburbia as a late, heterogeneous frontier for social mobility and realization of the American Dream by claiming that

a crucial aspect of [the promise of suburbia], which is embraced by many who move willingly to suburbia and like it, and correspondingly misunderstood by the critics is the instrumentality that suburbia affords for the production of selfhood, family, neighborhood, and wider social relations.¹⁴⁶

Contrary to what early readers and later major critics of American suburban fiction like Catherine Jurca and Robert Beuka argue,¹⁴⁷ the role of the 1950s suburban setting in serving as complementary to the tragic story in novels such as *Revolutionary Road* is incidental, not primary. As Foster documents, even such classic 1950s novels of suburban discontent as Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and Yates's *Revolutionary Road* resist "the idea of suburbia as a standardised, overwhelmingly white middle-class environment" and to interpret the suburban setting as conducive to the dispossession and victimization of the characters in suburban fiction is misleading and reductive.¹⁴⁸ McGinley shares this view, arguing that "a reading of Yates' texts from a perspective of suburban indictment severely limits and restricts our understanding of his work" and especially *Revolutionary Road* "advances a cautionary appraisal of suburbia in which beliefs about its supposed effects on its inhabitants are, in fact, more destructive than the move itself."¹⁴⁹

Arguably, the suburban environment being portrayed in *Revolutionary Road* and other notable 1950s works of literature is diverse, stimulating, and offers a wide range of self-

¹⁴⁵ John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690-2000* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 311.

¹⁴⁶ John Archer, "Everyday Suburbia: Lives and Practices," *Public: Art/Culture/Ideas* 43 (2011): 25.

¹⁴⁷ See Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3-19; and Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 1-22.

¹⁴⁸ Foster, "Escaping the Split-Level Trap," 28.

¹⁴⁹ McGinley, "Richard Yates: Re-writing Postwar American Culture," 121-2.

realization options to the people who live there. It is the misfortune of the Wheelers that they remain willfully blind to these opportunities for the diverse ways to build and enjoy their suburban experience. As Foster documents, *Revolutionary Road* is a novel which

represents the emergence of postwar suburb as one facet of an intense period of socio-cultural change and [...] its alleged restrictions are largely generated in the minds of the two central characters, husband and wife, Frank and April Wheeler.¹⁵⁰

When shown their house by Mrs. Givings, Frank and April take an instant dislike of the picture window which is portrayed as the symbol of everything that is wrong with suburbia and with the definition of privacy in suburban homes: “Of course [the house] does have the picture window; I guess there’s no escaping that.”¹⁵¹ When Frank responds with the belief that “I don’t believe one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities,” their move to the house is agreed-upon. By inference, the marriage of April and Frank had been unstable before the move, yet “they could fancy themselves at home here.”¹⁵² Moreover, the new house is portrayed as a safe haven for the young couple since “Who could be frightened in as wide and bright, as clean and quiet a house as this?”¹⁵³ Ironically, the Wheelers as postwar suburbanites are portrayed as modern-day pioneers who come to the suburbs on the impulse shared with the Pilgrim Fathers, who, according to D. H. Lawrence, “came [to America] largely to get away [...] from themselves.”¹⁵⁴ Like the Pilgrims, the Wheelers move to the new environment, in their case, to the Connecticut suburbs, to escape their problems which are of mental rather than social nature. Through the initial optimism and high hopes that the Wheelers have for their relocation to the suburbs, Yates also pays homage to the dominant critique of mid-20th century American suburbanization as millions of American families took the same step in the 1950s, hoping to improve the quality of their lives while their effort was unjustly denigrated, according to John Archer, by many social critics as a move towards “a terrain of aesthetic and psychic abjection.”¹⁵⁵ As I will show below, Yates’s use of the suburban environment to have the protagonists define their identity in relation to it, is ambivalent rather than dismissive of the suburban ideal of family togetherness and happy domesticity. As C. Wright Mills explains, in *White Collar*, middle-class Americans by the 1950s faced problems with self-definition and identity that had less to do with material want and more with understanding their situation in “more psychological

¹⁵⁰ Foster, “Escaping the Split-Level Trap,” 49.

¹⁵¹ *RR*, 29.

¹⁵² *RR*, 29.

¹⁵³ *RR*, 29.

¹⁵⁴ D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Tomas Seltzer, 1928), 5, https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Lawrence_Studies_in_Classic_American_Literature.pdf.

¹⁵⁵ Archer, “Everyday Suburbia,” 24.

terms.”¹⁵⁶ It is for the social dimension of *Revolutionary Road* that its protagonists are very much products of their time whose private struggle is best understood in the wider social context of postwar suburbanization in the United States.

The picture window in the Wheeler house is both a visual barrier that imprisons the people inside the house while allowing the people outside to peek in. According to Benjamin Christopher Stroud, the picture window reflects the anxieties of the inhabitants of the house since it “suggests a conformity-inducing surveillance in which everyone can watch everyone else from the comfort of their own living room” while it also functions “as a synecdoche of for the mass-produced suburb and all the fears and anxieties it ushers in,” reflecting the Wheelers’ self-consciousness in suburbia and their “worry about suburban life.”¹⁵⁷ By implication, the Wheelers are only too apt to blame outside forces and external objects including the picture window for their inability to embrace a married lifestyle of commitment and responsibility as they keep craving for a more glorious and exciting life elsewhere.

In a flashback, Yates reveals that the motivation for the Wheelers and their friends the Campbells to take part in the Laurel Players production originated during one of their meetings, while both couples would sit, drink and “see themselves as members of an embattled, dwindling intellectual underground” whose task it is to expose the conformist sameness and intellectual deficiency of the suburban community.¹⁵⁸ Frank would develop the topic by claiming that the boring and conformist lifelessness of their neighbors

wouldn’t be so bad if it weren’t so typical. It isn’t only the Donaldsons—it’s the Cramers too, and the whaddyacallits, the Wingates, and a million others. It’s all the idiots I ride with on the train every day. It’s a disease. Nobody thinks or feels or cares any more; nobody gets excited or believes in anything except their own comfortable little God damn mediocrity.¹⁵⁹

When Frank launches his typical anti-suburban diatribe, the Campbells join him in their sanctimonious evaluation of their community, both couples feeling ostracized yet together in feeling “painfully alive in a drugged and dying culture.”¹⁶⁰ As Daly reminds, such a self-congratulatory attitude allows Frank to reinforce his “image of the shrewd, canny intellectual” while his accusation of others’ mediocrity rings hollow as he remains “safe in the comfort of his stable but unchallenging job, and decent but unremarkable home” in a position which allows him to play the superior suburbanite who “faces no risk in doing

¹⁵⁶ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), xx.

¹⁵⁷ Benjamin Christopher Stroud, “Perilous Landscapes: The Postwar Suburb in Twentieth-Century American Fiction” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2009), 48-9, <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/63658>.

¹⁵⁸ *RR*, 53.

¹⁵⁹ *RR*, 54.

¹⁶⁰ *RR*, 54.

so.”¹⁶¹ Moreover, Leif Bull argues that in *Revolutionary Road*, “the suburban environment is repeatedly mocked and criticized as a contaminating influence” as the Wheelers blame their problems on the suburbs even though these problems, including their marital discord, “were fully developed long before [the Wheelers] moved there.”¹⁶² Bull also explains how the novel “stages both a critique and a metacritique: a critique of both the suburbs and of popular critiques of the suburbs,”¹⁶³ as the criticism of suburbia by the characters in *Revolutionary Road* reflects the social criticism of the era while calling attention to the irony of the failure of the characters to see through their delusions about suburban contamination of their identities with deadening boredom and conformity. These feelings have little to do with the suburban environment and everything to do with the Wheeler’s neurotic sensibilities. This attitude has grave implications for those who embrace it. As Foster explains, when Frank and April feel smugly superior in the suburban environment, their very hostility and pride makes them “abnegate any facility for reshaping their suburban world.”¹⁶⁴ Jamie C. Saucier even claims Frank Wheeler’s anti-suburban tirades are “so earnest and over the top that they approach satire,” with Frank becoming

what he despises [ie a conformist] and fails to realize it. He is a cliché who consistently fails to meet the challenges of his professed worldview in living his own life. His affair, the attitude toward his job that contradicts [...] the mindless comfort he finds in it [...] are Yates’s indictment of American manhood [...] Frank is [...] the knowing and willing conformist who professed to know better but succumbed anyway because of the control, power, and comfort conformity offered.¹⁶⁵

Even April Wheeler is not immune to self-deception when it comes to seeing herself in suburbia. In a fit of insight whose meaning she fails to understand, April tells Frank what they both really are—participants in the conformist suburban lifestyle that they choose to hate and denigrate since their favorite anti-suburban identity construction is “based on this great premise of ours that we’re somehow very special and superior to the whole thing, and I wanted to say ‘But we’re not! Look at us! We’re just like the people you’re talking about! We *are* the people you’re talking about!’”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ Daly, “Why Is Your Brand Crisis?”, 50.

¹⁶² Leif Bull, “A Thing Made of Words: The Reflexive Realism of Richard Yates” (PhD diss., University of London, 2010), 236, https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/4760/1/ECL_Bull_thesis_2010.pdf.

¹⁶³ Bull, “A Thing Made of Words,” 236.

¹⁶⁴ Foster, “Escaping the Split-Level Trap,” 65.

¹⁶⁵ Jamie C. Saucier, “Cul-de-Sac Culture: The Suburban Discourse in America, 1945-1975” (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2012), 186, <https://urresearch.rochester.edu/institutionalPublicationPublicView.action?institutionalItemId=26222>.

¹⁶⁶ *RR*, 96.

In *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm notes that conformity is a natural human reaction which actually goes together with the desire to be liked and accepted in society:

Why should anyone be so grateful for acceptance unless he doubts that he is acceptable, and why should a young, educated, successful couple have such doubts, if not due to the fact that they cannot accept themselves—because they are not themselves. The only haven for having a sense of identity is conformity. Being acceptable really means not being different from anybody else. Feeling inferior stems from feeling different, and no question is asked whether the difference is for the better or the worse.¹⁶⁷

When the Fromm perspective on conformity is applied to the Wheelers, it is clear that their sanctimonious crusade to be different and superior does not only prevent their wellbeing but is also the very basis of their problem—the more different from their neighbors they feel, the more unsatisfied they are doomed to get in maintaining this position. It is a vicious circle of suburban identity affirmation and denial which plagues April and Frank and contributes to their inability to enjoy their domestic and community roles.

When April builds on her rare moment of self-awareness of being complicit in the conformist suburban narrative, she uses the occasion to outline her naïve but earnest plan for “going to Europe ‘for good’ in the fall,”¹⁶⁸ the irony is that she builds her case on unrealistic expectations about her and Frank’s ability to succeed in a foreign culture and on the superficial information about life and work abroad that she has read about in a popular magazine.¹⁶⁹ April’s plan is also based on her misreading of Frank’s nostalgic, idealized memories of Europe as cultured haven for connoisseurs and “the only part of the world worth living in.”¹⁷⁰ Frank first laughs April’s plan off, then has practical objections, until, when April sells the idea to him as a project that would enable him find his true essence and exercise his manhood in their relationship, he makes love to her and agrees to go along since “the past could dissolve at his will and so could the future; so could the walls of this house and the whole imprisoning wasteland beyond it, towns and trees.”¹⁷¹ As Castronovo explains, by this point, the Wheelers feel “marooned in suburbia with their particular limitations [...] the place itself makes them [...] inert and garrulous, lonelier and [...] self-deluding” while they “have the excuse to whine and complain, and be cynical and intellectually snobbish and ultimately self-destructive.”¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Fawcett, 1955), 140.

¹⁶⁸ *RR*, 94.

¹⁶⁹ *RR*, 94-5.

¹⁷⁰ *RR*, 22.

¹⁷¹ *RR*, 100-1.

¹⁷² David Castronovo, *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s that Made American Culture*. (New York: Continuum, 2005), 192.

April's self-induced abortion at the end of the novel is presented as a situation in which a character has a chance to prove their authenticity yet fails, as April is unable to appreciate the true value of her family, house, and social connections. Refusing to complete her pregnancy and proceed with the European plan on Frank's terms, with the new child a few years later, April opts to kill herself. The irony, again, is in Yates exposing the unrealistic nature of April's justification for the abortion to the reader—she believes her act is going to be something “absolutely honest, something true,” a lonely and defiant manifestation of her independence and strength, yet it turns out to be a useless, destructive act of self-deception, a neurotic manifestation of frustration that is triggered by her crushing realization of having misunderstood everything in her life.¹⁷³

When Bernard J. Paris wonders whether Edna Pontellier's decision to drown herself at the end of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is “a victory or a defeat, a triumph over the forces that would thwart her authenticity of the consequence of psychological problems that compel her to destroy herself,”¹⁷⁴ the same question could be asked about the decision of April Wheeler to end her life at the end of *Revolutionary Road*. Like Edna, April knows what she is doing and she is not exactly a victim of her situation but a maker of it based on a mixture of false and delusionary beliefs about her position in her family and neighborhood. As Paris aptly documents, Edna in Chopin's novel is “driven to suicide [...] by her inner conflicts,”¹⁷⁵ which is motivation that might also be used to explain the April's decision to end her life. However, there are important differences between the motivation of Edna and April. Paris explains that Edna's decision is based on her realization that she “cannot resolve her inner conflict between the need to be absolutely free and the need to fulfill her responsibilities as a mother.”¹⁷⁶ April, like Edna, feels imprisoned in her inability to negotiate the conflicting needs to be free and responsible at the same time. What distinguishes Edna from April is the latter's disturbing lack of consideration when it comes to the way her suicide might affect her husband and especially her children.¹⁷⁷

Seen in historical context, April's self-abortion is not just an act of deluded self-destruction. It could also be interpreted as a desperate response to the limited choices that pregnant women had in America of the mid-1950s when they got pregnant yet did not wish to bear their children. As Daly reminds, at the time, “abortion was [still] illegal in the United

¹⁷³ See *RR*, 261-2. Interestingly, while there is little similarity between April Wheeler and Emily Grimes (the protagonist of *The Easter Parade*), Emily's final utterance in Yates's 1976 novel is something similar to April's fatal realization: “I've never understood anything in my whole life.” See Richard Yates, *The Easter Parade*, In *Revolutionary Road; The Easter Parade; Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 475.

¹⁷⁴ Paris, *Imagined Human Beings*, 215.

¹⁷⁵ Paris, *Imagined Human Beings*, 216.

¹⁷⁶ Paris, *Imagined Human Beings*, 235.

¹⁷⁷ Interestingly, Paris interprets Edna's suicide in *The Awakening* as “a way not only of eluding her children but also of fulfilling her responsibility to them.” See Paris, *Imagined Human Beings*, 235.

States [...] and the contraceptive pill was not yet available, which highlights the depths of [April's] desperation."¹⁷⁸ Thus, if a woman found out she was pregnant in the mid-1950s and she did not want the child, her options were very limited. She could get an illegal abortion, which was risky, or she had to give birth to the child. April decides to administer her abortion herself, harboring the naive idea of considering the procedure "a thing women did every day in perfect safety" and deluding herself further that "the girl at school had done it twice at least. [...] This way, though, being able to time it so closely and everything, it's the safest thing in the world."¹⁷⁹ While Yates makes her motive for the act vague and ambiguous, we might read April's fatal decision in two ways. First, it is a desperate mid-1950s housewife's action taken to win her a measure of self-respect and regain control over her body—at a time when contraception methods for women were limited. While condoms had been in use for years, men in stable relationships typically would not use them and the women's only preventive measures would be diaphragm use (which was often not effective), the contraceptive pill was only approved for widespread use in 1960, a few years after the story of *Revolutionary Road*. Abortions were widely practiced, but on an illegal basis and with high risks of complications (they were only made legal US-wide in 1973, following the *Roe v. Wade* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court). As May documents, since to obtain a legal abortion by the 1950s was possible but very difficult, there was a "thriving underground business [as part of which physicians as well as underqualified abortionists] provided illegal and often dangerous abortions to an estimated two hundred and fifty thousand to 1 million women each year during the postwar years."¹⁸⁰

April's decision to abort her child, seen within the context of the options pregnant women had in the 1950s, evokes more sympathy than the mere psychological analysis of her character offers. Her plight was not, however, exceptional, even within American fiction of the time. As Karen Weingarten explains, the decision of Yates to build the plot of his first novel on the problem of a woman's illegal abortion was shocking but already represented in several other works of American literature.¹⁸¹

Frank Wheeler is a person with vague notions of his own greatness and authenticity, yet the origin of his problems is different from those of his wife's. Like April, Frank has been formed by a traumatic childhood, during which his father repeatedly humiliated him for being clumsy. Moreover, there was a general lack of parental affection for their youngest

¹⁷⁸ Daly, "Why Is Your Brand Crisis?," 55.

¹⁷⁹ *RR*, 189.

¹⁸⁰ May, *Homeward Bound*, 145.

¹⁸¹ Karen Weingarten, *Abortion in the American Imagination: Before Life and Choice, 1880-1940* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 141. As texts exploring the theme of illicit abortion, Weingarten mentions *Detective Story*, a 1949 play by Sidney Kingsley, John Barth's 1958 novel *The End of the Road*, and John Updike's novel *Rabbit, Run* (1960), among others.

son.¹⁸² As a result, Frank grows up a neurotic whose anxiety is conveyed through Yates's physical description of hands. Facing a dramatic situation, Frank's stock response includes nail-biting and fist-chewing until his hands are "bloated and pale" and feel as if "all their bones had been painlessly removed."¹⁸³

Frank is portrayed as a person full of opposites, a curious mixture of self-confident poseur and nail-biting neurotic whose anxiety about his own performance as a social being and whose hunger for the approval of others force him to act in an aggressive and manipulative manner. Seen from the Horneyan perspective on character pathology, Frank suffers from the neurotic need to reduce his anxiety by wielding power over other people which he tries to accomplish by pretentious posturing, persuasive talk, and domination of the women whose respect and devotion he craves. McGinley concurs, arguing that Frank "attempts to reaffirm his masculinity according to a strictly hetero-normative code, pursuing the sexual and psychological submission of his partners as a means of control."¹⁸⁴ From this perspective, Frank's treatment of April and his mistress Maureen is identical in the cruel exploitation of his gendered privilege by acting as the macho chauvinist, a role Frank thinks is socially prescribed for him and which he tries to pull off.

Unlike April, Frank does not withdraw from society or his family roles, since his interpretation of the male identity at work and at home includes the need to showcase his masculine strength and conversationalist prowess to other people at all times. There is also an element of narcissism to Frank since he loves to assume movie-star poses as if he were onstage, striking cool manly poses for April's sake or practicing these in front of the mirror wherever he is unobserved. This happens notably at the beginning of the novel, when Frank comes to pick up his wife to her dressing room after the play and is caught by April as he "looked at himself in the mirror, tightening his jaw and turning his head a little to one side to give it a leaner, more commanding look, the face he had given himself in mirrors since boyhood and which no photograph had ever quite achieved, until with a start he found that she was watching him."¹⁸⁵ According to Charlton-Jones, the voyeurism of Yates's characters like Frank Wheeler is a way in which the author presents the inability of the characters to "identify honesty in either their own behavior or that of others" and this "indifference to truth" is an uncomfortable perspective that Yates often uses in his fiction, being "unable to ignore" the "inauthentic social interaction" of his characters.¹⁸⁶ Although Frank refuses to act himself in the Laurel Players production, as Charlton-Jones documents, he often feels

¹⁸² *RR*, 33-34.

¹⁸³ *RR*, 32.

¹⁸⁴ McGinley, "Richard Yates: Re-writing Postwar American Culture," 162.

¹⁸⁵ *RR*, 17.

¹⁸⁶ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 17-18.

like “the star in his own film”¹⁸⁷ whose love for his wife depends on his belief in her perennial beauty and superior acting skills that, in turn, might bring social recognition to him in his position of proud and respected husband. When this belief is shattered with failure of the opening night performance, Frank is hurt to suddenly see his wife without embellishment, as “the graceless, suffering creature whose existence he tried every day of his life to deny but whom he knew as well and as painfully as he knew himself, a gaunt constricted woman whose red eyes flashed reproach”¹⁸⁸ while he himself is exposed in his foolish pretension at social superiority within the audience of his conformist neighbors, feeling “his own sore feet, his own damp clinging underwear and his own sour smell.”¹⁸⁹ For Frank and April, the importance of presenting a falsely positive and glamorous image of themselves is a necessity that keeps them from mentally going overboard. As Charlton-Jones explains, “what Frank wants here is a fiction, a wife that time and experience hasn’t touched” but neither he nor his wife, although both are trying to perform to the best of their ability, are “equal to the roles they have chosen.”¹⁹⁰ April fails in her roles of amateur actress, caring mother, and submissive wife, while Frank does not manage to provide her with a happy and sustainable vision of the future of their relationship and himself as the solid, dependable husband and a pillar of strength in their home.

Daly argues that Frank Wheeler is a victim of delusion about his uniqueness as he “repeatedly invokes a desire to remain immune to the damaging forces of mass society and consumerism” while being unable to define his identity “in any way that did not relate to his job, his family, or his home. He has no identifiable talents or abilities beyond a striking capacity to talk a good talk.”¹⁹¹ Although Frank likes to strike poses of manly coolness to impress others, especially his wife, it is the neurotic damage to his hands that betray the degree of his anxiety in ways that seriously undermine the overall effect of his self-confident body posturing.

Another stock reaction that Frank repeatedly resorts to during conflicts and stressful situations is physical violence. At the end of April’s opening night performance, Frank looks “at [his hands], and particularly at the bitten-down nails that never in his life had had a chance to grow,” while he wants “to beat and bruise them against the edge of the sink.”¹⁹² Frank remembers the solid skillfulness of his father’s hands which were marked, unlike his own, by “sureness and sensitivity [...] and the aura of mastery they imparted to everything,”¹⁹³

¹⁸⁷ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 19.

¹⁸⁸ *RR*, 15.

¹⁸⁹ *RR*, 15.

¹⁹⁰ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 20.

¹⁹¹ Daly, “Why Is Your Brand Crisis?“, 48.

¹⁹² *RR*, 32-3.

¹⁹³ *RR*, 33.

contrasting sharply with Frank's history of failing to handle tools properly as a boy, which earned his father's disdain. Later, as an adult, Frank prefers to spend his leisure time talking and drinking rather than being a proper 1950s male suburbanite who uses his hands to make repairs and improvements around the house. Through the difference between Frank's and his father's hands, Yates portrays the animosity Frank feels for his parents. Even when his father dies, Frank ruefully remembers the image of his father's hands which "lay loose and still on the hospital sheet" and which "still looked stronger and better than his son's."¹⁹⁴ Frank grows up to be a lonely, naïve dreamer who hopes to become somebody memorable, authentic, and exceptional since, as Castronovo and Goldleaf explain, "you're never a jerk if you're pursuing a lyrical dream," which, in Frank's case, remains vague and undefined until the end of the novel.¹⁹⁵ At age 14, Frank spends "all his free time in a plan for riding the rails to the West Coast," only to have his dream of an adventurous escape westward dashed by a school friend who ridicules Frank's naiveté and calls him a jerk.¹⁹⁶ To outgrow his adolescent trauma of being always humiliated at home and by his peers, Frank later joins the army, sees battle action in World War II, and, after his discharge, moves to New York to study at Columbia using the GI Bill benefits.¹⁹⁷ During this time he starts to wear "the proud mantles of "veteran" and "intellectual" as bravely [...] as his carefully aged tweed jacketed and washed-out khakis."¹⁹⁸ His carefully practiced posturing of "an intense, nicotine-stained, Jean-Paul Sartre sort of man" and his barroom wisecracking start to win girlfriends and drinking buddies while

various ultimate careers were predicted for him, the consensus being that his work would lie somewhere "in the humanities" if not precisely in the arts [...] something that called for a long and steadfast dedication—and that it would involve his early and permanent withdrawal to Europe, which he often described as the only part of the world worth living in.¹⁹⁹

When Frank meets April, she is won over by his worldly talk and performative self-confidence and immediately becomes his girlfriend, which pleases Frank for two reasons. The first reason is the fact that April is beautiful and glamorous, an "exceptionally first-rate girl" that he gets to date, which pleases his masculine vanity. The other reason is the fact that April instantly takes to liking Frank's wise guy criticism of postwar American and becomes his most devoted listener.

¹⁹⁴ *RR*, 35.

¹⁹⁵ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 42.

¹⁹⁶ *RR*, 18-19.

¹⁹⁷ *RR*, 21-23.

¹⁹⁸ *RR*, 21.

¹⁹⁹ *RR*, 22.

By the time of his marriage to April, Frank has become, to his parents, “an ungrateful, spiteful, foul-mouthed weakling, boozing his way through Greenwich Village with God only knew what kind of companions.”²⁰⁰ After his young wife gets pregnant, Frank scornfully starts looking for a well-paying job that would bring “enough dough coming in” while its dullness would not destroy his identity of a self-proclaimed anti-establishment rebel who only needs a job until he can “figure things out.”²⁰¹ He further defines the undemanding job of his dreams to a friend as follows:

I want something that can't possible touch me. I want some big, swollen, old corporation that's been bumbling along making money in its sleep for a hundred years, where they have to hire eight guys for every one job because none of them can be expected to care about whatever boring thing it is they're supposed to be doing. [...] Look, you can have my body and my nice college-boy smile for so many hours a day, in exchange for so many dollars, and beyond that we'll leave each other strictly alone.²⁰²

Despite the naive notions of joining the corporate world of the 1950s without being contaminated by its culture, Frank succeeds in getting the job he wanted, and he is overjoyed to realize that his new office job in the sales promotion department of Knox Business Machines is the realization of an unfulfilled dream of his father who used to work for the same company for years but failed to get the desired promotion from regional salesman to the headquarters in New York. After the failure of the Laurel Players play, Frank resorts to self-congratulatory smugness as he downplays the play's importance for his wife since, for him, the play's failure “wasn't worth feeling bad about” as he believes that intelligent people like himself and his wife might preserve their superiority despite “the larger absurdities of deadly dull jobs in the city and deadly dull homes in the suburbs” since “the important thing was to keep from being contaminated [...] to remember who you were.”²⁰³ Ironically, the identity of Frank and April is defined by their participation in the suburban narrative of leading a conformist, family-oriented life, not by their resistance to it.

Through the portrait of the power struggle between April and Frank over dominance within their family, Yates seems to address a growing 1950s concern with “a decline of masculinity” that was perceived in the suburban lifestyle at the time.²⁰⁴ As McGinley

²⁰⁰ *RR*, 60.

²⁰¹ *RR*, 67.

²⁰² *RR*, 67.

²⁰³ *RR*, 21.

²⁰⁴ On this, see Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “The Crisis of American Masculinity,” *Esquire*, November 1958, 62-63; James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 62-80; and *The Decline of the American Male*, (New York: Random, 1958), the last publication bringing three satirical essays on the subject of suburban emasculation of 1950s men by editors of *Look* magazine.

explains, the parallel development to the growing masculinity crisis in the 1950s was the notion of “shifting sexual politics of the decade, wherein the increased autonomy of the female figure—both professionally and sexually—constituted a threat to the postwar American male.”²⁰⁵ Unlike the earlier explorers of masculine identity in American literature, such as William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, for Yates and other 1950s authors like Sloan Wilson and John Updike, “the newly domesticated [suburban] male was now seen as a [unmasculine] counterpoint to the more physically robust man of the early 20th century.”²⁰⁶ Frank Wheeler is thus a typical 1950s suburban male whose identity is threatened by his wife’s powerful presence in their home and her vague and impossible demands on him which he can neither understand nor satisfy. When April repeatedly refuses to have sex with Frank and leaves the bedroom to sleep on the living room sofa, Frank feels emasculated and seeks solace in the arms of Maureen, a younger woman from his office. From the feminist perspective, Frank is a male-chauvinist whose only approach toward a woman is by way of sexual conquest, or by using his seductive ability to talk to win a woman’s respect and her submission in bed. When April refuses to listen to Frank’s endless disparaging of his colleagues at work or their suburban neighbors and moves out of the bedroom, he is helpless since there is no ready way for him to solve the domestic situation as a traditional man.

The degree of Frank’s masculinity crisis is highlighted when April first tells him of her European plan. What scares Frank the most is the fact that the plan’s implementation would include a radical reversal of their gendered roles of breadwinner and house-bound homemaker spouse. Frank has “a quick disquieting vision of [April] coming home from a day at the office—wearing a Parisian tailored suit, briskly pulling off her gloves—coming home and finding him hunched in an egg-stained bathrobe, on an unmade bed, picking his nose.”²⁰⁷ April’s unwitting appropriation of the masculine role of breadwinner who takes charge of the travel and work arrangements and whose job would feed the family is as troubling as Frank’s own inability to perceive himself as anything in Paris but a time-wasting couch potato without a plan. While Frank would prefer the status quo of coming back home to their American suburban house every weekday to relax and have a couple of drinks, April scares him with the vigor with which she goes to the city one day and manages to do a month’s worth of travel and employment arrangements for the European relocation until she realizes her mistake and apologizes to her husband: “It must seem is if I’m sort of taking over, doesn’t it—taking charge of everything.”²⁰⁸ By showing her quickness and effectivity outside the home, April humiliates Frank and shows him in a true light, as an inept hot air

²⁰⁵ McGinley, “Richard Yates: Re-writing Postwar American Culture,” 161.

²⁰⁶ McGinley, “Richard Yates: Re-writing Postwar American Culture,” 163-4.

²⁰⁷ *RR*, 95.

²⁰⁸ *RR*, 117.

talker who thrives on pretension but is afraid to take real action. Although Frank agrees to April's plan, he remains horrified by the way it would emasculate him—while he often complains about the dullness of his city job and the family weekends, he cannot think of giving up his gender role of breadwinner and seductive talker in his suburban household for a life Paris or anywhere else. However, as Daly explains, the narrative of 1950s crisis of masculinity is a limiting way to interpret the gender role changes since female characters in 1950s fiction like April Wheeler are habitually portrayed as affected by the changing requirements on the gender roles in the area of suburban domesticity.²⁰⁹ Margaret Marsh defines masculine domesticity, or, the greater involvement of men in the construction and maintenance of the suburban households in America, as the locus of the great social change that happened in late 19th and early 20th century. She argues that the traditional division of domestic roles into male breadwinner and female homemaker in middle-class American suburban households at the time witnessed a major restructuring, specifically, with the widespread adoption of

a model of behavior in which fathers would agree to take on increased responsibility for some of the day-to-day tasks of bringing up children and spending their time away from work in playing with their sons and daughters, teaching them, taking them on trips. A domestic man would also make his wife, rather than his male cronies, his regular companion on evenings out. And while he might not dust the mantel or make the bed except in special circumstances, he would take a significantly greater interest in the details of running the household and caring for the children that his father was expected to do.²¹⁰

Marsh further explains that the rise of masculine domesticity in American suburbs “offered an alternative to feminism: men would acknowledge the importance of the domestic sphere [...] by assuming specific responsibilities within it” while the suburb would serve “as the spatial context for [...] a new form of marriage” wherein “husbands and wives would be companions, not rivals, and the specter of individualist demands [of men and women in suburbia] would retreat in the face of family togetherness.”²¹¹ In a later book, *Suburban Lives*, Marsh traces the history of masculine domesticity up to the mid-20th century and concludes that from the 1920s to the 1950s, “masculine domesticity [in American suburbs] began to degenerate” in the face of greater demands placed upon the men to again focus on providing for their suburban families while the women resumed their traditional roles of principal homemakers. By the 1950s, there was a return to the “idea of togetherness” in

²⁰⁹ Daly, “Why Is Your Brand Crisis?“, 177.

²¹⁰ See Margaret Marsh, “Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870-1915,” *American Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (June 1988): 166.

²¹¹ Marsh, “Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity,” 181.

American suburbs, including a rise of “male participation in playing with the children, some husbandly “help“ around the house in the form of lawn mowing, taking out the trash, and cleaning the garage, and a social life in which couples went out together.”²¹² In *Revolutionary Road*, this pattern of adult socialization is documented through the friendship of the Wheelers with the Campbells, two couples who share their sense of being sanctimonious suburbanites and visit each other regularly to drink, talk, and, occasionally, dance at a local bar.

According to James Gilbert, the narrative of 1950s in suburbia is related to a crisis of masculinity which “represented a persuasive way to retell the story of American social development”²¹³ as the decade saw many diverse developments in the suburban communities of which the redefinition of the gender roles of men and women was just one. It is important to note, however, that April Wheeler is no feminist radical—her refusal to please Frank in bed and to listen to his ranting should not be read as a political call towards radical change in American women’s lives that Betty Friedan called for in *The Feminine Mystique*. Rather, according to Daly, April tries to carve an identity of her own in the general 1950s confusion about the gender roles of men and women within suburban families as the “crisis that was supposedly unique to white, middle-class men, had just as much of an effect on their female counterparts.”²¹⁴ As May documents, the domestic space in postwar suburbia “was an arena of work for women and leisure for men” with the women having to “fulfill a wide range of occupational roles” within the family that included those of “early-childhood educator, counselor, cook, nurse, housekeeper, manager, and chauffeur.”²¹⁵ When the woman wanted any diversion from these duties, she had to accomplish this “through volunteer or community work or even through employment outside the home.”²¹⁶ In April’s case, her active involvement in the Laurel Players production makes sense as her rare chance to participate in an away-from-home social activity that provides interaction with other members of the community promises social recognition while she is able to rekindle her acting ambition that she had to put aside after she got married. The options of men in the 1950s were, of course, more diverse than those of women, as is evident in the example of Frank Wheeler. As May documents, American men after WW II felt it necessary to remain “the unchallenged heads of their households.”²¹⁷ When April challenges Frank’s dominant position in their household, he seeks to maintain its vestiges outside the home where he still can succeed—at work, drinking with colleagues from work, and through starting an affair with Maureen.

²¹² Margaret Marsh, *Suburban Lives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 186.

²¹³ Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 11.

²¹⁴ Daly, “Why Is Your Brand Crisis?“, 126.

²¹⁵ May, *Homeward Bound*, 176.

²¹⁶ May, *Homeward Bound*, 176.

²¹⁷ May, *Homeward Bound*, 86.

All of these options for getting recognition of his masculinity outside the home are denied to his wife, whose domestic performance is the only arena she can excel in since she shows little interest in any community work and does not seem to want to start working in a paid job outside the home.²¹⁸

Revolutionary Road is a suburban novel whose thematic and dramatic complexity merits multiple readings and interpretations. It has been often misread as a formulaic 1950s suburban story in which the conformist suburban setting, lifestyle, and community are to blame for the Wheelers' downfall and April's suicide. As I have argued here, Yates's portrayal of 1950s Connecticut suburbia is more complex, diverse, and ambivalent than the critics of suburban conformity claim. Similarly, to read the novel just as an example of victimization of the protagonists whose tragic downfall is caused by their life in a conformist suburban environment is too simplistic since this view disregards the diversity of postwar suburban communities and the complex psychological reasons that impel April and Frank to resist assimilation into the community and to reject the benefits of the suburban lifestyle. Castronovo and Goldleaf argue that regardless of the setting in which the story is located (in utilizes the American city, suburb and Europe), the characters in *Revolutionary Road* "are in the grip of intense desires, yet their passions flag when they are confronted with the arduous task of making them into realities."²¹⁹ Ultimately, the destructive way the Wheelers feel about their suburban lives is, according to Stroud, "less about the suburb[an environment itself] than [about] their desire to claim an elite intellectual status superior to the middle-class masses their home implies they've joined. It's this implication, rather than suburban life [itself], that so disturbs them."²²⁰ The suburban setting of *Revolutionary Road* is thus an authorial vehicle for the dramatization of the characters' problems and dreams that happen to be related to the process of constructing their domestic and social identities. The one minor flaw in an otherwise perfect novel is in the relative lack of focus on April's character which perhaps reflects Yates's gender preference for exposing the inner thought of male characters (as well as the author's greater familiarity with male thinking). One thus learns little about April's motivation for her withdrawal from her family roles and later her development of the psychotic obsession with aborting her third pregnancy. April is portrayed by Yates as a self-centered person who often acts on her whims, ignoring the fact that she hurts the people around her. Yet, in her anxious unhappiness, April resembles the prototypical 1950s suburban housewife whose problems are denigrated as silly or nonexistent by her husband. As Friedan explains, in the 1950s, "for the first time in their

²¹⁸ The one exception is April's plan to start working as a secretary in Europe once after the Wheelers move there. Through Frank's initial ambivalent response to the plan, Yates makes April's dream come across as naive and unrealistic, corresponding to her immature ideas about parenthood and marriage.

²¹⁹ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 56.

²²⁰ Stroud, "Perilous Landscapes," 46.

history, women are becoming aware of and identity crisis in their own lives.”²²¹ In the case of April, her withdrawal and eventual suicide are a way of responding to a problematic situation of American women in the 1950s that Friedan calls “the feminine mystique,” namely, the inability of the women to deal with a feeling of vague dissatisfaction with their roles of mothers, wives, and homemakers. For April, her problem is in the fact that she realizes that “neither her husband nor her children, nor the things in her house, nor sex, nor being like all the other women, can give her a self.”²²² In the absence of a drive for finding an identity within her marriage, family, and community, April deceives herself into thinking that starting over in Paris is going to cure all problems that she and Frank have suffered from.

From the psychological perspective, April’s fatal decision to give up on life and proceed with the dangerous self-abortion (at a time she knows is past a safe abortion date) at the moment when she realizes the European plan has to be cancelled or postponed indefinitely functions as a re-enactment of her father’s suicide²²³ as well as a response to the realization that she is too unhappy and depressed to go on living. Yates’s focus in the portrait of the final stages of the April’s third pregnancy is still on Frank and his feelings and thoughts about the situation as he spends weeks mounting a careful persuasive campaign to force April into keeping her baby. As I have argued above, however, April should not be seen as a feminist radical who takes responsibility for her own body and future. Rather, Yates presents her obsession with terminating unwanted pregnancies as signs of neurotic immaturity that have little to do with the conformist atmosphere of the Connecticut suburbs they live in and all to do with her unstable personality whose development is traceable to her unhappy and affection-deprived childhood. Foster argues that April’s planned suicide is “less a result of [her] inability to perceive an existence beyond suburbia, and more about an inability to act upon her ambitions.”²²⁴

April’s death as the authorial way of closing the novel raises the thematic possibility of comparing *Revolutionary Road* to two earlier realist novels that feature a young, unhappy housewife who chooses to kill herself—*Madame Bovary* and *The Awakening*. While the comparison to Flaubert’s realist masterpiece has been done before, even by Yates himself,²²⁵ comparing the resolution of *Revolutionary Road* with *The Awakening*, while obvious, has

²²¹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 72.

²²² Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 326.

²²³ It has been proved that suicide bereavement has a negative effect on the survivors within the family as they often suffer from increased risk of depression, institutionalization, or even suicide. See Alexandra Pitman et al, “Effects of suicide bereavement on mental health and suicide risk,” *Lancet Psychiatry* 1, no. 1 (June 2014): 86-94.

²²⁴ Foster, “Escaping the Split-Level Trap,” 40.

²²⁵ See Richard Yates, “Some Very Good Masters,” *New York Times*, April 19 (1981), Section 7, 3.

not been done and merits inclusion here.²²⁶ Like Edna Pontellier of Chopin's *The Awakening*,²²⁷ April Wheeler has done all she could to live up to her utopian vision of becoming the glamorous woman of her husband's (and her own) dreams while the demands of motherhood, parenthood, and their household have forced her to become a tired conformist who prefers self-deception about her cultural and intellectual superiority as "the next thing you knew all honesty, all truth, was as far away and glimmering, as hopelessly unattainable as the world of the golden people."²²⁸ Trapped in the vicious circle of neurotic anxiety, April sees no way to cope with the crushing awareness of her ordinariness but an act of radical defiance to prove her worth to herself and, as she hopes, to Frank. Her final realization of the true nature of Frank's (and her own) pathetic self-deception and unwarranted suburban sanctimony destroys any "mist of romantic admiration" on whose strength she used to enjoy her husband's perennial anti-social ranting and, as Charlton-Jones documents, "the effect [of April's realization of these unpleasant truths] is devastating."²²⁹ Like Edna Pontellier, April realizes her whole life been wasted on self-deception, in her case being "earnest and sloppy and full of pretension and all wrong [...] and then you were face to face, in total darkness, with the knowledge that you didn't know who you were."²³⁰ Jerome Klinkowitz explains that April's tragic realization of her true identity, which grew out of her youthful family trauma and was later based on the naive embellishment of her husband's sanctimonious pretension, betrays the disturbing fact that Frank is not a proper man who deserves her respect, and "there is no real center to her existence, as of much of it has been composed in terms of hopelessly ideal [and harmful] reflections."²³¹ April is unable to transcend the gap between the idealized and real social roles to assume which, according to Charlton-Jones, is a condition which originates in the "difference encouraged by a society that asks its women to take second place to their male partners and to place a greater value on their needs and their ideas of themselves" which brings about, for an intelligent and ambitious woman like April, feelings of "loneliness, dissatisfaction, and resentment" caused by her feeling of having wasted her life, being "domestically imprisoned," and realizing, by the end of the novel, the sheer vacuity of her dreams about a glamorous and authentic life with Frank.²³²

²²⁶ For the full analysis of *The Awakening* and *Madame Bovary* from the psychological perspective, see Paris, *Imagined Human Beings*, 215-239.

²²⁷ For the final days of Edna Pontellier after she gives up on life see Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (Chicago: Stone and Company, 1899), 290-303, <https://ia803400.us.archive.org/9/items/awakeningthe00choprich/awakeningthe00choprich.pdf>.

²²⁸ RR, 261.

²²⁹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 23.

²³⁰ RR, 261-2.

²³¹ Jerome Klinkowitz, *The New American Novel of Manners: The Fiction of Richard Yates, Dan Wakefield, and Thomas McGuane* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 21-22.

²³² Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 158.

While *Revolutionary Road* could be read as a tragic story of shattered unrealistic dreams in postwar suburbia, there are in fact three characters who experience major insight into their situation, which complicates easy interpretations of the novel. These are April Wheeler, Frank Wheeler, and their friend Shep Campbell. The degree of their major change is, however, different for each character. April's awakening is to the realization of the crushing fact that she has done everything in her life for the wrong reasons and sees no future in trying further. For Frank, his a-ha moment comes when his unexpected success at work makes him realize the foolishness of April's European relocation dream and he comes to appreciate the value of his conformist job and suburban lifestyle that he used to denigrate earlier. It is, however, too late to make April see his late-found vision of conformity in suburbia as an existence to enjoy. In the case of Shep Campbell, he comes to respect his wife Milly's ordinariness and survivor skills which he finds preferable to the destructive charm of April Wheeler who used to be the subject of his lustful and romantic dreams. When Milly naively tells the people who have bought the Wheeler house after Frank has moved out that the experience of having to cope with losing the Wheelers has brought her and Shep "closer together," Shep at first angrily disagrees, then realizes that his wife is right. While Milly may have many faults and is not as glamorous, beautiful and intelligent as April was, she "goes on living" through any marital storm and fulfills her roles as a solid wife, mother, and homemaker the way April Wheeler never did.²³³ Other minor characters, such as Mrs. Givings or her son John do not change and their role in the novel is strictly as authorial devices that provide reflection on the actions of the Wheelers. Castronovo and Goldleaf argue that April is "perhaps Yates's most successfully rendered version of a collapsing identity. A highly attractive young woman with unfocused acting ambitions, she stumbles into marriage with sexy Frank Wheeler, another unformed New Yorker who talks brilliantly and can diagnose every social problem in the American 1950s but his own."²³⁴ It seems that April and Frank Wheeler act, as parents, partners, and social beings, in despicable and selfish ways. However, when perceived as victims of their emotional immaturity, their behavior becomes much more understandable. They both come from fractured families and grow up with a range of neurotic problems that precipitate their downfall. According to Foster, "Yates constructs Frank as a character who *is* possessed of the socio-spatial imagination and agency necessary to find fulfillment in the suburbs, so that staying put in Connecticut becomes in itself both a rewarding journey and a satisfying destination."²³⁵ Ironically, Frank does not realize, until after April is dead, that for all his anti-suburban ranting, he is at his best as the

²³³ *RR*, 285.

²³⁴ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 7.

²³⁵ Foster, "Escaping the Split-Level Trap," 61.

person who he most despises—the conformist suburbanite whose dismissal of the suburban lifestyle has no basis in fact—outside of his criticism of suburban conformity and ennui, he has no substance or a plan B for his life and marriage. Without admitting as much, Frank is vaguely aware of this incongruity, and that is why he at first rejects April’s European plan since it would expose him as a loud-talking impostor who is unable to live up to April’s idealized image of himself as the man who can handle any problem with movie-actor coolness. Dickstein regards *Revolutionary Road* as “a road novel in reverse, with the hero [Frank] secretly unwilling to go anywhere.”²³⁶ Frank’s travel is all mental, within the confines of his mind or his suburban living room. Seymour Lawrence, publisher of *Revolutionary Road*, praised the novel’s manuscript, especially the characterization of Frank Wheeler. He considered Frank to be “the prototype of thousands of young Americans who have been in the war, got married too early, began a family by mistake, taken a job which they are indifferent to, and then try to make their lives and marriages work.”²³⁷ However, Frank’s anti-suburban posturing only gets him so far and when April challenges him to support his talk with action, he backs off with fear and apprehension.

Revolutionary Road is set primarily in suburban Connecticut, yet Frank Wheeler also commutes daily to New York where he works. Like George Babbitt, the protagonist of Sinclair Lewis’s groundbreaking suburban novel, Frank is cast into a sequence of events that he is not able to influence or change. Accepting a job at Knox is how Frank tries to erase the effects of the trauma originated by his father’s habitual humiliation of Frank’s clumsiness and ineptitude. By getting an office job in the same corporation that denied his father promotion, Frank finally feels himself superior to his father, moreover, he also chooses to view his job with sanctimonious condescension: “The great advantage of a place like Knox is that you can sort of turn off your mind every morning at nine and leave it off all day, and nobody knows the difference.”²³⁸ However, Frank is aware that this attitude to life brings only angry desperation of a conformist man whose fate is to belong to the very same crowd of fellow commuters that he despises. While Frank finds a modicum of a true calling in the late-blooming success at his job in writing brochures, April is denied such an opportunity and feels increasingly more stifled by her domestic role. Unlike the typical 1950s American woman, April does not seek ways to spend her time creatively, doing community service, or by working away from home. When April realizes this void in her life, a crushing unwillingness to find joy in her domestic roles, especially “an abiding reluctance to bear children,”²³⁹ made worse by the realization that she has always misread Frank’s pretentious

²³⁶ Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple*, 137.

²³⁷ Quoted in Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 204.

²³⁸ *RR*, 69.

²³⁹ *RR*, 195.

intellectualism for sophisticated and lovable coolness, and after she has failed as an amateur actress, realizing her former admiration for Frank has turned to cold hatred, there is nothing left for her but to kill herself, a final act of defiant affirmation, however hollow and selfish it seems to Frank as well as to the reader.

The psychological approach to analyzing *Revolutionary Road* proves especially rewarding, for without using it one is left wondering what has happened to the Wheelers by the beginning of the story that their marriage seems on the rocks. Yates only reveals cursory information about April and Frank save the brief flashback memories to their lonely and unhappy childhoods that gave rise to their adult immaturity, selfishness, and neurotic responses to challenging situations. The cliché of blaming the suburban deadness, uniformity and conformity for their marital problems is thus exposed as only partially true since the suburban setting in *Revolutionary Road* is a backdrop but not the cause of the tragic ending of the protagonists. McGinley explains that through the characterization of Frank Wheeler, Yates

conflates and parodies the characteristic tropes that were seen as symptomatic of a move from the city. Yates shows how Frank's actions are motivated by, and founded upon, his stylized conception of an intellectual anti-suburbanite. Notions of what constitutes the prototypical antisuburbanite dominates his actions and Yates shows how his criticisms are misplaced, hollow, and pieced together from sociological commentaries of the time.²⁴⁰

Revolutionary Road is one of the greatest realist novels ever written, comparable to *Madame Bovary* and *The Great Gatsby*, or even better, since Yates's novel lacks Flaubert's nineteenth century descriptive lengthiness and Fitzgerald's occasional propensity for ornate rhetoric. By presenting April and Frank Wheeler as victims of their selfish and cruel delusions, Yates manages to tell a memorable story which transcends the easy attempts to situate it within the anti-suburban narratives of the 1950s social critics. Far from being a second-rate imitation of Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, Yates's novel is firmly rooted in a specific period of postwar suburbanization and society while retaining a general validity regarding its dramatic portrait of unhappy, dreaming characters whose delusion dooms them into rejecting their suburban identities and taking action which proves destructive or even fatal.

The drama of a failed suburban marriage and dreams unfulfilled, portrayed so memorably in *Revolutionary Road*, is a theme that Yates would return to in *Young Hearts Crying*, his longest novel, published in 1984.²⁴¹ It brings the sad account of the life of

²⁴⁰ McGinley, "Richard Yates: Re-writing Postwar American Culture," 122.

²⁴¹ See Richard Yates, *Young Hearts Crying* (New York: Vintage, 2009). Originally published in 1984. Hereinafter referred to as *YHC*.

Michael Davenport, a moderately successful poet who has problems with maintaining the aura of masculine self-confidence, and his wife Lucy, a lonely, reserved millionaire who falls in love with Michael but is forced to hide her inherited wealth and does not know, for years, what to do with her life. Castronovo and Goldleaf summarize the novel as “a sustained presentation of two Americans’ misfires: saying the wrong thing, promising what you can’t deliver, expecting the unreasonable, pursuing careers that never jell.”²⁴² Moreover, in this novel, Yates dramatizes what could be called “the irony of [failed] expectations,”²⁴³ as he presents the lives of the Davenports to the reader while exposing the naiveté of the dreams that the protagonists have. Anatole Broyard situates the novel within the classical realist tradition represented by F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, emphasizing the “moral indignation [of the characters in *Young Hearts Crying*], the mediocrity, emptiness and conformity [...] of American life itself.”²⁴⁴ Broyard further complains about the problem of characters in the novel which he finds “shrunk by realism, robbed of invention and reduced to bleak and repetitive rituals.”²⁴⁵ As Bailey argues, such denigration of the novel by a jealous former friend of the author is not fair since “a work of fiction is not to be condemned outright on the basis of unlikable characters.”²⁴⁶ Yates’s skill in presenting such characters as complex beings who face an unusual mixture of decisions involving issues of class, wealth, and success in the arts makes the novel worth one’s attention.

Young Hearts Crying begins in the late 1940s and ends in the 1970s. Much of the plot is situated within the postwar suburbs, a crucial background element of the story that helps reflect the major conflicts and themes. Exploration of the changing gender identities and class differences and the problematic social position of the artist in postwar American suburbs are other essential elements of the novel.

In many ways, *Young Hearts Crying* is a book in which Yates rewrites *Revolutionary Road* with a more expansive vision, utilizing a greater diversity of sociocultural themes. Yet there are also many similarities between the two novels regarding narrative structure, characterization, conflicts, and themes. For example, both novels are set in postwar American suburbia and both are formally divided into three sections. While the plot of

²⁴² Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 134.

²⁴³ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 121.

²⁴⁴ Anatole Broyard, “Two-Fisted Self Pity,” *New York Times Book Review*, October 28, 1984, section 7, 3. The personal and vicious element in Broyard’s damning review of *YHC* proved so damaging that Yates never came over this review till the end of his life. For more details, see Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 531-538.

²⁴⁵ Broyard, “Two-Fisted Self Pity,” 3.

²⁴⁶ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 535. As a development of this argument, it would mean that *Revolutionary Road* is to be dismissed too since hardly any of the protagonists (including April Wheeler, her husband Frank, Shep Campbell, and even minor characters like Mrs. Givings and her son John) could be deemed a ‘likable’ character. What salvages *Revolutionary Road* as well as *Young Hearts Crying* is Yates’s supreme skill in presenting vaguely unlikeable characters who may not have original ideas or dreams as actors in memorable dramatic situations.

Revolutionary Road is compressed into a single year in the mid-1950s, the timeframe of *Young Hearts Crying* spans three decades, allowing a more complex presentation of the protagonists from the naive days of their university study up to the realization of painful truths of life that come with reaching middle age. In the first section of *Young Hearts Crying*, Yates portrays the courtship of Michael Davenport and Lucy Blaine, their marriage, parenthood, move to the suburbs, and, by the end of the section, separation.²⁴⁷ In the second section, the focus shifts on Lucy's life after the breakup of her marriage and her succession of honest but failed attempts to find fulfilment in the pursuit of the arts as she tries, in turn, her hand at acting, fiction writing, and painting.²⁴⁸ In the third section, Yates again focuses on Michael and his life after the dissolution of his first marriage. Attention is paid to his subsequent affairs, mental breakdowns and a happy courtship and second marriage to Sarah Garvey.²⁴⁹ At the end of the third section, Michael pays an impromptu visit to Lucy after many years of separation and they share memories of their lives together and apart.²⁵⁰

At the outset of the novel, Michael is an ambitious war veteran of twenty-three who served in the Air Force as a gunner on a B-17 bomber plane. On his return to the US, he attends Harvard using the GI Bill support and wishes to pursue the career of a poet and playwright. Michael's war experience was brief and, contrary to popular myths about the glamor and superiority of air force service, it was "humbling and tedious and bleak,"²⁵¹ yet the experience serves in his later life as a benchmark for measuring the validity of his and other people's actions. According to Klinkowitz, the war "has provided justifications for [Michael's] skeptical attitude toward the myth of college [...] a feeling of superiority which yields a constant sense of irritation"²⁵² whenever people with no war experience question his values and personal credentials. While at Harvard, Michael overcomes his initial skepticism of the Ivy League privilege that comes along with the institution and finds the university courses and the books to read stimulating, moreover, he realizes the other students are "the kind of men he had always craved as companions."²⁵³ He hopes that through writing poetry and drama he might succeed in his goal—to become a successful, respected professional who "can make difficult things look easy."²⁵⁴ Unlike Frank Wheeler of *Revolutionary Road*, who has no dream of an exciting future career and works only to pay the bills and be able to disparage his conformist colleagues and neighbors, Michael Davenport is obsessed with the American dream of working hard to achieve professional success, class, and respect.

²⁴⁷ See *YHC*, 1-119.

²⁴⁸ See *YHC*, 121-262.

²⁴⁹ See *YHC*, 263-422.

²⁵⁰ *YHC*, 412-422.

²⁵¹ *YHC*, 4.

²⁵² Klinkowitz, *New American Novel of Manners*, 161.

²⁵³ *YHC*, 4.

²⁵⁴ *YHC*, 4.

Ironically, while Frank works in a well-paying job that he hates and that requires little mental effort, Michael's choice of a creative writing career brings by definition almost no pay and endless periods of writer's block, mental problems, and periods of economic hardship. Like Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, Michael dreams big, unlike *Gatsby*, it is his rigid adherence to self-imposed moral principles and not external circumstances that stand in the way of fulfilling his ambition. When he meets Lucy Blaine, a beautiful Radcliffe student who acts in Michael's play and comes to admire his sophistication, everything seems to fall into place. She considers Michael "a man with a profound understanding of the – you know – of the human heart."²⁵⁵ When Michael tries to reciprocate Lucy's compliments she responds with surprising awareness of her own limited acting talent: "I mean, thanks, and of course that's nice to hear, but I know I'm not really an actress [...] it's just something I like to do, the way little girls play dress-up in their mothers' clothes."²⁵⁶ Lucy's education is, for her, a conventional way to meet a promising man to marry rather than serious preparation for a professional career. Betty Friedan explains that this usage of higher education for spouse-seeking purposes was rather typical for many American women in the late 1940s and 1950s.²⁵⁷ While in the 19th century, American women "had fought for higher education," by the 1950s the trend towards progress in women's professional participation became reversed as many women "went to college to get a husband" and the suburban housewife, rather than the wartime Rosie the Riveter who worked in male professions in factories and was proud to bring home a good wage, became "the dream image of the young American woman" who set her eyes on getting married quickly and strove to be "healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home [...]" She had found true feminine fulfillment."²⁵⁸ This conservative turning of many 1950s American women against what the feminists had fought for since the mid-nineteenth century is also mentioned by Phyllis McGinley, a bestselling poet of American suburbia of the 1930s to 1950s, who jokingly claims to think often "of those old Feminist ghosts who won their battles but lost their war" as the postwar generation of young American women "have run merrily back to their chains [of marital and domestic subservience to men]."²⁵⁹

Michael and Lucy become lovers and their courtship makes them "take in stride" the failure of Michael's play and Lucy's performance that is disparaged by *The Harvard Crimson* critics.²⁶⁰ Unlike the Laurel Players production in *Revolutionary Road*, wherein the

²⁵⁵ *YHC*, 5.

²⁵⁶ *YHC*, 6.

²⁵⁷ See Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 11-27. In her book, Friedan expounds on the complex and surprising ramifications of this social dictum for American women to forsake professional and educational ambition in favor of the domestic roles given above.

²⁵⁸ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 12-13.

²⁵⁹ Phyllis McGinley, *The Province of The Heart* (New York: Dell, 1959), 65.

²⁶⁰ *YHC*, 7.

play within the novel and its failure portends deeper and irreparable problems in the marriage of April and Frank Wheeler, Michael's Harvard play in *Young Hearts Crying* is mediocre at best, receives poor reviews, but neither Michael nor Lucy are traumatized by its failure—it only serves as the authorial vehicle for the protagonists to meet and fall in love.²⁶¹

What makes the relationship of Lucy and Michael unusual is their class difference. Lucy comes from a rich upper-class New England family, something Michael, a middle-class son of a lawyer, learns about early in their relationship. When he asks about her father's job, Lucy is evasive as her father "sort of – manages things. Different kinds of business things. I've never quite known what he does, exactly."²⁶² When Lucy takes Michael to meet her parents at their summer residence on Martha's Vineyard, their house within an affluent colony suggests they belong to what Paul Fussell calls "out-of-sight" upper class,²⁶³ summering in a lavish, fashionable house that is hidden from the street, "long and amply proportioned, made almost as much of glass as of wood, with its wooden sections finished in dark brown shingles that looked silver in the dappled sunlight."²⁶⁴ Lucy's parents are "tall and lean and graceful," with "the kind of taut, tan skin that comes with easy mastery of swimming and tennis," with voices that suggest "a full appreciation of daily alcohol," wearing "impeccable summer clothes" and speaking with just the right amount of condescension when they ask whether Lucy would stay the weekend or go right back to the city so as not to be kept "away from any number of romantic imperatives."²⁶⁵ Michael considers the Blaines' house "a place suggesting the timeless repose that only several generations' worth of success could provide. This was class."²⁶⁶ However, as Charlton-Jones explains, although Michael is bewildered about witnessing such class-based privilege, surprisingly, he also remains "at ease because he is not involved with the Blaine family beyond dating their daughter."²⁶⁷ When Michael mentions to Lucy his fascination with the opulent but tasteful design of her parents' summer residence, she is exasperated and calls

²⁶¹ While Michael Davenport spends a few more years on the dual career of poet and playwright, he realizes later that his poetry is more worth pursuing than his playwriting and drops the latter activity altogether after being unable to justify his playwriting to Lucy's parents as a viable career for a male breadwinner. See *YHC*, 106-7.

²⁶² *YHC*, 7.

²⁶³ See Paul Fussell, *Class* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), 16-22. Fussell describes two different subcategories of the American upper class—the "out-of-sight" upper class and plain upper class. The difference between the two groups is in the degree to which the "out-of-sight" group keeps their property and wealth out of public sight while the latter is not opposed to ostentatious display of their wealth and prestige. Lucy's parents seem to be a combination of both. Their presence their daughter's life is marginal, but during the rare visit to the Davenports, their condescending dismissal of Lucy's wasted life with Michael in a shabby rented suburban house contributes toward her decision to break up with Michael soon after their visit. See *YHC*, 105-107.

²⁶⁴ *YHC*, 8.

²⁶⁵ *YHC*, 8.

²⁶⁶ *YHC*, 9.

²⁶⁷ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 195.

him “proletarian and dumb, or something” as Michael’s deference to her family’s wealth and manners conflicts with her vision of Michael as the man of her dreams.²⁶⁸

Following the visit, Michael’s “own most romantic imperative, all through the fall and winter of that year, was to find attractive ways of fending off [Lucy’s] shy but persistent wish to be married.”²⁶⁹ Lucy’s naive dreams of an early marriage are explicable by her wish to escape the stifling atmosphere of her home where her self-centered, inattentive parents, similar to those of April Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*, cause her to become defensive, lonely, and withdrawn. The wedding date is set just after Michael’s graduation and he soon “found himself a married man without being fully aware of how it had all come about.”²⁷⁰ The difference between Michael’s and Lucy’s class background becomes evident again during the wedding as Michael’s family “smile in courteous bewilderment through the ceremony” while Michael is fascinated with the way Lucy’s parents were able to commission “a mounted policeman who raised one hand to the visor of his cap in a formal salute as his beautifully groomed horse stood straight and still as a statue at the curbside.”²⁷¹ Ostentatious display of wealth and privilege feels natural to Lucy, who has known it all her life and has become oblivious to its effects, but Michael cannot help being fascinated by it as well as embarrassed by his inability to claim membership in this world himself. During their honeymoon, Lucy shyly reveals that she has an inheritance of “something between three and four million dollars.”²⁷² The matter of Lucy’s private wealth creates an instant rift in the relationship of Lucy and Michael that never heals. Charlton-Jones explains that Lucy’s millions “are dollars that [Michael] thinks threaten to undermine his masculinity” and whether he agrees to let Lucy to use the money or not, „from the moment he is told about her money, that emasculation begins.“²⁷³

From the psychological perspective, Michael’s career and domestic position in the marriage is challenged from the moment he learns of Lucy’s money since no matter how hard he might try, he would never be able to equal the material and social achievement of his wife through his work which mere using of Lucy’s inheritance could provide to the young couple right away. Rubén Cenamor explains that Michael’s refusal of Lucy’s money may seem stupid but is socially inevitable since “he knows that if he accepts Lucy’s money and becomes maintained by her, he will be seen to be swapping gender roles by society, being a provider was a condition sine qua non for normative masculinity whereas being maintained

²⁶⁸ YHC, 9.

²⁶⁹ YHC, 9.

²⁷⁰ YHC, 10.

²⁷¹ YHC, 10.

²⁷² YHC, 12.

²⁷³ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 196.

was considered a trait of femininity.”²⁷⁴ Without realizing it, both Michael and Lucy are very traditional and conservative in their views on gender roles within marriage, which also accounts for the problem they have with using (Lucy’s idea) or refusal to use (Michael’s idea) the Lucy’s large inheritance.

Ironically, Lucy is unaware of the deadening effect which her money has on her husband, neither does she realize that by marrying “beneath herself,” the success of their marriage is going to be tested due to the enduring class difference between her and Michael. Stephen R. Jorgensen and David M. Klein explain that “spouses who marry down in terms of social class background while striving to move up the stratification ladder at the same time are more likely to report feelings of personal stress and to perceive conflict, lack of affection, lack of reciprocity, and value dissensus than are spouses who married someone from a higher or an equal socioeconomic background.”²⁷⁵ Thus Lucy, by marrying Michael Davenport, descends socially while hoping to spend her married life getting back up through her domestic career of being the supportive wife of a successful social climber.²⁷⁶ The status and wealth difference problem which plagues the marriage of the Davenports from the start might also be analyzed as failure of status homogamy. In general, homogamy means the marriage of people who come from similar class or educational background. Matthijs Kalmijn distinguishes two aspects of status homogamy that have dominated the marriage patterns in postwar America—marriages based either on the shared social origin of the spouses (ie their social class affiliation) or on their educational achievement.²⁷⁷ While Lucy and Michael have similar educational background (both are college-educated people with a love of literature and the arts), what becomes a problem that never heals, apart from Lucy’s inheritance, is their social heterogamy (ie the difference of the social standing of the parents of each spouse). According to Kalmijn, husbands and wives in postwar America came to

²⁷⁴ Rubén Cenamor, “Antifeminist or Antipatriarchal? Richard Yates’s Critique of Hegemonic Masculinity in *Young Hearts Crying*,” in *Richard Yates and the Flawed American Dream: Critical Essays*, ed. Jennifer Daly (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017), 164.

²⁷⁵ Stephen R. Jorgensen and David M. Klein, “Sociocultural Heterogamy, Dissensus, and Conflict in Marriage,” *Pacific Sociological Review* 22, no. 1 (Jan. 1979): 70, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1388895>.

²⁷⁶ For this reason, a female monarch such as Elizabeth I of England chose not to marry since there was no chance of class homogamy in her case—to marry a royal from one of the continental European countries was were out of the question for political reasons and any English aristocrat for a husband would be her social inferior, which means her status and power would be greatly diminished by marriage to a lower-ranked man who would then become king and her master by virtue of his gender and his position within the royal marriage (since a king always outranks a queen). Ironically, if the social background of Lucy and Michael Davenport were reversed, ie if Michael came from an upper-class background and Lucy did not, their marriage would not have suffered in the same way it does in *Young Hearts Crying* since the social dictum regarding the gender roles in postwar America still preferred the husband to function as the breadwinner (or rich spouse) whose task was to provide for the family and his wife while the social status of the man’s wife would become equal (ie rise to correspond to) his own after their marriage.

²⁷⁷ See Matthijs Kalmijn, “Status Monogamy in the United States,” *American Journal of Sociology* 97, no. 2 (Sep. 1991): 496–523, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2781384>.

“resemble each other more in their educational achievement than in their social origins,” which leads him to the conclusion that “education [in the postwar decades] has become an even more substantial foundation of social distinctions in American society.”²⁷⁸ In other words, while a shared education history may help erase any differences between the two spouses in a marriage, a different class background of the spouses may actually help perpetuate those class differences. For this reason, the shared love of the arts proves exciting during the courtship of Michael and Lucy, but insufficient for their marriage to last since their social differences become more pronounced with the passage of time, as Lucy grows more resentful and Michael more withdrawn and aggressive when his career stalls and does not meet their unrealistic expectations of professional and material success on the basis of which Lucy married him.²⁷⁹

While Michael’s life as a married man is defined by the imperative to try hard to become a rich, successful man to provide Lucy with the social status she dropped by marrying him, she, in turn, is plagued by the effect of her financial agreement with Michael that requires her to store her wealth away and forget her upper-class ways in order to merge with Michael and their friends. Both Lucy and Michael thus suffer from different types of class denial. Michael’s notion of himself as the male breadwinner in the family forces him to reject using Lucy’s inheritance. While he remains haunted by the specter of Lucy’s wealth, she is troubled by her inability to push through such a financial arrangement in her marriage which would make her happy. When Michael embarks on a career that is tantamount to chasing rainbows, Lucy supports his futile effort while regretting her years of material and social restraint.²⁸⁰

Daniel Schneider explains why the availability of wealth in relationships affects the marriage patterns of Americans and the power and gender relationships within marriage. While not a prerequisite, he argues that sufficient wealth acquired prior to marriage “matters for what it symbolizes to others beyond potential partners,” that is, the wealth of one or both partners has not only economic value in itself but “takes on a social meaning and is used to define [...] eligibility for marriage.”²⁸¹ Moreover, Schneider explains that “a potential partner with wealth may be better able to help provide the material aspects of a comfortable life” while their wealth, if used wisely, “might be valued for marriage in the same way that job stability and a mature career are valued: [for] providing couples with a buffer against uncertainty about the economic future.”²⁸² In the case of Lucy Davenport’s inheritance,

²⁷⁸ Kalmijn, “Status Monogamy in the United States,” 519-520.

²⁷⁹ *YHC*, 113-15.

²⁸⁰ *YHC*, 15-69.

²⁸¹ Daniel Schneider, “Wealth and the Marital Divide,” *American Journal of Sociology* 117, no. 2 (September 2011): 633, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/661594>.

²⁸² Schneider, “Wealth and the Marital Divide,” 633.

however, its effect upon her marriage is the very opposite—it is like a threatening skeleton willed into the closet for permanent dormancy, to be hidden from view for as long as it takes Michael to make using the money unnecessary. When Michael persuades Lucy that his vision of their successful marriage based on his ability to feed the family by working as a writer is going to succeed, he feels like an American hero who will make “something of himself on his own” while Lucy meekly disagrees, thinking her money should be used sensibly to set them up into a comfortable lifestyle that would provide “an extraordinary opportunity for time and freedom in his work.”²⁸³ When Michael argues that “living off her fortune might only bleed away his ambition, and might even rob him of the very energy he needed to work at all,” Lucy yields and calls his stubborn determination “admirable.”²⁸⁴

What Michael thinks but keeps unsaid is a thought on the effect of Lucy’s money on their marriage, namely, the fact that “to accept the money would jeopardize his ‘very manhood,’ or even that it would ‘emasculate’ him.”²⁸⁵ Yates thus makes Michael’s refusal of Lucy’s money a conscious decision whose effect is known to the protagonist, which makes it all the more problematic to defend on moral grounds. It is by choice rather than by necessity, then, Michael wants to maintain his heteronormative position within his marriage and embark on the pursuit of the American dream by working hard and hoping to succeed on his own merit as he cannot imagine his career as a writer who is cushioned into a comfortable lifestyle that could be made available instantly by using Lucy’s wealth. As Paul Goodman documents, such a proud attitude is traditional for American artists and bohemians who “have always gravitated to the bottom of the income pyramid” where the social norms are less strictly observed, offering a greater degree of freedom to the artist who chooses to live frugally and bet everything on succeeding in their line of noncommercial creative work.²⁸⁶ It is ironic, however, that Michael Davenport forbids his wife to use her money to ease their life, trying to assume the false identity of a bohemian artist who is poor but fully in control of his future: “we’re going to do this my way.”²⁸⁷ Within Yates’s fiction, *Young Hearts Crying* is thus a telling commentary on the failure of wealth and class privilege of

²⁸³ *YHC*, 12–13.

²⁸⁴ *YHC*, 13.

²⁸⁵ *YHC*, 14.

²⁸⁶ See Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized Society* (New York: Vintage, 1960), 63. While Goodman’s book is a lengthy analysis of the ways in which postwar American society harms the proper development of the young generation, his marginal notes on the situation of artists and bohemians are useful for understanding the ironic situation of the Davenports in Yates’s novel wherein Michael’s stubborn refusal to have an easy life of leisure using Lucy’s wealth brings a series of disappointments and marital conflicts.

²⁸⁷ *YHC*, 14.

the protagonist to provide a happy and fulfilling life, a theme that is also explored in Yates's other novels.²⁸⁸

According to Charlton-Jones, Michael's symbolic emasculation begins at the moment Lucy tells him of her money, to which he reacts by forbidding her to use it, thus becoming "an aggressive inverted snob [...] who feels embittered and disempowered."²⁸⁹ Indeed, his refusal of Lucy's inheritance is a sign of weakness rather than strength as a man of stronger personality would have no problem with using the money without feeling corrupted by it. Joseph Epstein defines a snob as somebody who "hopes to position himself securely among those whom he takes to be the best, most elegant, virtuous, fashionable, or exciting people. He also fears contamination from those he deems beneath him."²⁹⁰ In this light, Michael Davenport is a socially-conscious snob who works hard to succeed and, based on his projected success, win the approval and respect of fellow writers, artists, and friends. Since these people are poor early in the novel, it is important for Michael and Lucy to emulate the economic situation of their friends by living in false poverty only on what little Michael is able to earn, a situation which hurts Lucy and humiliates the self-esteem of both while this attitude still fails to bring the respect of their friends.

The marriage of the Davenports proceeds in the way Michael has planned including a move to New York "where he'd take the kind of job that other fledgling writers took, in some advertising agency or publishing house," and the couple try to "live on his salary like an ordinary young couple" while Lucy's wealth is to remain "a secret to keep from the other ordinary young people they'd meet along the way."²⁹¹ The problem the Davenports face of how to deal with the gender-based "inverted stigma" of Lucy's wealth and upper-class background that cripples their ability to enjoy their relationship might be understood through the relation to the theory of the middle class by C. Wright Mills. In *White Collar*, Mills discusses the various elements that constitute social prestige in American society in mid-20th century. In different ways, Michael and Lucy Davenport both suffer from what Mills calls status panic, namely, an obsession to maintain and improve one's social position and sense

²⁸⁸ For example, the mother characters in other Yates novels, such as Esther Grimes in *The Easter Parade*, Alice Prentice in *A Special Providence*, and Gloria Drake in *Cold Spring Harbor*, invariably try to improve their social standing by moving to a fashionable suburban community, befriending classy people there, and by having their children succeed through an upwardly mobile marriage or through study at a prestigious prep school. This endeavor is complicated by the fact that the mothers in these novels are divorced and impoverished, living beyond their means on modest alimony payments by their absent exhusbands, which accounts for these mothers' social ostracization and failure. When they do find themselves living in the suburbs, they do so in rented housing of poor quality, and remain ignored by the classy neighbors who they wish to become friends with. All of these elements are highly autobiographical representations of Yates's own early life in the prewar suburbs, including the pretentious social-climbing ambition of his mother. For more details, see Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 7-74. The role of wealth in other fiction by Yates is thus that of an ever elusive means towards the goal of winning social recognition.

²⁸⁹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 196.

²⁹⁰ Joseph Epstein, *Snobbery: The American Version* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 20.

²⁹¹ *YHC*, 13.

of self-worth through success at work, by a respectable marriage, or through the acquisition of a house in a prestigious community which brings the respect and admiration of one's peers.²⁹² In the case of Lucy Davenport, her attitude to the matter of social status is unusual and complex. Born to upper-class wealth and privilege, educated at an elite liberal arts college, she nonetheless spends her life feeling ostracized, lonely, unhappy, and guilty about her background, hiding her ready-for-use wealth and trying to win respect and acceptance of working-class and middle-class people and friends on her personality alone and through the professional and social achievement of her husband. Lucy's choice of her career is unusual yet typical for a 1950s American woman who feels her place is at her husband's side and abandons any professional and domestic ambition of her own. As May documents, American women after WWII "continued to face inequalities at work and at home. [...] Women of the fifties, [feeling] constrained by tremendous cultural and economic pressures to conform to domestic containment, gave up their independence and personal ambitions."²⁹³ It is thus Michael who pulls Lucy down to his level of social and economic achievement (or its lack) without providing a viable narrative for a fulfilling life together. This is no easy situation and it contributes to Lucy's neurotic withdrawal from social interaction as she increasingly finds little to talk about with their painter friends whose careers (and bank accounts) take off while her husband's does not. With Michael, his panic status shows differently. Choosing the career of the poet and playwright, he aspires to become a respected artist and intellectual, two occupations which according to Mills provided a rare chance to postwar Americans "to resist and to fight the stereotyping and consequent death of genuinely lively things."²⁹⁴ Ironically, in the dominant atmosphere of pragmatic anti-intellectualism and consumerism, as Richard Hofstadter explains, it was very difficult for postwar American writers and intellectuals to succeed in the "incompatible efforts" to be "good and believing citizens of a democratic society" while resisting "the vulgarization of [consumerist] culture which that society constantly produces."²⁹⁵ To gain social recognition and economic prosperity as a successful poet and intellectual is, then, a contradictory ambition and an impossible task for Michael who wants to be an 'organization man' by working as a free-lance writer and self-employed artist. Consequently, when Lucy bets everything in her marriage on the success of her husband, the failure of his career causes their relationship to crumble. Although a man of principles regarding the refusal of Lucy's money, Michael still has to compromise by working as a technical writer (which he hates) to feed the family and earn the time for his literary writing. The marriage of Lucy and Michael is also beset by gender inequality.

²⁹² Mills, *White Collar*, 254-5.

²⁹³ May, *Homeward Bound*, 213.

²⁹⁴ Mills, *White Collar*, 159.

²⁹⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 407-408.

According to Michael B. Katz, Mark J. Stern, and Jamie F. Fader, American women have always suffered from inequality “embodied in access to jobs, income, and wealth.”²⁹⁶ While Lucy Davenport is spared some of these problems, her unequal position as woman homemaker is not caused by economic but gender-based inequality which dominated the postwar American suburbs. In her marriage, she chooses to be the traditional woman who is a passive recipient of her husband’s selfish decision to accept their economic deprivation with the prospect of achieving a measure of social and material recognition later, based on his career success. Since Lucy does not feel the imperative to work to supplement her family income and to use her inheritance is against her agreement with Michael, her ambition focuses on supporting Michael’s struggle to succeed as a writer, social being, and husband. When his writing career starts to lag behind the expectations and his social skills at parties repeatedly bring embarrassment, his neurosis turns into aggressive attacks on other people’s conformity while Lucy logically turns the arrangement about the non-usage of her inheritance against her husband.

An interesting comparison might be made between the way Lucy Davenport of *Young Hearts Crying* and Shep Campbell, a minor character in *Revolutionary Road*, deal with the problem of social heterogamy. Both Lucy and Shep marry beneath themselves and are thus not social climbers but, rather, social descent-makers by choice. Whereas most people aim for upward mobility, Lucy and Shep move in the opposite direction, choosing to join their lower-class spouses on a level social footing. For this reason, they both become anti-establishment radicals in their own ways. Born to upper-class privilege, Lucy as well as Shep reject their social background in order to marry and live modestly. Lucy attends Radcliffe, a prestigious liberal arts college, yet her heart is set on finding a dream husband, not on a future career.²⁹⁷ In Shep’s case, he avoids attending a prestigious university on his mother’s money. Instead, he chooses to study at a regional Midwestern school and marries a simple-minded working-class woman who corresponds to his assumed identity of a lowbrow man who wants to start from scratch, as a proletarian rebel rather than upper-class conformist who would ride along with the family tradition of using his background to educational and professional advantage.²⁹⁸ It is only after having worked for a time at a dull factory job that Shep realizes that class and sophistication are elements of American identity to maintain and desire rather than throw away, and he has to work hard to partially reclaim his social status. From that point on, Shep no longer subscribes to the fallacy working-class tough-guy posturing and tries to work his way back up the social ladder, realizing that “the

²⁹⁶ Michael B. Katz, Mark J. Stern, and Jamie F. Fader, “Women and the Paradox of Economic Inequality in the Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 1 (Autumn 2005): 65, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3790530>.

²⁹⁷ *YHC*, 5-7.

²⁹⁸ *RR*, 120-127.

high adventure of pretending to be something he was not had led him into a way of life he didn't want and couldn't stand, that [...] he had turned his back on his birthright."²⁹⁹ By becoming "a moody listener to classical music and a sulking reader of literary quarterlies" as well as by moving his family from Arizona back to the New York City area to reclaim his roots, Shep manages to move beyond the rebellion of his youthful "tough-guy phase" as he and his wife settle in the suburbs and befriend the Wheelers with whom they share the sanctimonious attitude toward their conformist, barbecue-loving neighbors.³⁰⁰ Shep's awakening at the end of *Revolutionary Road* is to the fact that he is far too solid a man, husband, and father to indulge in further fantasies of having an affair with the attractive but fatally self-destructive April Wheeler. Having recognized his foolish infatuation, Shep comes to appreciate his wife's practical approach to life and ends up a resigned but happy man.³⁰¹ In the case of Lucy Davenport, her options for achieving upward mobility as a woman, following her social fall by marriage, are much more limited. As a conventional, submissive wife whose status is defined by the actions and achievement of her husband, she finds it impossible to win respect and recognition on her own. Postwar American narratives of professional and social success still focused on male success and achievement while the women's social and professional recognition were not of primary importance within American families. As May documents, the gender roles in marriage in postwar America were partially subject to modification, yet the feminist myth of the new model family with "two equal partners who shared breadwinning and homemaking tasks never gained widespread support" as the media and social critics after the war advocated a return of men and women to "traditional gender roles [within marriages] as the best means for Americans to achieve the happiness and security they desired."³⁰²

For the first couple of years, the Davenports live in a rented apartment in New York. Michael gets a better-paying job as a staff writer at a trade magazine so that his salary might at least pay for his family's city-based life in a rented apartment. They befriend Diana Maitland, the glamorous but pretentious girlfriend of a colleague of Michael's, and Diana's brother Paul, an abstract expressionist painter who does carpentry for a living while he paints in his spare time with the dedication and perseverance of a true professional.³⁰³

Art, its production, appreciation, and the way it influences people's dreams and lives are essential elements of *Young Hearts Crying*. Charlton-Jones explains how the writers and painters in the novel "jostle with one another and negotiate the demands of their often over-

²⁹⁹ *RR*, 122.

³⁰⁰ *RR*, 124-5.

³⁰¹ *RR*, 280-285.

³⁰² May, *Homeward Bound*, 87.

³⁰³ *YHC*, 15-26.

inflated egos, trying to find an outlet for their talents without undermining their ideals.”³⁰⁴ Both Michael Davenport and Paul Maitland work in regular jobs to feed their families and pursue writing and painting, respectively, in their spare time as their real mission. Commercial success is secondary to the recognition of their art by their peers and critics. The problem of art appreciation is portrayed through Michael who is appalled to see an abstract painting by Paul during a visit to his studio. To Michael, the painting feels “incomprehensible to the point of chaos,” providing “no sense of order, or any sense at all, except perhaps the silence of the painter’s own mind.”³⁰⁵ In a flashback, it is revealed that Michael’s failure to appreciate a piece of modern art made Lucy exasperated, scornful, and condescending toward him already once before they married as he prefers the mimetic work of artists who “get down to the real story.”³⁰⁶ Although Michael and Lucy never agree on the topic of art taste, they both wish to cultivate friendships with interesting art people. Lucy naively admits that the Maitlands are the rare “kind of people I’ve wanted to know all my life.”³⁰⁷ Ironically, the Davenports fail to see the cruelty, selfishness and pretension of the Maitlands and other art people whose friendship and respect they keep desiring in a one-sided affection that is not reciprocated. As Naparsteck explains, “Yates’s characters want to be somebody else; all yearn for a different life,”³⁰⁸ and, for Lucy and Michael, this assumption of a more attractive identity is to be done through the practice of their art (or through art appreciation), a shaky plan which backfires for both of them since art and its appreciation fails to provide an escape from their own neurotic conflicts and is, rather, a pathetic reflection of the neurotic responses to life’s challenges.

By the time Laura, the Davenports’ only child, turns four, Lucy and Michael “look for a place in the suburbs, assuming, of course, that they could remain within easy commuting distance.”³⁰⁹ They settle in the suburban community of Larchmont where their rented house provides “a good place [for Michael] to work, a good place to rest; and [...] a good, grassy backyard for Laura to play in.”³¹⁰ Ironically, when it became practically a social dictum after WWII for a young American family to buy a house in suburbia “to keep up with the Joneses” rather than just rent, the Davenports go against the grain by stubbornly persisting in Michael’s idea of a modest living on his writing alone while their artist friends

³⁰⁴ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 106.

³⁰⁵ *YHC*, 24.

³⁰⁶ *YHC*, 3. According to Charlton-Jones, in Michael’s failure to comprehend abstract and experimental art, Yates commented indirectly on his own problems with appreciating not only art but also the new trends in American fiction (such as postmodernist experimentation of the 1960s). See Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 106-9.

³⁰⁷ *YHC*, 26.

³⁰⁸ Naparsteck, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 132.

³⁰⁹ *YHC*, 28.

³¹⁰ *YHC*, 28.

start upgrading from bohemian poverty in the city to better suburban addresses.³¹¹ As Hofstadter documents, the postwar American artists and intellectuals chose to “berate their exclusion from wealth, success, and reputation,” however, they were not averse to selling out and subsequently being “seized by guilt when they overcome this [social] exclusion.”³¹² It is one of the ironies in *Young Hearts Crying* that Michael Davenport follows his painter friends in their bohemian pursuit of art for art’s sake, yet fails to understand that the friends consider their art as a means to a commercially successful career, a career move he can not easily duplicate as a poet or playwright.

During a commute to the city, Michael befriends Tom Nelson, a young painter who happens to live in the same suburb and travels to New York to sell his paintings to famous art galleries. Unlike the avant-gardist Maitland, Tom Nelson is a traditionalist who uses watercolors and shelving paper for his realist paintings. He is portrayed as an affable yet cynical overachiever who paints with too much ease and speed and has already become famous and highly valued, even though he is still only in his late twenties.³¹³ As Charlton-Jones points out, Yates introduces the Nelson character “as a powerful counterpoint” to Michael Davenport whose career seems to never match his immense ambition. Whereas Michael remains forever the struggling writer whose lukewarm critical reception hardly exceeds the minor success of his first book of poems, Tom, on the other hand, is portrayed as “happily married, confident, charming, charismatic, upwardly mobile, and modest.”³¹⁴ Through emphasis on Tom’s success and likeable nature, Yates highlights the lack of success and misanthropic nature of Michael, including the problems which his morose attitude brings to his “increasingly turbulent marriage, erratic self-confidence, and struggle to perform artistically and eventually sexually.”³¹⁵ Interestingly, Michael is not envious of Tom’s achievement, rather, he is inspired by Tom’s example to accomplish something similar as a writer.

When visiting the Nelsons, Michael is excited to learn about an army of miniature soldiers that Tom has made and the two men stage a mini-battle with the soldiers to the annoyed commentary of their wives.³¹⁶ However, Michael has a knack for making social blunders at parties. To get more room for their toy soldier battle, Michael drunkenly pulls

³¹¹ For more information on the nationwide rise of postwar percentage of suburban housing ownership at the expense of house renting, see Arthur Acolin, Laurie S. Goodman, and Susan M. Wachter, “A Renter or Homeowner Nation?”, *Cityscape* 18, no. 1 (2016): 145-158, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26328246>.

³¹² Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 417.

³¹³ *YHC*, 33-52.

³¹⁴ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 109.

³¹⁵ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 109.

³¹⁶ *YHC*, 44-50.

away a fixed carpet and ruins it, to the embarrassment of his wife who feels like “watching a total stranger do some insane, destructive thing.”³¹⁷

A major theme in *Young Hearts Crying* is the insecurity of the male characters, especially Michael Davenport and Tom Nelson, regarding their gender roles and masculinity. In this, their situation is similar to the problem of Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*.³¹⁸ For all his air of masculine self-confidence, Michael feels uneasy for having chosen the effeminate career of poet and playwright. Therefore, he compensates by evoking his war past of an air force veteran and his short-lived success of an amateur boxer who lost a match in an early round of the Golden Gloves tournament but can still deliver a deadly punch at an opponent’s stomach at parties.³¹⁹ As Jerome Klinkowitz reminds, Michael Davenport is annoyed by the “enviable success” that Tom Nelson has with his “offhand but effective dress in [army or navy] service jackets that he has no right to wear but in which he looks more authentic (and gets better results) than the vets [like Michael himself].”³²⁰ By implication, Michael is traumatized by the realization that the pretentious posturing of successful people like Tom Nelson works better than authentic experience and performance of underachievers like himself.

Through the characters of Tom Nelson and Michael Davenport, Yates also dramatizes the postwar male anxiety about being mistaken for a homosexual, which both men deal with by making ostentatious (and ridiculous) displays of their masculinity. For example, they buy shotguns and start going out hunting together while the real purpose of their walks is sharing intimate confessions about their love lives and women-dating histories.³²¹ As May documents, such attitudes of men made sense in the 1950s as “the postwar years brought a wave of officially sponsored homophobia”³²² in which heteronormative patterns of behavior were the socially prescribed norm and “individuals who chose personal paths that did not include marriage and parenthood risked being perceived as perverted.”³²³ When Michael gets drunk at suburban parties, he likes to

³¹⁷ YHC, 52.

³¹⁸ Yet there are differences between the way Yates portrays his male characters’ gender-based anxiety in *Revolutionary Road* and *Young Hearts Crying*. While Frank Wheeler has no problems with presenting the masculine persona of a man in control of his life to colleagues at work and to women such as his wife and mistress, Michael Davenport and Tom Nelson are characters whose masculinity is not recognized by others since their chosen careers of poet (in Michael’s case) and painter (in Tom’s case) are perceived as unfit for men and in contrast to the American tradition of preference for aggressive masculinity as trademark elements of being a man.

³¹⁹ In a curious manifestation of defensive pride, Michael tries to include a caption about his boxing past in a blurb for his poetry book until his wife persuades him of the silliness of this attempt to present himself as a masculine yet sensitive young poet who writes poems but can also punch his opponents when necessary. See YHC, 54-56.

³²⁰ Klinkowitz, 161.

³²¹ RR, 108-111.

³²² May, *Homeward Bound*, 91.

³²³ May, *Homeward Bound*, 92.

challenge his adversaries to trading knockout boxing punches in the stomach. When he almost kills a man he dislikes at a party with his punch, his wife reacts with horror and embarrassment.³²⁴ Cenamor argues that Michael's conception of his own masculinity "does not depend on whether he personally feels manly, but rather on how his actions and behavior display heteronormative manliness."³²⁵ By punching his opponents, he achieves short-lived satisfaction, even though his wife (both the first and second) is horrified by such display of drunken violence.

Another way in which *Young Hearts Crying* mimics *Revolutionary Road* is in the diversity of the suburban community being portrayed. When the Nelsons move from a rented suburban apartment in Larchmont to their own house in Kingsley, a prestigious suburb in Putnam County, the Davenports soon follow and move to stay close to the Nelsons, the only difference being that the Davenports' house is a modest residence in a lower-class community which has seen better times. They rent the house from Ann Blake, a lady who owns a large, run-down estate including several houses of her own design and hosts visiting theatre groups on her property. The house which the Davenports come to live in is "stubby and ill-proportioned," with "a lopsided, crudely fanciful look, like something drawn by a child," yet they accept it as a place "good enough, at least, to live in for the next year or two."³²⁶ They become friendly with the Smiths, working-class neighbors who also rent a house from Ann Blake, but soon Lucy and Michael become uneasy about the lowliness of the Smiths' lifestyle and the vulgarity of their views. While the Davenports live in Tonapac, a "once popular summer resort for middle-class vacationers from the city," when they visit the Nelsons in their new Kingsley house nearby, Lucy's resentment grows as the Nelsons now live in a prestigious community that includes people who "had earned enough money in New York to put squalor and vulgarity behind them forever – and they valued their privacy."³²⁷ Michael's refusal to "come to his senses" and allow Lucy to buy a proper house in a good location instead of having to pretend they enjoy life in the "dopey little [rented] house in the decadence of Tonapac"³²⁸ presages later complications in their marriage and its ultimate breakdown. While young families typically rented their apartments in the city, they would then buy their houses in the postwar suburbs, which makes Michael's denial of Lucy's money to buy a proper suburban house all the more painful and humiliating for her. During

³²⁴ Interestingly, both Michael and Lucy repeat their past mistakes in their later lives. In Michael's case, he replays the embarrassing moment of punching an adversary at a party later, to the horror of his second wife, Sarah. Lucy, in turn, keeps trying to be recognized on her own by her later lovers, a futile undertaking which leaves her more lonely than ever.

³²⁵ Cenamor, "Antifeminist or Antipatriarchal? Richard Yates's Critique of Hegemonic Masculinity in *Young Hearts Crying*," 164.

³²⁶ *YHC*, 58-9.

³²⁷ *YHC*, 70.

³²⁸ *YHC*, 74.

a visit of the Smiths, Michael and Lucy realize their social superiority over their neighbors, which makes the visit an exercise in embarrassing politeness that the Davenports do not wish to repeat. Still, Harold Smith is portrayed as a likeable family man whose down-to-earth views on life and marriage are what Michael appreciates as the two men occasionally walk together to their New-York-bound commuter train and talk.³²⁹ With the passage of more years, Lucy has had enough of the precarious life in the shabby housing. Michael's writing career becomes stalled, moreover, his meagre bill-paying job in the city does not allow for any upward mobility. During a minor altercation with Michael, Lucy decides to break up with him, claiming to hate his guts, voice, and his sanctimonious mannerisms.³³⁰ For Michael, "the bottom had dropped out of everything" while Lucy is left with impotent anger at having spent years in unnecessary unhappiness since she had always had an alternative, in a makeshift rented house where "nothing had ever been right."³³¹ In a telling moment, Lucy whispers angrily to her kitchen wall that Michael's long-term dabbling in poetry and drama is nothing compared to the careers of real writers since "A poet is someone like Dylan Thomas. And a playwright – oh, God! – a playwright is someone like Tennessee Williams."³³² By comparing Michael's solid but mediocre achievement with the 20th-century American classics of his literary genres, Lucy voices her anger at having wasted years living as a pauper due to the unfortunate inheritance denial, yet her decision to divorce Michael is not selfish or cruel. Rather, it is a manifestation of the tension which had rose during the years in which Lucy's identity had been stifled by her domineering and misanthropic husband as well as by the reality of economic want in their household. In a way, Lucy's decision to end her marriage based on her sudden visceral reaction to her husband's mannerisms parallels April Wheeler's realization of the pretentious way she has lived in her marriage to Frank, which leads to April's decision to kill herself. The difference between Lucy and April is only in the extremity of the action taken by each woman at the moment of her major awakening to the real interpretation of her husband's failure to satisfy her in marriage. For April, the result of her decision to abort her child is fatal while Lucy's decision to end her marriage gives way to a slow, painful cultivation of her independent identity as a divorced woman who has to make her own decisions in life, without bowing to the opinions of a domineering but unsuccessful husband.

In the second part of *Young Hearts Crying*, the focus shifts to Lucy's life after as a divorced woman. She first stays in the rented house in Tonapac for a while and experiences a stormy affair with Jack Halloran, a dashing young theatre director from a visiting actors'

³²⁹ *YHC*, 113.

³³⁰ *YHC*, 115-116.

³³¹ *YHC*, 117.

³³² *YHC*, 117.

company who appears out of nowhere and encourages Lucy to revive her acting in order to play the complicated role of Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. During rehearsal, Lucy fields a call to ex-husband Michael who is drunk and on the brink of a nervous breakdown.³³³ Before she hangs up on him, he insults her, calling her somebody with “six artificial, affected ways of speaking [...] a millionaire girl among ordinary people“ who has had to “be up there on the stage all the time“ before stumbling upon a true summary of the sad way their relationship worked out when he realizes that he and Lucy “spent our whole lives yearning. Isn’t that the God damndest thing?“³³⁴ Lucy’s heated affair with Jack proceeds along with the Williams play rehearsal. The production is a moderate success, and Lucy’s amateur performance is saved from embarrassment by virtue of Jack’s expert directing which enables Lucy to rise the occasion with almost professional skill. However, as Erving Goffman explains, “when an individual appears before others, he wittingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of him self is an important part.“³³⁵ Since Lucy is unable to separate personal experience from that of the mad character she plays, the acting becomes very painful and humiliating for her. Lucy remains an inspired amateur at best who rises to the occasion but feels she has hit the ceiling of her ability. When Jack praises her afterward with a touch of condescension, admitting that she “came in out of nowhere and learned an extremely difficult part, and [...] brought it off,“³³⁶ Lucy’s suspicion about the mediocrity of her performance is confirmed, for, as Castronovo and Goldleaf point out, this is Jack’s diplomatic way of telling Lucy that her performance was “stagy and ordinary.”³³⁷ In Horneyan terms, Lucy’s willingness to become part of the theater production under Jack’s expert direction is a manifestation of her impulse to reduce her anxiety, restore her pride in her own ability to have a public self, and thus establish a new level of self-worth that was denigrated during her marriage to Michael. However, Lucy falls prey to the pitfall of unrealistic expectations which damage her self-confidence. Hoping her one-time acting experience to be a smashing success that would be the panacea to all her problems and desires, she cannot but be disappointed by the lukewarm result. Horney explains that this reaction is common with amateurs who give up their pursuit of arts, sports and politics too fast and too easily whenever “their impatient need to excel, or

³³³ *YHC*, 151-159. This breakdown, highly autobiographical, is only mentioned as happening to Michael in the background in *Young Hearts Crying*, while the same episode is the focus in an earlier novel, *Disturbing the Peace*, where the protagonist John Wilder is institutionalized in Bellevue and has recurring bouts of manic psychosis that require further hospitalization and contribute to the collapse of his marriage to Janice and subsequent relationship with Pamela Hendricks. See Richard Yates, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Delta, 2008), first published 1975.

³³⁴ *YHC*, 154.

³³⁵ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956), 155.

³³⁶ *YHC*, 172.

³³⁷ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 136.

to do a perfect job, is not [quickly] satisfied.”³³⁸ Lucy’s performance in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is solid even if not professional, and the discrepancy between her unrealistic expectations of success and the reality of her inspired but amateurish performance is so great that she chooses to quit acting after the play run ends. According to Horney, “the pernicious character of neurotic pride lies in the combination of its being vitally important to the individual and at the same time rendering him extremely vulnerable.”³³⁹ As a way to restore her pride and a sense of dignity, Lucy repudiates the acting experience as a one-time summer diversion from her otherwise uneventful life. Horney also explains how one’s feelings about oneself may assume the shape of “a vicious circle operating between pride and self-contempt, one always reinforcing the other.”³⁴⁰ Since Lucy’s budding pride as actress is not supported by corresponding response to her performance from Jack and other pros from his theater company whose opinion she respects, she reacts with dismissing her participation on the final night during the final curtain call: “She wouldn’t forget knowing she had better be happy to take this applause – stand here and take it however it came – because it was something that would never happen again.”³⁴¹

Ironically, although her friends the Nelsons praise her performance in a phone call, the Maitlands (another couple of artist friends turned suburbanites) do not even bother to attend. The best layman reaction to Lucy’s performance comes from her neighbor Harold Smith who has words of enthusiastic praise, telling Lucy that she

were in *command* of that stage. You went straight for everybody’s throat and you never let go. You were a star. And I want to tell you something. I’m not very big in the crying department, but when that curtain came down you had me crying out there like a little bastard. Nancy too. And I mean for Christ’s sake, Lucy, isn’t that what the theater’s for?³⁴²

Harold Smith may be a simple-minded man but he is, along with his wife Nancy, also the most honest and likeable character in the novel. The satisfaction from Harold’s praise proves short-lived, however, as Lucy learns that Jack has started dating a young actress from the company without bothering to tell Lucy. Nonetheless, Lucy does not become vindictive and reacts as a typical Horneyan self-effacing neurotic who is unable to “get even” by “hitting back” at Jack, the opportunist offender who has abused her affection and average acting ability. Rather, Lucy reacts with her typical empathy and presents Jack with two expensive suitcases as a going-away gift. Yates thus portrays Lucy as the haunted rich woman who is destined to be kind to the people who hurt her, resorting to a response that “nearly always

³³⁸ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 104.

³³⁹ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 103.

³⁴⁰ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 137.

³⁴¹ *YHC*, 174.

³⁴² *YHC*, 177.

made her feel foolish, but it hadn't ever stopped her from making the same mistake the next time."³⁴³ Even a professional actor like Jack is prone to assuming movie-star poses to impress others, as when he comes to say goodbye to Lucy, standing "outside the screen door in exactly the way he had appeared the first time, a strikingly handsome young man with his thumbs in his jeans."³⁴⁴ Lucy, by choosing to befriend artists and bohemians, has unwittingly chosen to have to experience a life's worth of social humiliation since she has had to act middle-class, hide her wealth, and pretend to like living like an impoverished, ordinary woman in a stream of shabby, falling-down rented suburban houses while their artist friends keep using her hospitality or, like the Nelsons, move away to a better neighborhood which is an option which Lucy's financial agreement with her husband rendered unavailable during her marriage.

After the departure of Jack Halloran, Lucy finally decides to use her wealth and buys "a solid, comfortable house" which is "high and wide without being too big," and feels "civilized."³⁴⁵ Another attraction of the new house is its prestigious location away from the road, and the proximity to the Nelsons whose friendship Lucy still wishes to cultivate. She also buys quality new furniture, antiques, and a new car since there is "no reason why any of the things in her life should not be the best she could find."³⁴⁶ Ironically, her strategy of wealth-denial during the marriage to Michael has brought her nothing save a sad realization that those were wasted years since such willed poverty was ignored by others and only made her sad and resentful. While Michael was trapped in a career path in which he could not possibly succeed, by supporting him in his delusion in a selfless attitude of compliance with his views and needs, Lucy denied herself any possibility of self-definition as her support for her husband only augmented her own anxiety and intensified her withdrawal from other people. This is another point of similarity between Lucy Davenport and April Wheeler. Both characters try to carve a promising identity within their gender roles of supportive housewives, which is a strategy doomed to fail since their husbands are not the proper targets of their support and admiration.

After her marriage, there is no long-term relationship in Lucy's life, only a sequence of short-lived affairs. As Horney documents, "the content of [human] ambition [to satisfy one's search for glory] may well change several times during a lifetime."³⁴⁷ Lucy thus sets her mind on fiction writing next, which is a way of coming to terms with her own anxiety and inner conflict as well as an unintentional attempt to beat her ex-husband at his own game. She starts commuting to New York to take a short story writing workshop taught by Carl

³⁴³ *YHC*, 179.

³⁴⁴ *YHC*, 180.

³⁴⁵ *YHC*, 182.

³⁴⁶ *YHC*, 183.

³⁴⁷ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 25.

Traynor, a young fiction writer who is an alter-ego of Yates.³⁴⁸ When an autobiographical story by Lucy gets workshopped by her student colleagues, she realizes she is unable to move beyond lifeless autobiographical fiction about herself as a “little rich girl who doesn’t like boarding school because the other girls make fun of her all the time, and she doesn’t like going home on vacations either because she’s an only child and her parents are all wrapped up in each other.”³⁴⁹ The metafictional use of Lucy’s own writing to expose the uncomfortable memories of her childhood and adolescence enables Yates to analyze Lucy’s personality—her experience, when put in the shape of fiction, is too bland to write about and move the reader due to its banality. Lucy tries hard to improve her writing, aided by the sharp comments of Mr. Kelly, a fellow student (and elevator repairman by trade) who provides brutal but honest criticism of all the stories in class, but it is no use. Finally, Lucy realizes that writing “tired your brains” and “lead to depression and insomnia and walking all day with a haggard look” which is something that she “didn’t feel old enough for.”³⁵⁰ Ironically, in order to belong, Lucy has spent her life pretending to be something she is not—namely, a poor and happy housewife who fears that she might be considered a snob by the people whose respect she craves and, “the fear of seeming to be a snob impelled her, perversely, to become one.”³⁵¹ When Lucy’s own short stories have been discussed in the workshop, she feels annoyed to realize the stories she and other students bring are not good enough and never will be, so she angrily accuses everybody, including the instructor, of being mediocre and storms out of the classroom. Unable to negotiate the extremes of autobiographical honesty and fictional embellishment in her writing along with the inability to write with complete dedication to the task, she quits writing altogether.³⁵² Seen from the Horneyan perspective on human neurosis, Lucy’s decision to quit writing fiction is another manifestation of the way her neurotic ambition and pride result in her disappointment with anything less than her own stellar achievement in the arts. To a degree, the neurotic conflicts within the artist’s (or writer’s) image of themselves may “contribute to an incentive for [her] doing creative work,” however, it is quite as often that these conflicts also “paralyse or impair” the artist’s ability to create.³⁵³ For Lucy, the appropriation of her own experience in her stories does not move beyond thinly-disguised autobiography, and the effect of seeing herself as the pathetic protagonist in the clumsy fictionalized version of her uneventful life is so painful and humiliating that she sees no choice but give up writing. In a reincarnation of her acting “search for glory” to alleviate the manifestations of her neurotic pride, this time

³⁴⁸ *YHC*, 183-187.

³⁴⁹ *YHC*, 195.

³⁵⁰ *YHC*, 210.

³⁵¹ *YHC*, 201.

³⁵² *YHC*, 208-211.

³⁵³ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 331.

through the medium of fiction writing, Lucy has made another honest effort to excel as an artist and cure herself of her inner conflicts. However, she fails in this endeavor again since she is unable to find a viable identity of herself as somebody who is able to pursue a creative career for pleasure over an extended period of time as an end in itself, regardless of the quality of her work and its reception by other people.

When Lucy meets a new exciting man, Chip Hartley, the scene suggests a re-imagining of the *Revolutionary Road* scene of Frank Wheeler striking a conversation with April Johnson at a party. This time, however, Lucy Davenport is the one who initiates the conversation with a man she wants to date.³⁵⁴ Chip is a shallow but entertaining stockbroker, “exactly the kind of man she might have married if she hadn’t met Michael Davenport first – the kind of man her parents would always have been comfortable with.”³⁵⁵ Moreover, Lucy shares with Chip a privileged class background since “he too had been born rich” and only works for pleasure, not for the money.³⁵⁶ Ironically, Lucy soon becomes bored with Chip and terminates their affair for she finds him too selfish and lacking in art appreciation and empathy. Searching for a new pastime, Lucy rekindles her love of painting which she enjoyed as a student and takes an adult education painting course at the Art Students League. She gets to enjoy painting very much, “the feeling that I’m doing something well – something I can do without any sense of strain or fear of failure; something I may even have been born to do.”³⁵⁷ When Lucy drives past her former landlady, she learns that Ann is leaving her Tonapac estate to die in a cancer hospital. Lucy at first considers the potential of turning Ann’s suffering into a story before realizing that “stories were no longer her business” as “she was a painter now.”³⁵⁸ When Lucy contacts her former writing teacher Carl and becomes his lover, she rekindles thoughts of “devoting her life to a [creative] man,” having done exactly that for her husband Michael earlier.³⁵⁹ The difference between Michael Davenport and Carl Traynor, both writers of serious dedication, is, however, that the latter sees no problem in allowing Lucy’s fortune to “pay his way through life,” to buy time for his writing since he understands that living in poverty “held no virtue” and that “unearned income [such as Lucy’s] would imply no corruption.”³⁶⁰ While Michael Davenport remains a naive idealist regarding the way to make a living in order to pursue art as one’s true calling, which ruins the lives of the women who enter a relationship with him, Carl is a cynical pragmatist who is willing to sacrifice everything to get his best writing done. Lucy finds

³⁵⁴ *YHC*, 211., *RR*, 23.

³⁵⁵ *YHC*, 211.

³⁵⁶ *YHC*, 211.

³⁵⁷ *YHC*, 219.

³⁵⁸ *YHC*, 222.

³⁵⁹ *YHC*, 227.

³⁶⁰ *YHC*, 227.

unexpected spiritual kinship with Carl, being able to “tell him things about herself she’d never told anyone else” while she develops naive dreams of becoming a professional painter who might support Carl’s writing career.³⁶¹ Before long, however, Lucy experiences Traynor’s “social snobbery” and other despicable character traits and when he mocks her generous offer to pay for his tax debts, she breaks up with him.³⁶² In a way, Lucy is a person who reacts to problems or conflicts by retreat and withdrawal from people, another pattern of responding she shares with April Wheeler of *Revolutionary Road*.³⁶³ What Lucy and April also share is their inability to be good and caring mothers—Lucy, like April, is strangely aloof when dealing with her daughter, even when problems arise. When Laura turns fifteen, she has a minor argument with her mother in which the generation difference leaves Lucy exasperated and her daughter annoyed and sulking.³⁶⁴ After finishing a couple of paintings at the art class, Lucy takes them to Paul Maitland and Tom Nelson for evaluation, however, their well-meant but condescending reaction hurts her so much that she quits painting for good.³⁶⁵ For the third time in her divorced life, Lucy has tried a creative outlet for her neurosis, and is again disappointed by the patronizing response to her work from her artist friends. While considering a hasty retreat from Nelson’s party before it even starts, she realizes that quitting the art course is not a good idea. Yates contrasts Lucy’s humiliation with the ironic fact that at this moment of defeat, she realizes that despite her disappointment and inner turmoil, “she had never looked prettier.”³⁶⁶

The third, final section of *Young Hearts Crying* returns to Michael’s life after his divorce. This period is marked by his dating of two beautiful young women—Jane Pringle and Mary Fontana, bouts of impotence in his relationship with the latter woman, and a failed attempt to win Susan Compton, a young actress in a Canadian TV production of his play.³⁶⁷ As Cenamor documents, these “sexual conquests” of “exceptionally pretty girls” help Michael recover a sense of his manliness which was challenged by the traumatic end of his first marriage.³⁶⁸

Managing to survive two attacks of manic psychosis and subsequent hospitalization, Michael gets back to writing, realizing that “if he ever let his mind slide away from it, there might be a third [psychotic] episode” which “might easily take him back to Bellevue

³⁶¹ YHC, 227-228.

³⁶² YHC, 243-246.

³⁶³ See Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts*, 73-77.

³⁶⁴ YHC, 247-253.

³⁶⁵ YHC, 255-262.

³⁶⁶ YHC, 262.

³⁶⁷ YHC, 265-298.

³⁶⁸ Cenamor, “Antifeminist or Antipatriarchal? Richard Yates’s Critique of Hegemonic Masculinity in *Young Hearts Crying*,” 169.

again.”³⁶⁹ When Lucy contacts Michael over her concern with the future of their rebellious daughter, they agree on Michael’s visiting Miss Garvey, a guidance counsellor at Laura’s school. The meeting proves life-changing for Michael who realizes that “he’d begun to wish he had a university job, like most other poets,” since he has grown “tired as hell of living in the Village” which was a lifestyle suitable for a young bohemian but not a forty-three-year-old sedate man like himself.³⁷⁰ The meeting with Sarah Garvey under the pretext of discussing Laura’s future choice of college turns into a date, then a night of love-making at a nearby hotel during which both Michael and Sarah realize “there would be plenty of time for figuring out the rest of their lives.”³⁷¹ Refreshed in a relationship with the beautiful, self-confident, young, and charming Sarah, Michael’s self-confidence and pride is restored and he sets his mind on getting married and obtaining a dependable teaching job, which he does, at the fictitious Billings State University in Kansas.³⁷²

In Kansas, Michael and Sarah rent “the first modern, efficient house Michael and Sarah had ever known,” a residence “generously long and wide and high [...] with a bright hallway connecting its several spacious rooms.”³⁷³ The solidity of the new Kansas house makes Michael compare it to “the funny little house in Tonapac” in whose uninviting space his first marriage collapsed. However, even though “the world was ready to give [Michael] a second chance,” he starts making the same mistakes in his new marriage and at parties. When the wife of his department chair attacks a young soldier acquaintance who is leaving for Vietnam the next day, Michael angrily defends him even if this brings criticism from his department chair.³⁷⁴

When Sarah suggests they have a baby, Michael agrees. Paternity is no longer a challenge but, rather, a welcome diversion to his writer’s domestic routine. Later, when Michael’s daughter Laura gets in trouble after joining a hippie commune and leaving to California with them. For once, Michael does the right thing at the right time when quickly travels to California, picks up his drugged and destitute daughter from her hippie commune and brings her home to recuperate.³⁷⁵ Naparsteck points out that Michael’s act is without parallel in all of Yates’s fiction as Yatesian parent characters are typically self-centered

³⁶⁹ *YHC*, 308. The Bellevue hospital referred to in the novel is a large public hospital in New York City, associated in popular imagination with treating mental patients even though it offers a wide range of medical services in all fields.

³⁷⁰ *YHC*, 313.

³⁷¹ *YHC*, 319.

³⁷² The name of the university and its location is a fictional mixture of two existing universities and states as there is a real-life Billings State University in the state of Montana. Yates here metamorphoses his own experience of having taught at Wichita State University in the state of Kansas where he taught in the early 1970s.

³⁷³ *YHC*, 334.

³⁷⁴ *YHC*, 342-350.

³⁷⁵ *YHC*, 355-363.

neurotics who neglect their children and “there is not a single other parent in all of Yates’s writing who performs a similar act.”³⁷⁶ In a fit of unusual fatherly determination, Michael thus changes from a distant parent to caring father who is able to “purge himself of the damaging effects traditional manhood has inflicted on him.”³⁷⁷

After being saved from her drug-using stint in a hippie commune, Laura is not able to relate to his father and stepmother for a while, until she and Sarah take a typing course together and start riding bikes together, which are shared activities that improve their relationship (bike riding is something that Michael failed miserably at earlier). Sarah, although “scarcely five years older than her stepdaughter,” was “always quietly in charge” of the household and of Laura’s road to recuperation from her hippie period.³⁷⁸ With Laura healed and dispatched to a college nearby Michael’s, Sarah becomes pregnant. Michael is glad, but when Sarah gives birth to a son, he is disappointed since he would have preferred a daughter. Still, Michael’s new fatherhood becomes redemptive for him since, according to Cenamor, the experience of being a father again makes it possible for Michael to prove his manliness within the 1950s model of domestic masculinity.³⁷⁹ When Michael asks Sarah’s opinion about his plan of writing his fifth book of poem on his past history of mental breakdowns, she disapproves, claiming that “this whole line of talk is just a self-indulgence [...] it’s both self-pitying and self-aggrandizing.”³⁸⁰

By the end of the novel, Michael is in his early fifties and worries about his ability to keep his second marriage as his pursuit of literary success has not quite brought the accolade he hoped for and his repeated mistakes and mannerisms threaten to destroy his second marriage. Still, his young wife Sarah is portrayed as the stabilizing and mature force in the marriage whose sensible approach to everyday problems has a good effect on Michael, which is very different from the destabilizing effect of his first wife Lucy whose insecurity and submissiveness contributed to the breakup of Michael’s first marriage. He suggests a move back to Boston since there “he might have a better chance of keeping [Sarah].”³⁸¹ When Michael gets a teaching job offer from Boston University, he considers it the climactic moment in his poet’s career that he had always craved, jumps at the chance and travels over to find accommodation for his family to move to. He meets his poetry editor who has ditched a writer’s career himself in favor of becoming an executive at a publishing house who makes good money but has to put up with difficult authors such as “a boring, rapidly aging striver

³⁷⁶ Naparstek, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 131. On the refusal of parents to properly care for their children in Yates’s suburban fiction, see my discussion of the parental failure of the Wheelers in *Revolutionary Road* in this chapter above.

³⁷⁷ Cenamor, “Antifeminist or Antipatriarchal?“, 167.

³⁷⁸ *YHC*, 369.

³⁷⁹ Cenamor, “Antifeminist or Antipatriarchal?“, 167.

³⁸⁰ *YHC*, 394.

³⁸¹ *YHC*, 396.

like Davenport.”³⁸² During his journey, Michael also visits the Nelsons and Maitlands, which finally helps him realize that that he and Lucy had always looked up to these art people and had only been treated with polite condescension. As Naparsteck explains, the artists in *Young Hearts Crying* are careless egotists who “use their art to justify the pain they cause to others.”³⁸³ To Tom Nelson, Paul Maitland, and even Carl Traynor, art (or writing, in Traynor’s case) is a field of activity in which professionalism and success is everything and impassioned amateurs like Lucy Davenport or underachievers like Michael Davenport have no place in it.

Interestingly, the minor quarrel between Michael and Lucy on the matter of art taste before they married is replayed during their last meeting, when Michael pays an impromptu visit to Lucy in her Boston house and notices her curtains whose colors do not match.³⁸⁴ Lucy explains that the curtain design “seemed like an interesting idea: having everything clash on purpose” in a parody of bohemian eccentricity.³⁸⁵ When Michael, in a replay of their earlier quarrel over the meaning of an abstract painting, again doesn’t “get it,” Lucy, reacts with similar impatience at Michael’s obtuseness, “as if reproving the kind of dull-witted listener who assumes that every story must have a point,” only to concede that she has grown tired of the clashing curtains and will “probably put up regular curtains eventually.”³⁸⁶ During their final meeting, Lucy looks serenely self-confident as she admits to Michael something she has been hiding for years, a realization of having wasted her life feeling as “a ridiculed, picked-on, wretchedly unpopular little boarding-school girl whose only friend in the world was her *art* teacher.”³⁸⁷ Having been hurt by the cruelty of the people who she loved and befriended, Lucy now feels the liberty to dismiss therapy and art for good since these proved ineffective crutches that made her dissatisfaction with life more painful. When Michael shares his long-term distrust of psychiatrists and proposes a toast to “fuck psychiatry,” Lucy agrees and counteroffers a toast to “fuck art,” wondering whether it is not “funny how we’ve gone chasing after [art] all our lives? Dying to be close to anyone who seemed to understand it, as if that could possibly help.”³⁸⁸ As Naparsteck points out, “the desire to be artists” makes “many characters in the novel pretentious” which contributes to the unhappiness of themselves and the people close to them.³⁸⁹ However, while Lucy is

³⁸² *YHC*, 399.

³⁸³ Naparsteck, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 132.

³⁸⁴ Castronovo and Goldleaf note that this meeting is inspired by the closure of Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education* in which two former partners meet and swap stories of their lives. Quoted in Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 138.

³⁸⁵ *YHC*, 413.

³⁸⁶ *YHC*, 413-14.

³⁸⁷ *YHC*, 418.

³⁸⁸ *YHC*, 419.

³⁸⁹ Naparsteck, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 133.

finally able to rid herself of her obsession with art, Michael is not, which makes his attempt at coming to terms with himself all the more difficult.

Young Hearts Crying is a story of Michael and Lucy Davenport, two disappointed dreamers who try to make their ambition transform into success but fail. Michael's problem is the fact that he is unable to share Lucy's final rejection of art since for him, poetry equals life and he has no substance and identity without it. Walking back to his hotel, Michael realizes that he does not have to spend his whole life making the same mistakes and that his marriage to Sarah is still salvageable and worth saving, for his young second wife has given him time to pull himself together and "there would be no more plunging ahead in pursuit of ephemeral things."³⁹⁰ Both Michael and Lucy thus end up as serene survivors of their earlier mistakes and mishaps, becoming "more accepting of who they [are]."³⁹¹ To quote Horney again, the Davenports are, by the end of *Young Hearts Crying*, people who have transcended their neurotic anxiety and matured into accepting their "place in the world and the responsibility that goes with that acceptance."³⁹² For Lucy, this newly-found stability means a life alone, without the burden of her inheritance. Without the need to produce an art masterpiece and approval of others, she finds simple fulfilment in doing volunteer work with immediate results and satisfaction. For Michael, the acceptance of who he is will probably lead him back to his young second wife, now that he is able to appreciate her stabilizing effect upon their marriage and he looks hopefully toward the future development of his marriage since Sarah "had never been that kind of girl who would collaborate in allowing her future to fall apart."³⁹³

Michael Davenport is a writer who has sacrificed everything to the long-term pursuit of perfection in his chosen field of creative work yet has failed to achieve his goals. As Bull explains, Michael's position of "the initially promising, but underperforming poet" renders him unable to face the fact that his life and career has not "pan out as planned" as he faces "the very possibility that his work would soon be entirely forgotten."³⁹⁴ Michael's failure to realize the futility and ostracization of his professional endeavor is a manifestation of the trademark American anxiety "of the male writer struggling for masculine authority" which has been a dominant aspect of American literature "for close to 150 years" as the author "may cast himself as a man of business, as a man of action, but the solitary, silent, inward-facing aspects of the work will always resist such claims."³⁹⁵

³⁹⁰ YHC, 421.

³⁹¹ Naparstek, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 133.

³⁹² Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 361.

³⁹³ YHC, 421.

³⁹⁴ Bull, "A Thing Made of Words," 233.

³⁹⁵ Bull, "A Thing Made of Words," 162.

Another explanation of the reason why Michael is doomed to remain living in his delusions about writing, poetry, art, and success while Lucy has managed to break free from a lifetime of social and artistic humiliation could again be found in Horney's work on neurosis. She explains that every artist, professional or amateur, might benefit from the realization that "the existing gifts [of the creative artist] are independent of neurosis [...] and [that] neurosis has a considerable share in preventing their [creative] expression."³⁹⁶ Michael's stubborn subscription to the idea of himself as the tortured poet whose mental problems are a prerequisite for doing his best creative work are false since the decision to cherish his neurotic responses to the world brings creative impotence rather than inspiration to prolific writing. Unlike Michael, Lucy realizes that the primary reason why her life was full of disappointment is the mishandling of her inheritance and a wrong mental attitude toward her art activities and friends. When she gives her money away and takes up volunteering for Amnesty International, she becomes a happier person who is able to enjoy life and defend her actions

because [her volunteer work]'s real. It's real. Nobody can deny it; nobody can shrug it off, or make fun of it, or ever take it away. [...] When you do this kind of work you're in touch with reality every day, and that simply wasn't true in any of the – any of the other things I've tried.³⁹⁷

According to Horney, the neurotic who resorts to withdrawal from life as a way to combat their anxiety may still find a cure to their problems by lessening their "standards of absolute perfection," which, in turn, contributes to the decrease of feelings of failure and inadequacy, and to one becoming less dependent on the analysis and more confident of one's own ability to overcome one's inner conflict and neurotic symptoms.³⁹⁸ Moreover, this attitude helps one to feel "less threatened by others, or less hostile toward them," which, in turn, enables one to assume "friendly feelings for [others]" and increases one's self-confidence.³⁹⁹ Although Lucy has spent a lifetime wanting affection and seeking fulfilment through art and friendship with artist friends, she ultimately finds both in her volunteer work, a field in which perfection is irrelevant and competition does not matter.

When Lucy and Michael part, he feels that it is good "to be walking with such a nice, brave, forthright woman—a woman who [finally] knew how to speak her mind when she felt like it, and who understood the restorative value of silence."⁴⁰⁰ Ironically, Michael never realizes that it was his obstinacy that accounted for much of their suffering while they were together. When Michael returns to his hotel, he realizes the stupidity of his hysterical long-

³⁹⁶ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 328.

³⁹⁷ *YHC*, 417-18.

³⁹⁸ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 363.

³⁹⁹ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 363.

⁴⁰⁰ *YHC*, 420.

distance calls to his young second wife, wondering if “people really say [silly vindictive] things like that, or was it a kind of [theatrical] talk heard only in the movies?”⁴⁰¹ In the absence of faith, Michael relies, like Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*, on his ability to muster the stock responses to problems which are inspired by lines spoken by the macho, self-confident male stars in Hollywood films.⁴⁰²

In many ways, *Young Hearts Crying* is a novel of in which the protagonists, Michael and Lucy Davenport, just grow old and realize they have spent their lives pursuing the wrong horizons and trying to win respect and affection from the wrong people. As Castronovo and Goldleaf observe, the tragic element of the novel (an a typically Yatesian one) is in the fact that Michael and Lucy feel forced to live their lives as if based on an outside “[film] script that forces them to inflict pain and endure it.”⁴⁰³ Not being able to tell the difference between submission to life’s realities and acting bravely on their own, they repeat their mistakes even after their marriage dissolves.

From the psychological perspective, Lucy Davenport is, in a way, like April Wheeler of *Revolutionary Road*, a lonely, reserved person whose neurotic need for affection and approval is unfulfilled for most of her life. The problem starts in Lucy’s lonely childhood as she is traumatized by her aloof, cold, unloving parents who ignore her while being more interested in the pursuit of upper-class leisure activities.⁴⁰⁴ As a woman, Lucy repeatedly tries to devote her life to a man who she thinks needs her support and who might reciprocate her affection. This approach to relationships with men, however, brings her only disappointment and unhappiness, to which she reacts with resentment as she gradually withdraws from socializing with people altogether. According to Horney, one’s moving away from people (withdrawal), is one of the three major neurotic reactions to anxiety-raising conflicts in one’s life. The other two possible reactions are moving toward people (compliance) and moving against people (aggression).⁴⁰⁵ In the case of Lucy Davenport, her compliant embrace of the way she is to act in a social setting is based on what other people expect of her, which is a situation that forces her to move away from people whenever their response to her art, love, or friendship does not correspond to her self image.

In *Young Hearts Crying*, Yates deals with the theme of artists in suburbia, a contradiction in terms if one considers the proliferation of critical reflections about the

⁴⁰¹ YHC, 421.

⁴⁰² Yates’s characters often imitate the behavior, poses, and speech of actors in the films they like. For example, see Charlton Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 17-18, on how Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road* often resorts to using performative poses to cover their inauthentic behavior with actor-like pretension that people mistake for the ingenuity.

⁴⁰³ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 139.

⁴⁰⁴ This interpretation is based on the way Lucy’s parents treat her as a young woman and later housewife as Yates provides no factual details from Lucy’s childhood in the novel.

⁴⁰⁵ For more details, see Karen Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts* (New York: Norton, 1945), 34-47.

intellectual and artistic vacuity of postwar suburban communities.⁴⁰⁶ Paul Maitland and Tom Nelson start out as city-based bohemian artists by choice, yet they are not opposed to moving beyond their city-based existence and jump at the chance to move to fashionable suburbs as soon as they can. By contrast, the Davenports fail to see this manifestation of upward social mobility in their friends.⁴⁰⁷ Pat, the wife of Tom Nelson, once tells the story of her painter husband's inability to explain his profession to a wealthy conservative neighbor in the snobbish suburban community the Nelsons move to. The neighbor thinks that "a fine-arts painter" who can afford to live in the suburb has to live on some kind of inherited money, or, on "a trust fund" while he paints as a hobby, since a career in the arts, in popular understanding, does not pay and only a rich amateur can afford to pursue it.⁴⁰⁸ As Charlton-Jones explains, Michael Davenport's problem as a writer and family man is the fact that he has no interesting identity to boast of save that of a sanctimonious Harvard graduate and war veteran whose party antics are embarrassing rather than funny.⁴⁰⁹ As a writer, he only can think of himself as a "struggling" poet whose bohemian decision to live as a poor man and suffer is a mark of pretension rather than strength and perseverance. It is also ironic, since his first marriage to Lucy, a millionaire, makes the self-imposed bohemian struggle to succeed in his literary genre ridiculous and unnecessary. However, it is Yates's skill as realist that makes reading *Young Hearts Crying* worth the experience even if the quirks of Michael Davenport whose pretension and denigration of his wife's inheritance make him "an unlikeable character" with little substance and identity of his own, whose only talent is for neurotic outbursts of society-bashing when his writing does not go well, and for ruining his own life and those of the women who love him.

Horney argues that "the frequently expressed conviction of the value of neurosis for artistic creativity is unfounded" since, even though the neurotic conflicts of the artist within himself and with his environment "may contribute to an incentive for doing creative work," may even become the subject of his work, the artist ultimately "can create only to the extent to which his real self is alive, giving him the capacity for deep personal experiences and the spontaneous desire as well as the ability to express them."⁴¹⁰ This may explain the long-term inability of Michael to produce any poetry that would match the moderate success of his first

⁴⁰⁶ For a rare analysis of the complex responses of suburbanites to their neighbors who are (fine arts) painters, see the story of the author's painter wife in Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 203-4.

⁴⁰⁷ This development is presented by the move from the city to the suburb which both Paul Maitland and Tom Nelson undertake as soon as they can afford it. While the initial attitude of Maitland towards suburbia is negative, the attitude of Tom Nelson toward commercial success in art is pragmatic from the moment he is introduced.

⁴⁰⁸ See *YHC*, 73.

⁴⁰⁹ See Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 196.

⁴¹⁰ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 331-2.

book and the failure of Lucy to transfer her vaguely defined identity into an acting performance or a work of art.

Michael Davenport's pathetic effort to be an authentic character and artist is reminiscent of the futile struggle of Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road* who also desires to do something great and authentic but does not know how to go about it. While Frank reserves his most creative efforts to the writing of technical manuals at work, working on a stone path in front of his house, and sanctimonious evaluations of suburban life his wife, Michael's performance in his technical writer's job which he despises remains strictly utilitary as he considers sticking to his commercial as the only way he can "stay true to artistic ideals while at the same time earn enough money to support himself and his family."⁴¹¹ Clearly, Michael's refusal to use Lucy's inheritance to buy the time and freedom to write the books he wants seems at the basis of Michael's long-term crisis, along with his inability to learn from past mistakes.

The Wheelers as well as the Davenports, protagonist couples in *Revolutionary Road* and *Young Hearts Crying*, respectively, are portrayed by Yates as pathetic strivers who are unable to see through the self-deception they have about their own uniqueness and originality. Their obsession with external marks of success in the workplace, family, and art, is also the reason for their unhappy lives since the more they try to achieve something extraordinary, the more their mediocrity strikes them down. While Lucy Davenport becomes reconciled with the art of losing, which is a liberating thought that brings her peace of mind, April Wheeler is unable to cope with the devastating realization that her illusions have been all wrong, and takes her life as a response to this crushing realization. One cannot agree, however, with Castronovo and Goldleaf, who argue that Lucy by the end of *Young Hearts Crying* becomes "something of a shell, an April Wheeler who doesn't kill herself."⁴¹² The implication of this statement is that April's suicide is a commendable act of moral strength and affirmation of April's defiant identity, which it is not. As I have shown above, it is Lucy Davenport, not April Wheeler, who manifests survivor skills and adaptability as she admirably faces her history of wrong decisions to reach a modicum of satisfaction in her later life when she is able to change her attitude and expectations and becomes moderately happy. Unlike Lucy, Michael Davenport remains the foolish striver for success who is on the brink of ruining his second marriage with his continued reliance on theatrical mannerisms and an outdated conception of himself as the 1940s poet, boxer, veteran, and skeptic who does not realize that the postwar decades in America come to favor the new identities of

⁴¹¹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 114.

⁴¹² Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 139.

“self-possessed artists and trendy beautiful girls”⁴¹³ rather than the tortured poetic displays of artistic ambition of an anti-establishment pessimist and bohemian.

April Wheeler and Lucy Davenport both suffer from placing too much emphasis on persuading others of their worth. A useful comparison might be also made between the role of the acting experience for both characters. Using their acting opportunity to leave the stifling environment of their domestic roles, both April and Lucy set their eyes on the one-time chance to persuade the public of their worth. While April’s one attempt to play the romantic protagonist of *The Petrified Forest* becomes a humiliating fiasco, Lucy’s involvement in a professional production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a much more accomplished acting achievement. In different yet complementary ways, the acting experience serves the same purpose for April and Lucy. Horney emphasises the fact that the inner conflict for neurotic women is possible to define as the problem of how to negotiate the demands of “love and work on the basis of cultural conditions.”⁴¹⁴ Since working or the pursuit of hobbies is never easy for the woman who wants to “combine a career with being a wife and a mother,”⁴¹⁵ April and Lucy both eagerly jump at the chance to act in a play, hoping to please their own neurotic ambition as well as to win recognition for their effort. As has been explained, the acting experience proves disappointing for April and Lucy alike, even if the general quality of acting of each protagonist in each theater production is different, which also holds for the performance of each woman in her lead role. While the Laurel Players production of *The Petrified Forest*, which is portrayed in the beginning of *Revolutionary Road*, is an example of how beginner cast (with the exception of April Wheeler) is crippled by their lack of skill and stage fright into a performance full of blunders that ultimately sink April’s own honest attempt to stand out in the lead role, the performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in *Young Hearts Crying* has every facet of a professional production. The role of Lucy in the performance is reversed—while April was the only semi-skilled actress in the Laurel Players cast, Lucy is the only amateur in a cast of young but experienced professionals who just need somebody to fill in a vacant lead role. Comparing the two, Lucy’s performance is not so disappointing as April’s, yet she, too, feels hurt in her neurotic pride and reacts, like April, by quitting on the world of drama and withdrawing into her domestic routine.

When the recognition for their acting does not come, both April and Lucy react with self-loathing, verbal aggression (especially April), and withdrawal (both).⁴¹⁶ As Horney documents, excessive faith in one’s own ability to succeed in a chosen social role [including

⁴¹³ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 139.

⁴¹⁴ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 354.

⁴¹⁵ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 354.

⁴¹⁶ See Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 25.

that of a performing artist] is also a manifestation of one's will "to express [one's] idealized self, to prove it in action," which, in turn, "grows into a more comprehensive drive [...] *the search for glory*."⁴¹⁷ In the case of Michael Davenport, his quest for glory is flawed from the start, as he chooses to compete in a game with no clear victors but many possible losers. Unlike Lucy, who ultimately sees through the self-deception in each of her art-pursuing periods so that she is able to quit and move on with her life, Michael is doomed to keep chasing excellence and external recognition for his poetry without ever fully realizing the foolishness of his pursuit. As Castronovo and Goldleaf document, Michael is a pathetic "bigmouth who violates the proprieties not because he's a superior person [that he would love to be] but because he has driven himself to be special."⁴¹⁸ As usual, Yates portrays Michael's pathetic struggle to write more good poetry books to equal the moderate success of his first with brutal and unsparing honesty. At the end of *Young Hearts Crying*, Michael's impossible struggle to succeed is rendered pathetic but believable as a valid response of a conservative man whose values and beliefs remain constant even though the people around him change and adapt.

What Yates's April Wheeler and Lucy Davenport also share is their dislike of the socially-prescribed role for women as homemakers, wives, and mothers. Their failure to find fulfilment in these roles goes against the medialized social norms of the time, which is why their anxiety and withdrawal from these roles intensifies even more.⁴¹⁹ Poet and feminist Adrienne Rich remembers how in the 1950s, every American woman dreamed of becoming a suburban housewife whose white-collar husband would enjoy an upwardly mobile career as people all over the United States "were moving out to the suburbs, [and] technology was going to be the answer to everything, even sex; the family was in its glory."⁴²⁰ However, as Stephanie Coontz documents, such idealization of the joy of starting a model nuclear family in the postwar suburbs was often based on false premises of universal optimism and prosperity as the model family myth that Rich speaks of having had in the 1950s faced multiple challenges in the suburbs such as growing isolation, conformity, and separation of the young suburbanites from the traditional networks of extended family and a wider community of neighbors which they had access to in the city.⁴²¹ Truly enough, neither April Wheeler nor Lucy Davenport feels comfortable in the socially-prescribed role of isolated

⁴¹⁷ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 24.

⁴¹⁸ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 139.

⁴¹⁹ For the sake of simplification, I here consider only the 1950s to compare the two novels, even though *YHC* reaches as far as the 1970s, by which time many of the 1950s attitudes toward pregnancy, motherhood, and career choices of American women had changed.

⁴²⁰ See Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *College English* 34, no. 1 (1972): 22.

⁴²¹ For a recent re-evaluation of the myth of the model 1950s nuclear family in the United States that was promoted by the media of the time, see Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 36-50.

suburban housewife whose only major social contact is with her husband when he comes back from work in the evening tired and in need of his wife's attentive ear. According to William H. Chafe, the typical male suburbanite in postwar America could not afford to stay at home during the working hours of the week since he would have to commute to work, leaving

the home almost before daybreak, returning just in time for a romp with the kids, perhaps a quick swing, and then a kiss goodnight. Mothers, meanwhile, held down the fort at home, cleaned the house, transported the children to their daily activities, participated in various P.T.A. and church groups, and still found time, in the midst of all, for kaffeeklatsching with women friends and discussing childrearing.⁴²²

April and Lucy, however, are not portrayed as venturing outside their homes for any of the above-mentioned community activities and ways for women to socialize with their neighbors. Yates's characters in *Revolutionary Road* and *Young Hearts Crying* (and in his other suburban fiction too) are strangely uninterested in taking part in any of the many possibilities for suburban community involvement—all they do is stay at home and, occasionally, go to parties. Robert Wuthnow explains that in the postwar suburbs, “people were troubled by spatial dislocation and [...] they needed to find a space in which they could belong in order to know who they really were.”⁴²³ It is perhaps the principal cause of the failure of the Wheelers' and Davenports' marriage in the suburbs that neither couple is really able to see themselves as rooted in their suburban home and proud of that living in that environment.⁴²⁴ A major reason why the Wheelers and the Davenports feel out of place in the postwar suburbs and alienated from their homes, neighbors, and even themselves, is not only their sanctimonious attitude toward their neighbors (especially strong in case of the Wheelers), but also their failure to localize their own identities and future in the suburbs. According to Wuthnow, 1950s suburbanites were able to “make a new start for themselves” in their homes, which could be seen as spaces “nurturing to the soul as they were comforting to the body,” and as social beings, the people in the suburbs could join one or more of the newly established suburban “civic groups, clubs, and religious organizations [and churches].”⁴²⁵

⁴²² William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 123-4.

⁴²³ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 38.

⁴²⁴ In *Young Hearts Crying*, the problem which the Davenports face in suburbia is, of course, compounded by the fact that they, based on the agreement which prevents them from using Lucy's inheritance to buy a suburban house, keep living in a sequence of shabby rented homes which they fail to properly identify with as their home.

⁴²⁵ Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 38.

The fact that neither April nor Lucy are portrayed as showing any interest in joining any suburban community group with shared interests explains why they at least seek an external outlet for their social ambition in acting or (in Lucy's case) in writing and painting. The failure of both women characters to resist the dominant patterns of postwar gendered domesticity in American suburbs and their refusal of the possibilities for community involvement provides an alternative interpretation for the way their marriages deteriorate and collapse as April, before her suicide, becomes irrevocably estranged from Frank and Lucy actually breaks up with Michael and divorces him. However, neither woman's decision to end her marriage is to be seen as a heroic, feminist affirmation of her identity, rather, it might be read as a sad failure to make the most of the suburban options and possibilities for the good life in the 1950s.⁴²⁶

In both novels, Yates dramatizes his life-long ambivalence about the utility of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Frank and April Wheeler discuss the possibility of April seeking the help of analysts, Lucy and Michael Davenport both undergo analysis, an experience they come to resent later. Ultimately, the Davenports leave their analysts and feel having wasted time and money and none the wiser about their mental problems. After her divorce from Michael, Lucy Davenport repeatedly storms out of her analyst's office, dismissing his profession as "a slippery, irresponsible business" in which the analysts "suck people in when they don't know where else to turn, then [...] seduce them into telling you all their secrets until they're utterly naked."⁴²⁷ During his final visit to Lucy, Michael agrees with her repudiation of analysts, claiming they "give themselves a whole lot more credit than they deserve."⁴²⁸ May explains that the use of help from psychologists was, for the postwar American suburbanites, different for men and for women. While male suburbanites "claimed that "anxieties" or "inferiority complexes" generally resulted from problems at work," their suburban wives "identified stress at home, or resentment against one's spouse or domestic situation" as the source of their problems.⁴²⁹ Ironically, while men like Frank Wheeler thus "could find comfort, solace, and a release from stress" in their home, the women's problems originated in the same home and thus their use of professional help was to "help them adapt" to home-based stressful situations since the women had no easy way to escape the domestic situation like the men did (who could typically leave for work, go drinking with friends, have an affair in town, and so on). The situation is more complicated in the case of Michael

⁴²⁶ While feminism is not a presence at all in *Revolutionary Road* (although it is possible to read the novel from the feminist perspective), in *Young Hearts Crying*, Michael's second wife Sarah does become enamored of the women's movement in the early 1970s, to the horror of her chauvinist husband who fears an imminent end of their marriage and reacts with unfounded aggression.

⁴²⁷ *YHC*, 138.

⁴²⁸ *YHC*, 416.

⁴²⁹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 178.

Davenport, a home-based male breadwinner whose constant presence at home (compared to the daily weekday absences of an office worker like Frank Wheeler who leaves in the morning and comes back in the evening) contributes to an early escalation of the marital conflict with his first wife Lucy.

In terms of the representation of gender roles, *Young Hearts Crying* is a much more traditionalist novel than *Revolutionary Road*. The women in *Young Hearts Crying*, from Lucy Davenport to Pat Nelson and Peggy Maitland, are portrayed as content and submissive suburban housewives who get university education but are willing to put the experience aside to provide moral and emotional support to their creative and breadwinning husbands. With the exception of Lucy's creative period after her divorce, she is never a person to question her prescribed domestic and social roles of mother, wife, and homemaker. The failed marriage of the Davenports might be analyzed from the Horneyan perspective as caused by the reactions of both spouses to the impossible expectations and unrealistic career dreams. Both Michael and Lucy are victims of their neurotic obsession to be liked and respected for what are and what they do, and when they do not get the respect they crave, Michael reacts with aggression while Lucy silently withdraws away from her husband and friends.

For Lucy, she spends her life fearing that she might be considered a snob, which forces her to overdo her attempts to fit in with her socially inferior friends and husband. In different ways, Michael and Lucy try to be what they are not, interesting and authentic personalities whose ambition to lead interesting lives is also what prevents them from achieving it. Michael wishes to become a successful poet and intellectual, yet, when he meets really dedicated and authentic artists like Paul Maitland, he feels like an impostor who is intimidated by their bohemian attitude and by the recognition they get from friends and peers. While both Michael Davenport and Tom Nelson are self-conscious regarding their masculinity, their attitude to their art is different—Nelson “achieves his effects with hardly any effort and is as cool and casual as Michael is worrisome, clumsy, and self-conscious.”⁴³⁰

Young Hearts Crying also satirizes the intellectual snobbery of people who denigrate suburbia without understanding its real importance for the modern and healthy lifestyle of young postwar American families. When Michael's writer friend Bill Brock and his glamorous girlfriend Diana Maitland (who is the object of Michael's long-term platonic love interest) visit the Davenports in their modest house in suburban Larchmont, their reaction to the Davenports' move from the city to the suburb is cruel and snobbish. Diana claims her painter brother Paul “would absolutely, literally die here.”⁴³¹ Ironically, Paul Maitland and his wife soon after move to a suburban community called Tonapac, while his city-based, art-

⁴³⁰ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 135.

⁴³¹ *YHC*, 29.

loving sister later dates and marries a successful theatre producer and also settles in a suburban house. Both couples thus willingly become participants in the postwar suburban narrative of secluded conformity which they used to love to denigrate.

May argues that in typical 1950s suburban fiction, such as Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, the focus is on the protagonist as "the new type of corporate hero who accommodates himself to bureaucratic constraints and wants to get ahead without sacrificing his family. Success is defined not by being at the top, but by having a secure, balanced life."⁴³² By contrast, success in *Revolutionary Road* and *Young Hearts Crying* remains situated outside the nuclear family, in the hazy and ill-defined region of professional and artistic recognition. Still, Joseph George argues that the majority of American 1950s suburban fiction remains family-oriented as it "focuses on married characters" and "the marriage pact [...] as the focal point" of the stories from this period.⁴³³ The difference between *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and Yates's two novels under review here is in the fact that for Betsy and Tom Rath, their marriage is a source of rejuvenating energy, "an intimate respite from the demanding outside world,"⁴³⁴ while the marriage of the Wheelers and Davenports is an exasperating battlefield of debilitating neurotic conflicts which are repeatedly taken out by one spouse upon the other as the gender roles become fluid within the problematic framework of collapsing suburban domesticity in both novels.

Neither the Wheelers in *Revolutionary Road* nor the Davenports in *Young Hearts Crying* are family-oriented adults—they keep quarreling all the time, do not care much for their children or houses, and complain about not being sufficiently admired as the only authentic and original people in their suburban neighborhood.⁴³⁵ The parental neglect of children is more extreme in *Young Hearts Crying*, where Laura Davenport, an only child of Lucy and Michael, gets so lonely and bored that she invents Melissa, the younger "sister that she wished for, and dreamed of"⁴³⁶ with whom she talks often to help her cope with the emotional deprivation and loneliness that she experiences at home. By making up a little sister and playing the game of taking care of her, Laura deals imaginatively with the problem of being habitually neglected by her self-centered parents (and, later, by her divorced mother).⁴³⁷ Laura's invention of a little sister to talk to and protect is also an ingenious way of coping with the stressful atmosphere caused by their parents' collapsing marriage. With

⁴³² May, *Homeward Bound*, 167.

⁴³³ Joseph George, *Postmodern Suburban Spaces*, 130.

⁴³⁴ George, *Postmodern Suburban Spaces*, 130.

⁴³⁵ This is especially true of the Wheelers in *Revolutionary Road* (see *RR*, 53-4).

⁴³⁶ *YHC*, 117-18.

⁴³⁷ As I have shown in my discussion of *Revolutionary Road* above, the children in Yates's fiction are marginalized yet function as essential reflectors of their parents' selfish and deluded actions. Unable to cope with the destabilizing situations (such as vicious quarrels of the Wheelers, and aloofness of the Davenports) created by their parents, the children typically respond in imaginative ways to survive their parent's conflicts and maintain a sense of healthy identity despite living in an environment that problematizes such effort.

Laura's imagined character of Melissa, Yates mirrors the inventive ways in which Michael, the younger son of the Wheelers in *Revolutionary Road*, tries to create a safe space for himself and his sister behind the family house, away from their parents' traumatizing presence.⁴³⁸ The importance of children in Yates's suburban fiction thus cannot be overestimated and is a testimony to the realism with which the author portrays the different aspects of life in postwar suburbia.⁴³⁹

The role of the suburban domestic space as a major factor which shapes the construction of domesticity is of primary importance for Yates. In *Revolutionary Road*, the house functions as the contested space onto which the neurotic ambition of April and Frank Wheeler is projected by themselves in an attempt to blame a material object for their own inner conflicts. By contrast, in *Young Hearts Crying*, the ownership of a suburban house functions first as an unattainable ideal of permanence and safety, as it is only after Lucy Davenport divorces her husband that she is able to fully enjoy the benefits of life in a solid, well-designed suburban house that she no longer rents but actually gets to own, a house equipped with the best of appliances, furniture, and decorations that her money can buy. While Yates has been accused of exploiting the formulaic 1950s narratives of suburban critique by social scientists, in *Revolutionary Road* and *Young Hearts Crying* he conveys the notion that the Wheelers and the Davenports experience the breakup of their marriage in the suburban setting, yet the suburbs are not to blame for that. The suburban house in the fiction of Yates functions as a backdrop for foregrounding the long-lasting conflicts between the husband and wife, not as the space which causes these problems to happen.

Charlton-Jones mentions a puzzling aspect of Yates's fiction. Although his protagonists typically "earn their own downfall," and "the reader always know that they will fail," Yates manages to sustain the reader's interest since one "always identifies with them, not despite, but because of, their failings."⁴⁴⁰ As a chronicle of the diminished lives of American suburbanites told in a style notable for the "incisive and unsparing characterization and dialogue within a traditional form [of realist storytelling]," Yates seems to have few equals. In *Revolutionary Road* and *Young Hearts Crying*, postwar American suburbs are presented as a fitting background for Yates's dramatization of his characters' struggle to achieve their vaguely defined dreams within the challenging framework of normative gender roles and career options. While these two novels are in many ways a response to the literary

⁴³⁸ See *RR*, 204.

⁴³⁹ The suburban novels by other writers of the 1950s to 1980s, which is an era that corresponds to Yates's writing career, focused on chronicling the problems of adult characters. See, for example, *Rabbit, Run* by John Updike, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* by Sloan Wilson, and *Couples* by John Updike. Major suburban novels that would focus on children and adolescent characters as protagonists, such as *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides, and *Mona in the Promised Land* by Gish Jen, only appeared in the 1990s and later (the suburban novels of Tom Perrotta, for example).

⁴⁴⁰ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 220.

representations of American suburbia that one finds in earlier novels such as *Babbitt*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, Yates's protagonists in *Revolutionary Road* and *Young Hearts Crying* point toward a changing dynamic in the way domesticity, gender roles, and mental problems are conditioned by the suburban lifestyle of the protagonists. Still, it might be said that the complex identities which people develop after moving to the suburbs remain survival reactions to the possibility of sliding into suburban conformity and alienation. More than any of his novelist predecessors, Yates succeeds in portraying an alternative reading of the suburbia as a place of white middle-class victimization of the people who live there. The suburbanites in Yates's novels are victims of their own neurotic responses to conflicts and social expectations, yet the reader's response is that of sympathy and understanding for their failed pursuit of diminished and increasingly unattainable dreams. It is only when these characters realize their complicity in the suburban narrative of uneventful, conformist, or unsuccessful life that they may start to live as interesting and authentic people with a vision and purpose that is conditioned by their first taking roots in their own domestic environment as well as by their involvement with activities of civic groups within the larger suburban community. As Joseph George explains, suburbia may be "a place where the chosen self can live securely and freely," and characters in Yates's *Revolutionary Road* and *Young Hearts Crying* are offered the chance "to live where they want and be who they wish to be."⁴⁴¹ What the Wheelers and Davenports do not realize, however, and what breaks them in the end, is their failure to appreciate themselves as authentic beings and to integrate with other people in their suburban community on the basis of shared cultural experience. Authentic suburban identities are possible in postwar America, yet these may only be achieved "by [the protagonist] relating with other people" in the suburban environment that is defined by "the mixture of proximity and autonomy" that enables a large degree of privacy but also requires the individual to become a social being whose spouse, friends, and neighbors respond to one's social performance in the suburbs by "confirming and contradicting it."⁴⁴² The fact that neither the Wheelers nor the Davenports succeed in developing a viable suburban identity which might enable a fulfilling and diverse lifestyle suggests that the problem is not in the deadening effect of the suburban setting upon the people but, rather, in the destructive way the protagonists respond to their failure to address their neurotic symptoms which originated in their lives prior to their move to the suburbs. The protagonists of both novels also fail to live the suburban version of the American Dream—the Wheelers by pretending to live like a childless couple without parental responsibility, the Davenports by making the silly decision to avoid using Lucy's

⁴⁴¹ Joseph George, *Postmodern Suburban Spaces*, 180.

⁴⁴² George, *Postmodern Suburban Spaces*, 180.

inheritance and to live as paupers in rented suburban housing in a socially embarrassing position which escalates their marital discord to the point of divorce. The novel is thus a memorable story of class incompatibility of two partners whose unrealistic expectations and prejudice come in the way of their happiness.

A Special Providence (1969) is Yates's second novel on which he worked for much of the 1960s. It is a jarring combination of a suburban and war novel and fictionalized autobiography in what is considered to be the author's weakest book.⁴⁴³ The second part of the novel provides the first extensive treatment of the prewar suburb in Yates's work, a setting to which he would return in his fiction for the rest of his career.⁴⁴⁴ The suburban setting in this part of the novel is a catalyst for action characterization, yet it is not, per se, not to blame for the protagonists' failures and misfortune. As in other novels, the protagonists of *A Special Providence*, too, place too much faith in their deluded notions of authenticity and achievement and when these notions are projected onto the suburban setting, domestic space, and community, typical Yatesian disappointment or failure is sure to follow.⁴⁴⁵

The autobiographical bildungsroman starts with a prologue, situated in 1944, featuring the protagonist, eighteen-year-old Robert J. Prentice (called Bobby by his mother), who visits his mother Alice in New York City on a weekend's leave from his army service before he is sent over to Europe to fight.⁴⁴⁶ Bobby is introduced as a lonely, shy young man who travels to New York, "feeling lost and cramped and lightheaded" when he enters the crowds at the station but before he reaches his mother's place, he walks past other soldiers on leave who team up with their girlfriends which makes him "weak with envy."⁴⁴⁷ Through a series of flashbacks, Bobby's childhood is retrieved as an unhappy, unstable period of constant moving during which he "had spent most of his life in New York, or near it, but no section or street of it had ever felt like his neighborhood: he had never lived in one house for more than a year."⁴⁴⁸ During their dinner, his mother Alice reminisces about the old times with the real message being that she, "helpless and gentle, small and tired and anxious to please, she was asking [Bobby] to agree that her life was not a failure. [...] And did he realize

⁴⁴³ Richard Yates, *A Special Providence* (New York: Vintage, 2009). First published 1969. All subsequent quotes are from the 2009 edition. Hereinafter referred to as SP. For the negative appraisal of *A Special Providence*, see Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 397-400; and Naparstek, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 74-79. For Yates himself on the subject of considering this book his biggest literary failure, see DeWitt Henry, and Geoffrey Clark, "An Interview with Richard Yates," *Ploughshares* 1, no. 3 (1972): 70, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40349860>.

⁴⁴⁴ See my analysis of the prewar suburb in other Yates novels (such as *The Easter Parade* and *Cold Spring Harbor*) below.

⁴⁴⁵ For more on the tradition of critical misreading of the way in which American suburbs make people conformist, unhappy, and depressed, see my discussion of Yates's *Revolutionary Road* in this chapter above.

⁴⁴⁶ SP, 1-20.

⁴⁴⁷ SP, 1-2.

⁴⁴⁸ SP, 2.

[...] how remarkable and how gifted and how brave a woman [she] was?”⁴⁴⁹ It is revealed that Bobby as a child did love his mother “romantically, with an almost religious belief in her gallantry and goodness. [...] he would serve as her ally and defender against the crass and bullying materialism of the world.”⁴⁵⁰ For much of the 1930s, Alice’s “artistic career became a desperate and ever-thwarted effort played out against the background of the Great Depression, a hysterical odyssey that she always said was made bearable only by the “wonderful companionship” of her little boy.”⁴⁵¹ Karen Horney explains that such “search for glory” is a basic neurotic ambition that may combine the drive towards external success with “the drive toward vindictive triumph.”⁴⁵² A close mother-son relationship like that of Alice and Bobby Prentice influences the son, according to Elaine Tyler May, to become “weak and passive,” a victim of his mother’s “overprotection and overaffection.”⁴⁵³ After Bobby’s father died, Bobby had to take a factory job to help support his mother whose artist’s pretension and inability to earn a living suddenly posed a challenge to the family’s existence now that there were no more alimony payments. Bobby even started “to see himself as the hero of some inspiring movie about the struggles of the poor,” taking pride in having “had to quit school and support my mother.”⁴⁵⁴ The dinner before Bobby’s departure for war is marked by his inner struggle as he fights the impulse to shatter his mother’s delusion about her past achievement as a successful sculptor and respectable mother which is made worse by his own inability to break free from her possessive influence. Battling what Castronovo and Goldleaf sum up as “the lifetime’s worth of rage and love directed at an absurd parent,”⁴⁵⁵ Bobby decides to say nothing, leaving his mother content in the deluded notions of her own uniqueness and achievement. Bobby’s mature awakening is to the fact that his life is his own responsibility as he has to make the important decisions on his own and should not “blame his mother for his own lack of guts.”⁴⁵⁶ To hurt his mother with exposing her delusion will bring nothing but more pain to both of them, so Bobby decides to skip doing this, listening to her idealized memories of the past, “holding his mouth shut tight and allowing his fingers to twist and tear a raddled paper napkin in his lap.”⁴⁵⁷ Despite Bobby’s ambivalence towards his mother, he comes to cherish his last civilian night spent at her shabby apartment, realizing it is “hard to remember that he’d waked before dawn this morning to scrub his cartridge belt for inspection, jostled in the stinking latrine by men who

⁴⁴⁹ *SP*, 6.

⁴⁵⁰ *SP*, 8.

⁴⁵¹ *SP*, 7.

⁴⁵² Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 25-27.

⁴⁵³ May, *Homeward Bound*, 73.

⁴⁵⁴ *SP*, 11.

⁴⁵⁵ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 121.

⁴⁵⁶ *SP*, 18.

⁴⁵⁷ *SP*, 17.

told him to get the lead out of his ass. [...] he was only dimly and guiltily aware of the cruel silent rage that has poisoned his dinner.”⁴⁵⁸ The prologue ends with Bobby drifting off to sleep, feeling “privileged and safe, cradled in peace,” putting away the “deadly realities” of war which await him after the weekend.⁴⁵⁹

The first and third sections chronicle Bobby’s honest but futile attempts to make his mark as a man in the army during World War II, first in the training camp and later in the European theater of the war.⁴⁶⁰ Inserted in between the first and third sections is a flashback section focusing on Robert’s mother Alice who remembers his childhood (and her early motherhood) in the mid to late 1930s, a section which disrupts from the linear framework of chronicling Robert’s army career and could have worked better as a separate piece of fiction.⁴⁶¹ *A Special Providence* ends with an epilogue, placed just after the war, which returns to the lonely Alice Prentice who keeps living in idealized memories of herself as the sculptor mother of young Bobby in the 1930s, while her son tries to break free from her possessive love by staying in Europe after having fought in the war.⁴⁶² The title of the novel is ironic since both Robert and his mother are perennial losers who strive to defy their bad luck and achieve something memorable in life. Alice foolishly believes that “a special providence would always shine” on her and her son, and lives in her delusional conviction, “held against all possible odds, that both of them were somehow unique and important and could never die.”⁴⁶³ With the two protagonists of *A Special Providence*, Yates thus comes up with another version of small, diminished, but ambitious people whose inability to see their foolishness is presented to the reader for sympathy. The providence that Alice and Bobby seek is in their being allowed to try to live up to Alice’s false beliefs in their authenticity, uniqueness, and invulnerability. While Alice is a mediocre sculptor who spends her career dreaming of having her own “one-woman” exhibition and of winning the respect of rich art benefactors, Bobby is a weak, sissy boy who grows up resentful of his mother’s unhealthy influence over him and unable to develop a masculine identity of his own.

The second section, which is the part of *A Special Providence* that is relevant for my survey of Yates’s suburban fiction, is an extended reminiscence of Alice of the 1930s which she spent with young Bobby in a sequence of rented suburban lodgings.⁴⁶⁴ Alice’s suburban

⁴⁵⁸ *SP*, 19.

⁴⁵⁹ *SP*, 20.

⁴⁶⁰ *SP*, 23-108; 223-305.

⁴⁶¹ See Naparsteck, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 63-4.

⁴⁶² *SP*, 306-322. The topic of the son breaking away from the stifling influence of his mother is revisited in the closure of a later short story from *Liars in Love*, “Regards at Home,” in which Bill Grove (an alter-ego of Yates) leaves for Europe to break free from his possessive mother.

⁴⁶³ *SP*, 18.

⁴⁶⁴ *SP*, 111-220. For the autobiographical element of the prewar suburban period of Alice and Bobby Prentice in *A Special Providence*, see Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 20-36. Unlike the fictional Bobby Prentice of *A Special Providence*, who was an only child, Yates had an older sister, Ruth.

odyssey starts in Bethel, Connecticut, where she, a recently divorced mother whose sole income are modest alimony payments from her ex-husband George, rents “a fine old colonial house” which “was a pleasure – at least it would have been a pleasure if she’d had a man to share it with – and she had made a studio out of the old barn behind it.”⁴⁶⁵ No matter how high an opinion Alice has of herself, Yates presents her as the typical character of a selfish and deluded parent who is responsible for failing to provide a clean and safe home for her son. As Charlton-Jones explains, “the slovenly behavior of the maternal characters [such as Alice Prentice in *A Special Providence* or Gloria Drake in *Cold Spring Harbor*] at the heart of the dwellings Yates describes [...] provides a further indictment of the Yatesian concept of home.”⁴⁶⁶ The prewar Prentice household in *A Special Providence* is destabilizing for two reasons—due to the absence of the father figure and as a result of Alice’s failure to act as an adequate homemaker and mother.

In her delusion, Alice fails to see that home ownership and being part of a complete nuclear family is a prerequisite to social acceptance in the prewar suburbs. As Constance Perin explains, “being “able to own” is a threshold criterion to social personhood that renters [in suburbia], by definition, do not meet; they partake of less citizenship and on that account have lower status.”⁴⁶⁷ Alice is a class-obsessed dreamer who tries to succeed as a suburbanite on her own terms—as a sculptor who gives art workshops to upper-class suburban women and works on her own art (which is average at best and does not sell)—failing repeatedly on both counts while she pesters her ex-husband George for more funding beyond the alimony payments, to which he typically agrees after much admonishment.⁴⁶⁸ Alice craves the suburban lifestyle for two reasons. First, she thinks that joining the ranks of suburbanites is a ticket to higher social standing. Second, renting a suburban house enables her to set up a studio in the garage which is something she could not do in a cramped city apartment. Neither hope of Alice is fulfilled in the 1930s suburbs—as a divorced mother who tries to make her living as a suburban artist, she is ignored by her neighbors while her work never reaches the level of achievement she craves. When her social and professional failure sinks in, she reacts with moving to a new community. The effect of the peripatetic suburban lifestyle on her son is devastating—Bobby grows up shy, lonely, resentful of the absence of a father figure at home, and fearing interaction with the local children. Bobby’s childhood humiliation reaches its climax when Alice forces him to pose for her nude in her barn studio one day while local children gleefully watch through a crack in the wall.⁴⁶⁹ Charlton-Jones

⁴⁶⁵ *SP*, 111.

⁴⁶⁶ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 182.

⁴⁶⁷ Constance Perin, *Everything in Its Place: Social Order and Land Use in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 66.

⁴⁶⁸ *SP*, 112.

⁴⁶⁹ *SP*, 122-124.

highlights the fact that Alice “barely registers [Bobby’s] mortified state and insists he continue posing,” ignoring Bobby’s basic right to dignity and privacy in the face of public humiliation while she only focuses on finishing the statue at all costs.⁴⁷⁰ According to Bailey, the humiliating posing of Bobby is one of many autobiographical elements in the novel as Yates’s mother Dookie used, in a way similar to Alice Prentice, “the small, obliging Richard” as her “favorite model for her faunlets, often posed in the nude.”⁴⁷¹ Like the real Dookie Yates, Alice Prentice keeps working vigorously on her mediocre sculptures, and in her selfish delusion she pays little heed to her son’s needs. As in *Revolutionary Road* and *Young Hearts Crying*, the role of the child in the suburban section of *A Special Providence* is to highlight his parent’s deluded and selfish actions. All Alice cares about is finishing her current artwork which might, like any other work she has done in the past, cause a positive change in her career and improve her financial situation any time since, in her understanding of art and its marketability, “a big sale [of her artwork] or “one-man exhibition” was forever in the offing.”⁴⁷² Alice’s obsession with “the search for glory” goes hand in hand with what Horney calls projection of “the idealized self” whose creation is only possible with the help of the neurotic imagination as Alice “loses in the process” her “interest in truth” which accounts for her difficulty in distinguishing between genuine feelings, beliefs, strivings, and their artificial equivalents. [...] The emphasis [for the neurotic artist character like Alice] shifts from being to appearing.”⁴⁷³ Pretension and image of success is more than the actual achievement for Alice, a trait which Yates utilizes in many characters throughout his oeuvre.

After the failure and instability of their early suburban period, Alice and her son move back to New York City, where she meets Sterling Nelson, a charming Englishman who becomes her boyfriend and persuades her to move to Scarsdale, a fashionable suburban community where they co-rent a house.⁴⁷⁴ For a divorced mother without an adequate income, with a foreign boyfriend whose background is dubious at best, it is no surprise that Alice’s dream of being recognized in Scarsdale fails. She is completely ostracized and ignored as “nobody in Scarsdale called her anything at all” and none of their conservative neighbors “called her up or dropped in for a neighborly visit,” the new suburban community Alice moves to simply “behaved as though Alice and Sterling didn’t exist.”⁴⁷⁵ She thus resorts to disparaging the Scarsdale neighbors as conformist snobs while “electric trains drew the men away to the city each morning and the children were swallowed up by school”

⁴⁷⁰ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 172.

⁴⁷¹ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 21.

⁴⁷² Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 21.

⁴⁷³ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 38.

⁴⁷⁴ *SP*, 129-140.

⁴⁷⁵ *SP*, 147-8.

and the Scarsdale “women, alone in their big, impeccable houses, let their days slip away in endless rounds of triviality.”⁴⁷⁶ Alice further imagines the housewives of Scarsdale as

idling through easy household chores or giving instructions to their maids, and painting their fingernails and fixing their hair and compounding their lassitude by spending hours on the telephone with one another, talking of bridge clubs and luncheons and functions of the P.T.A.⁴⁷⁷

Sarah Jane Deutsch explains that interwar suburbs such as Scarsdale experienced a population explosion of newcomers who honored the gender division into “masculine cities and feminine suburbs.”⁴⁷⁸ The suburban domesticity in communities such as Scarsdale was, however, defined by complete nuclear families, so the divorced mother status of Alice Prentice makes her stand out as an oddity destined to remain an outcast with little potential of being recognized and befriended by the neighboring housewives (or stay-at-home wives). Ironically, she “didn’t care” since the new housing in Scarsdale offered ample room for her sculpting in the garage for her next attempt to produce enough work “to warrant a one-man show.”⁴⁷⁹ The obsession of Alice with achieving success with her art and social recognition in the conservative and intolerant suburban community of the 1930s is a manifestation of the Horneyan neurotic search for glory via vindictive triumph, which is a process during which the individual’s “chief aim is to put others to shame or defeat through one’s very success.”⁴⁸⁰ As Horney further specifies, the arrogant approach is a neurotic response to the hostile social reception of a person whose “vindictiveness [...] becomes a way of life” as the unrecognized suburban artist such as Alice Prentice needs to triumph in her field of expertise in order to match her own inflated notion of self-worth.⁴⁸¹

While Yates makes Alice’s quest for glory ridiculous as well as pathetic, it is important to realize that social success in 1930s American suburbs was less a function of a suburbanite’s professional achievement than of one’s ability to conform to the prewar ideal of suburban domesticity. As Margaret Marsh documents, in the 1930s, “the unsettled economic situation made the desire for a traditional family life understandable” while the government, private corporations, and the media made it clear that “the nuclear family, with the male breadwinner and female homemaker, ought to be considered the “normal” type of

⁴⁷⁶ *SP*, 147.

⁴⁷⁷ *SP*, 148.

⁴⁷⁸ Sarah Jane Deutsch, “From Ballots to Breadline: 1920-1940,” in *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*, edited by Nancy F. Cott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 439, <https://archive.org/details/nosmallcouragehi0000unse/page/472/mode/2up>.

⁴⁷⁹ *SP*, 148.

⁴⁸⁰ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 27.

⁴⁸¹ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 197.

family.”⁴⁸² After the impostor Sterling leaves for England and Alice is again left alone, she perseveres in her dogged pursuit of artistic success and the only interruption is a visit of sister Eva and her bridegroom Owen, a retired professor of history whose “booming voice and lumbering frame filled the house with authority [...] as if the house were his own and he were the host.”⁴⁸³ The male element is missing for much of Bobby’s suburban childhood while his mother, unaware of this lack, keeps playing the role of “a noble fugitive from a dull provincial family and husband” and “from the dull conventions of average people.”⁴⁸⁴

The next suburban move of Alice and Bobby is to Riverside, “an isolated pocket of grandeur” in the Hudson Valley, “a colony of handsome dwellings built as close as possible to the high-walled borders of a great private estate called Boxwood.”⁴⁸⁵ Alice’s delusion of having succeeded as a sculptor and art teacher reaches its peak during the stay at Boxwood, which is made possible by an arrangement with Mrs. Vander Meer, matriarch of the family which owns the Boxwood estate, who rents a few cottages on the estate grounds to artists and writers.⁴⁸⁶ Alice is fascinated by the proximity to upper-class grandeur that renting a cottage on the Boxwood property offers, so she goes ahead with the deal despite the fact that the rent (and tuition for the local school that Bobby is to attend) is well beyond her reach:

It had become her own plan, as firm and settled as any decision she had ever made. She and Bobby would live in the gatehouse; Bobby would attend Riverside Country Day [an expensive private school built on the estate grounds]; they would be among stimulating people like the Larkins, instead of the stuffy mediocrities of Scarsdale, and the whole charming new life would be made possible by her role as “artist in residence.”⁴⁸⁷

Refusing to be realistic, Alice gets “a good supply of personal stationery printed up” with the Boxwood address and writes “enthusiastic letters to everyone she knew who might be glad of her good fortune.”⁴⁸⁸ As Klinkowitz explains, she “falls for this planned community’s symbols of status, its high Episcopal church for her and its Country Day School for Bobby,” however, “her plans for supporting herself with sculpting soon collapses, as do Bobby’s academic fortunes.”⁴⁸⁹ Alice plunges into working on her own art and teaching art to the

⁴⁸² Margaret Marsh, *Suburban Lives*, 184-5.

⁴⁸³ *SP*, 154.

⁴⁸⁴ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 399.

⁴⁸⁵ *SP*, 161.

⁴⁸⁶ The Boxwood estate is modelled after Beechwood, an estate of Frank A. Vanderlip with a notable park designed by Frederick Law Olmstead, where Yates lived in the late 1930s with his mother and older sister Ruth. For details, see Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 30-35. As part of their tradition of art patronage, the Vanderlips hosted artists such as Isadora Duncan and John Cheever, who spent several years renting a small cottage on the edge of the Boxwood estate in the 1950s.

⁴⁸⁷ *SP*, 167-8.

⁴⁸⁸ *SP*, 176-77.

⁴⁸⁹ Klinkowitz, “The New American Novel of Manners,” 35.

local women in an unused squash court on the estate, which first brings the admiration of Mrs. Vander Meer which soon turns to hostility as Alice quickly falls behind with her rent payments.

Bailey explains that Alice's precarious existence on the edge of a lavish and expensive country estate, corresponding to Yates's own experience of staying at such an estate with his sculptor mother in the late 1930s, was doomed from the start since, "though creativity and personal charm were pluses, they were no substitute for money, and one learned the hard way how suddenly one's sense of belonging could evaporate when a few bills weren't paid."⁴⁹⁰ By implication, while 1930s American suburbs may have tolerated an artist newcomer, a person who fails to honor their debts and commitments becomes an instant outcast and public enemy in a community where money is a prerequisite to art existence and appreciation.

An interesting afterthought on Alice's impossible attempts to succeed as a bohemian artist in the American suburbs is provided by Herbert J. Gans in *The Levittowners*. Although he chronicles, using the participant observation approach, the early years of life in Levittown, a famous mass-produced lower-middle-class suburb in postwar America, his observations on the attitude of suburbanites towards art produced by a woman from their midst (ie Gans's own wife) are relevant in comparison with the cold reception of Alice Prentice in the prewar suburbs of Yates's *A Special Providence*. Gans reminisces that his wife's abstract expressionist paintings, produced at home, elicited two different responses from their neighbors. When the Ganses had lived in the city, the Italian working class neighbors would, as people not familiar with art and its conventions, "shrug off her activity and her abstract expressionist style [but were able] to admire colors they liked or forms that reminded them of something in their own experience."⁴⁹¹ Although these neighbors were baffled by his wife's highbrow hobby, they were able to recognize art as a social activity with personal benefits as "painting was a good thing because it kept her [Gans's wife] out of trouble, preventing boredom and potentially troublesome consequences such as drinking or extramarital affairs."⁴⁹² The neighbors of the Ganses in the late 1950s Levittown, then a lower middle class suburb, responded more negatively to her art pursuit, namely, "with anxiety, some hostility, and particularly with envy of her ability to be 'creative'."⁴⁹³ For the women of Levittown, who, in their youth, "learned that creativity was desirable, and many had had some cursory training in drawing, piano, or needlework," their opportunities for

⁴⁹⁰ Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 34.

⁴⁹¹ Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 203.

⁴⁹² *Levittowners*, 204.

⁴⁹³ *Levittowners*, 204.

pursing these ambitions were gone after they married and had children.⁴⁹⁴ In *A Special Providence*, ironically, while Alice Prentice is a pathetic failure of an artist in suburbia, her art workshops for married women who suffer from a prewar variation of domestic unhappiness which Friedan famously dubbed ‘the feminine mystique’ are admirable in the way they try to bring isolated women in suburbia together in a constructive environment of shared creative experience which is an outlet denied to these women in their everyday suburban lives.

When the Boxwood estate owners threaten legal action and actually sue Alice for her debt, she angrily accuses her friends of not helping her and leaves with Bobby to stay with her sister in Texas.⁴⁹⁵

The awkward situation at her sister’s small house on the edge of Austin, Texas, is dramatized by Alice’s nervous and incessant talking: “It was as if the awkwardness of her position – a homeless, penniless refugee, wholly dependent on charity – could be eased only by the sound of her own voice.”⁴⁹⁶ Uncle Owen is a man who places great emphasis on masculinity, and while he tries to instill a bit of manhood into young Bobby, Alice watches Owen’s crude provinciality and boorishness with disgust. Within a couple of weeks, the housing arrangement becomes untenable and, since Alice and her sister’s husband Owen get on each other’s nerves, Alice takes her son and they walk away. During the long walk in the southern heat, Bobby proves stronger than his mother, carries the suitcases while she feels “comforted and protected” by his unexpected manifestation of masculine strength and resolve.⁴⁹⁷ After walking through a cloud of roadworks dust and reach the town, they check into an air-conditioned hotel and put their past behind. Alice’s stock response to any unpleasant situation is “Let’s pretend it isn’t happening” which makes her feel “well armed for the future.”⁴⁹⁸

After the war, Alice is portrayed as living alone in a lowdown city apartment while she fondly reminisces about the Riverside stay at the Boxwood mansion gatehouse, “the one place in which she had felt she truly belonged.”⁴⁹⁹ Alice is a person who has always been oblivious to class differences and social rules as she would repeatedly try to force entry into communities where she does not belong, thinking her ticket to social acceptance is the exhibition and sale of her art and teaching art in workshops. None of these, however, work

⁴⁹⁴ *Levittowners*, 204.

⁴⁹⁵ *SP*, 185-8.

⁴⁹⁶ *SP*, 190.

⁴⁹⁷ *SP*, 211.

⁴⁹⁸ *SP*, 219.

⁴⁹⁹ *SP*, 307.

as the 1930s American suburbs are portrayed as peaceful but exclusive communities of conformist materialists in which divorced career women cannot win the entry and recognition they crave.

Alice Prentice is portrayed as a selfish, pretentious woman whose life is based on the delusion about her ability to make ends meet (and even achieve material success) as an artist in the prewar suburbs and win the respect and approval of the suburban community. With “a desperate optimism that left no room for argument,”⁵⁰⁰ Alice refuses to act as a sensible mother and breadwinner, ignoring the voice of reason represented by her ex-husband George who tries, in vain, to make her behave in a more responsible manner and live within the limits of her alimony payments. When he confronts her with the debt she has accumulated during her stay at the Boxwood estate, she perseveres in her delusion about a bright future: “I know what I’m doing. Next year’s going to be entirely different. My classes are bound to expand, for one thing, and I happen to be doing a great deal of very good, very important work that’s bound to be profitable.”⁵⁰¹ Another reasonable character who questions Alice’s financial irresponsibility is Jim Larkin, husband of Alice’s friend Maude, who lives in a rented house at Boxwood but is a commercially successful writer who can afford, unlike Alice, to live there.⁵⁰² For all her maddening idiosyncrasies and destructive pursuit of a career and lifestyle which is beyond her reach, Castronovo and Goldleaf consider Alice Prentice “a buoyant survivor whose self-deceptions are easier to take than [her son’s] whining” and the second section of the novel is, surprisingly, the best part of the book which provides “a first-rate portrait of a floundering woman” while the first and third sections fail to sustain the reader’s interest in Bobby’s pathetic and humiliating army experience.⁵⁰³ Bobby Prentice is a victim of his mother’s social and artistic pretension, a person who grows up traumatized by the neurotic obsessions of his mother and by the absence of his father—this situation causes him to feel lonely, shy, and vaguely unsure of his masculinity, which comes under serious scrutiny in the army as he experiences “an endless series of frustrations” and when he views himself in a mirror once, he is not a dashing Frank Wheeler of *Revolutionary Road*, but, rather “a born loser briefly deceiving himself with his illusory appearance [of masculine poise].”⁵⁰⁴ According to Castronovo and Goldleaf, *A Special Providence* is a failed novel because it presents a realistic portrait of Alice’s delusionary pursuit of class and flair while juxtaposing it with the lackluster army career of her son Bobby whose ambition to become somebody memorable during his service fails as he experiences only “a series of gaffes and mishaps” and by the time war ends, Bobby has

⁵⁰⁰ *SP*, 175.

⁵⁰¹ *SP*, 184.

⁵⁰² *SP*, 169.

⁵⁰³ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 123-4.

⁵⁰⁴ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 123.

“proved nothing,” and even his one earnest physical fight with a fellow soldier over a minor insult ends in an embarrassing defeat that brings home a realization that the fight, like the whole war itself is useless since it brings “no settling of accounts, no resolution, no proof.”⁵⁰⁵ After the war, Alice gets a couple of letters and money from Bobby who decides to break free from her influence and stays in England “where he would either find a job or enroll in an English university.”⁵⁰⁶ As Charlton-Jones explains, Bobby “suffers from having to be both son and spouse to a woman who needs a man to support her, literally and figuratively.”⁵⁰⁷ In an Oedipal mother-son relationship whose damaging effect on his future ability to function in adult relationships with women Bobby never fully understands, he feels a mixture of love and disgust toward his mother and hatred towards his absent (and later dead) father. When Bobby finally makes the liberating decision to break away from his mother’s emotional hold over him by staying on his own in Europe, Alice ends up as a lonely alcoholic who keeps reliving the idealized past, including her own fifteen minutes of fame when her sculpted head of Bobby “was photographed in *The Times*” and she keeps hoping for her son’s return from Europe to her to continue their close prewar relationship so that she might “make a new *Portrait of the Artist’s Son*” featuring the head of Bobby as that of a “beautiful, sensitive, resolute young man.”⁵⁰⁸ In her deluded pursuit of art, Alice forgets to care for her son’s needs and development, perceiving him as a perennial youthful object for the sculptor.

Yates’s suburban fiction, from *A Special Providence* to *Cold Spring Harbor*, features prominently the autobiographical, deluded figure of the mother whose maniacal and often pathetic pursuit of social mobility and recognition ruins the lives of her child (or children, in the later novels) and makes everyone’s life miserable. As Charlton-Jones documents, “motherly love [in Yates’s fiction] is complicated by the fact that maternal figures [such as Alice Prentice] are weak-willed and selfish” and, in a travesty of normal mother-child relations, “they often seek love and physical comfort from their sons rather than adult male partners.”⁵⁰⁹ Still, Yates never implies as much as the chance of the mother-son relationship reaching the level of incest—his mothers just feel emotionally close to their sons and smother them with theatrical shows of affection. Fathers in Yates’s fiction are typically sensible but absent or die too early to be enough of a presence in the family, reflecting Yates’s own experience of having lost his father in 1942, halfway through his prep school attendance. Alice’s delusion about herself as a successful artist and a caring mother is explicable using the Horneyan anatomy of neurosis. Alice’s destructive effect on Bobby is

⁵⁰⁵ *SP*, 302.

⁵⁰⁶ *SP*, 322.

⁵⁰⁷ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 172.

⁵⁰⁸ *SP*, 320.

⁵⁰⁹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering*, 173.

caused by what Horney calls the neurotic inability of the individual to see the destructive nature of her illusions about being “entitled to be treated by others, or by fate, in accord with her grandiose notions about herself.”⁵¹⁰ Since the other people do not subscribe to Alice’s inflated self-image of a great artist and respected member of the community, what she resorts to is projecting her delusion about herself onto her vulnerable and trusting son, resulting in his growth into a timid, traumatized person whose masculinity is habitually tested during his army service and beyond.⁵¹¹ Charlton-Jones argues that “Yates’s women are unsure how to navigate between the old restrictive traditions that they have rejected, but which have left their mark, and new freedoms that promise so much but, if grasped, would leave them isolated, misjudged or ensnared by liberalities too complex to negotiate.”⁵¹² While Alice Prentice is a liberated woman way ahead of her time in the 1930s suburbs, her freedom to have a career, home, and family in accordance with her preferences is always limited by the uncomprehending response of the community to her rejection of her feminine roles within the traditional nuclear family structure.

While Yates himself faulted *A Special Providence* with lacking sufficient distance from portraying autobiographical experience of himself and his family,⁵¹³ Castronovo and Goldleaf see the problem of the novel in the unexpected sympathy that Yates’s brutally honest exposure of Alice’s delusion brings as she is a madly possessed but exciting person whose responses to the world are “divided between sentimentality and real poignancy.”⁵¹⁴ Indeed, while disagreeable and deluded, Alice seems a more interesting and developed character than her son Bobby whose development from youth to adult responsibility is the principal theme of the novel. Ironically, although it is Bobby who finally grows up to become a man who breaks his mother’s emotional hold over him, it is Alice who evokes more sympathy and interest as a pathetic, deluded, selfish, failing, yet human character whose portrayal enables Yates to memorably “chart the terms of embarrassment and qualified failure” in the prewar suburban setting.⁵¹⁵

The Easter Parade (1976) is a comprehensive novel whose plot, like that of *Young Hearts Crying*, spans several decades.⁵¹⁶ Through the portrait of three women of the Grimes family—Emily, her older sister Sarah, and their mother Esther, known in the family as

⁵¹⁰ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 41.

⁵¹¹ See *SP*, part I (23-108), and part III (223-305).

⁵¹² Kate Charlton-Jones, “Richard Yates’s Fictional Treatment of Women,” *Literature Compass* 7, no. 7 (2010): 500.

⁵¹³ DeWitt Henry, and Geoffrey Clark, “An Interview with Richard Yates,” *Ploughshares* 1, no. 3 (1972): 70, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40349860>.

⁵¹⁴ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 124.

⁵¹⁵ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 124.

⁵¹⁶ Richard Yates, *The Easter Parade*, in *Revolutionary Road; The Easter Parade; Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, by Richard Yates (New York: Knopf, 2009), 291-475. The novel was first published in 1976. All subsequent quotes from *The Easter Parade* are from the 2009 edition. Hereinafter referred to as *EP*.

“Pookie,” Yates dramatizes many of his trademark themes and aspects of the suburban and urban identity. As Castronovo and Goldleaf explain, *The Easter Parade* brings “the grim tale of the [Grimes] sisters’ lives” which are located “amid the bourgeois, often trivial conflicts of four decades.”⁵¹⁷ The principal focus of the *The Easter Parade* is on tracing the lonely, unhappy, and unlucky life of Emily Grimes, the lonely and melancholic protagonist whose life is chronicled from age five to forty-nine, corresponding to the period from 1930 to 1974. For this reason, the novel is the most comprehensive of all Yates novels even though it focuses on the experience of a single character. In major ways, Yates rewrites his own suburban childhood in the novel, using the perspective of a female protagonist, with interesting and problematic results.⁵¹⁸ In a reference to the legend of Flaubert’s famous comment about the protagonist of *Madame Bovary*, Yates supposedly quipped, “Emily fucking Grimes is *me*,” implying the usual high degree of autobiography that went into the characterization of Emily Grimes, despite the gender role difference between himself and the protagonist of his novel which he had struggled to negotiate.⁵¹⁹ According to Jennifer Daly, *The Easter Parade* is a major novel within a tradition of “male writers who write sympathetically about women” which is remarkable since Yates was “a man who openly railed against increasing equality for women”⁵²⁰ and spent much of his career exploring the crisis of masculinity in his male characters. Castronovo and Goldleaf further claim that “had [*The Easter Parade*] been published by a woman, [it] might have been acclaimed as a feminist classic of the 1970s.”⁵²¹ Still, as Charlton-Jones explains, Yates’s portrait of Emily Grimes is a memorable story of a woman who tries “to live independently without relying on a man [and in the process] she finds out about life and herself by exploring her sexual and social freedoms [facing] the many contradictions that the postwar female struggled to understand.”⁵²²

My inclusion of *The Easter Parade* in the present survey of Yates’s suburban novels is based on the fact that Emily Grimes experiences the formative decade of her youth in the suburbs and even when she later lives in the city, she keeps visiting the suburban home of her older sister Sarah on many occasions, which enables the author to dramatize the differences between the two sisters and comment on the postwar suburbs of Long Island. Ultimately, Emily winds up destitute in the suburban home of her compassionate nephew

⁵¹⁷ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 125.

⁵¹⁸ For more on Yates’s unusual choice of a female protagonist within the history of the postwar masculinity crisis in American society, see Jennifer Daly, “Emily Grimes Is Me,” *IJAS Online* no. 3 (2014): 40-47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26556712>.

⁵¹⁹ Quoted in Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty*, 465.

⁵²⁰ Daly, “Emily Grimes Is Me,” 41.

⁵²¹ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 127.

⁵²² Charlton-Jones, “Richard Yates’s Fictional Treatment of Women,” 500.

Peter Wilson, so her life is portrayed as following a circular trajectory, from the suburban home of her youth to Peter's New England suburban home at the end of the novel.

The Easter Parade begins with the divorce of the parents of Emily and Sarah Grimes in 1930, "when Sarah was nine years old and Emily five."⁵²³ As in all fiction by the author, the parental divorce is portrayed as a destabilizing factor for the children who have to defend the normality of their fatherless family to other children in the playground. Emily is "blond and thin and very serious" as well as "a stickler for accuracy" while her older sister Sarah is "the dark one with a look of trusting innocence."⁵²⁴ Their suburban childhood, corresponding to the first decade of Emily's life, is dominated by the absence of their father Walter, a mild-mannered "copy-desk man" at a New York newspaper whom they only meet a few times a year on scheduled visits, and by the lackluster parenting of their mother Pookie, a failed real estate broker with unrealistic career dreams and pathetic social ambition whose life seems devoted to the bourgeois pursuit of

achieving and sustaining an elusive quality she called "flair." She pored over fashion magazines, dressed tastefully and tried many ways of fixing her hair, but her eyes remained bewildered and she never quite learned to keep her lipstick within the borders of her mouth, which gave her an air of dazed and vulnerable uncertainty. She found more flair among rich people than in the middle class, and so she aspired to the attitudes and mannerisms of wealth in raising her daughters. She always sought "nice" communities to live in, whether she could afford them or not, and she tried to be strict on matters of decorum.⁵²⁵

In the atmosphere of their mother's selfish and deluded pursuit of an unattainable bourgeois lifestyle in the suburban communities where a divorced mother of limited means does not belong, the Grimes sisters grow up having only each other for moral support and for finding out about the facts of life including divorce, love, sex, marriage, and parenthood. Their childhood bond is strong and when Sarah hits her head on a metal bar in a silly jumping game, Emily cries all through her sister's hospital treatment as the protectiveness she feels toward Sarah is a manifestation "of her own susceptibility to panic and her unfathomable dread of being alone."⁵²⁶

The Grimes sisters are affected by the fact that their mother "found it necessary to change homes so often" that it harms their ability to forge a connection to any community, to make and keep friends.⁵²⁷ A dominant feature of Emily's and Sarah's childhood is the

⁵²³ *EP*, 295.

⁵²⁴ *EP*, 297-8.

⁵²⁵ *EP*, 295-306.

⁵²⁶ *EP*, 300.

⁵²⁷ *EP*, 302.

need to play with each other and to defend themselves as children in a fatherless incomplete family to the world, and from the destabilizing effect of the constant moving which their mother Pookie explains by the need to search for new business and education opportunities. The peripatetic lifestyle of Pookie is a manifestation of neurotic pride and a search for glory, or, in the words of Karen Horney, of the obsession with trying “to be associated with groups that carry prestige, to be affiliated with prominent institutions”⁵²⁸ and to satisfy one’s “craving for social prestige” which substitutes the pursuit of normal goals in life.⁵²⁹ Unlike the other deluded mothers in Yates’s fiction, such as Alice Prentice in *A Special Providence*, Pookie Grimes has little professional ambition per se and spends much of her life trying to pass off for a classy woman without the family and economic background to do so.

For the Grimes sisters, the pattern of frequent moving instituted by their prestige-hungry mother means having to cope with what Charlton-Jones terms “emotional impoverishment” and deprivation, which is a primarily a result of “poor parenting,” as well as the product of the economic hardship that is caused by Pookie’s exclusive reliance on the meagre alimony payments from her ex-husband.⁵³⁰ When Pookie “announced that she’d found a wonderful house in a wonderful little town called Bradley, and that they’d be moving there in the fall. [The sisters] had almost lost track of the number of times they’d moved.”⁵³¹ The pattern of repeated suburban dislocation and corresponding loss of connections to local playmates and friends is a reenactment of the way Bobby Prentice is traumatized by her mother Alice’s constant moving about the New York suburbs in *A Special Providence*.⁵³² The Grimes sisters have themselves to withstand this unstable living while Bobby faces it alone. By 1940, Pookie and her daughters return to the city where Pookie finds a fashionable apartment “on the south side of Washington Square” which “cost more than Pookie could afford” but what matters is the fact that “the ceilings were uncommonly high and visitors never failed to remark that the place had “character”.”⁵³³

As the sisters get older, Sarah begins to differentiate from her younger sister in character and looks. Charlton-Jones explains that while Sarah grows up to be “the romantic whose behavior and speech always resonate with the contrived sentiment of film,” Emily grows up to be “the pragmatist who asks questions, stands apart and, with the reader, stands in bewilderment at an uglier reality.”⁵³⁴ Both sisters develop buck teeth, but the parents

⁵²⁸ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 89.

⁵²⁹ Horney, *Neurosis*, 355.

⁵³⁰ Kate Charlton-Jones, “What About the Children?“, 122.

⁵³¹ *EP*, 303.

⁵³² *SP*, 111-220. Unlike the Grimes sisters in *The Easter Parade*, however, Bobby Prentice in *A Special Providence* grows up a shy loner, somebody who is afraid to go out and play with local children for fear of being humiliated.

⁵³³ *EP*, 306.

⁵³⁴ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 148-9.

arrange only for Sarah to have the teeth fixed with braces.⁵³⁵ While Sarah grows up to be beautiful, with “a lovely full-breasted figure that made men turn around on the street,” the tall, slender, and flat-chested Emily becomes “weak with envy” as her own teeth, unlike Sarah’s “were still slightly bucked and would never be corrected,” and the only consolation comes from her mother who unconvincingly claims that Emily has “a coltish grace” and would grow up to be “very attractive.”⁵³⁶

Emily’s sister Sarah becomes a shallow, superficial, and bourgeois young woman regarding her views on life and relationships, taking after her mother. Sarah first falls in love with Donald Clellon, a young pretentious impostor with good looks but no reliable history, then with Tony Wilson, a dashing neighbor with a charming English accent who “looks just like Laurence Olivier,” works as a mechanic in “a big naval aircraft plant on Long Island” and, most important of all, owns “a 1929 Oldsmobile convertible” which he drives “with flair.”⁵³⁷ In Sarah’s world, appearances matter more than merit, so her relationship with Tony seems ideal as the emphasis on posing and good looks is what they both share and enjoy. When they have a picture taken of them by a newspaper photographer in which Sarah and Tony in historic costumes smile “at each other like the very soul of romance in the April sunshine,” it is the envious and neglected Emily who is sent by her mother to buy as many newspapers with the image of the happy couple as possible since the “picture could be mounted and framed and treasured forever.”⁵³⁸ Emily thus grows up in the shadow of her older sister, resenting the situation but unable to prevent it.

After Sarah marries Tony in 1941, the couple move to a modest cottage on the eight-acre estate of Tony’s father “on the North Shore of Long Island.”⁵³⁹ While the impoverished state of the property offers little to brag about, it satisfies Sarah’s bourgeois pride as it signifies the dream move from a rented city apartment to a house in a prestigious New York residential suburb.⁵⁴⁰ As Baxandall and Ewen explain, the area became a fast-developing suburban community that includes the Gilded Age mansions of the New York Elite who found the “rolling and wooded North Shore” landscape ideal to build mansions of large new estates to be used “in the spring and fall season and many winter weekends” while by 1910, a railroad tunnel connected Manhattan and Long Island which promoted the suburbanization

⁵³⁵ *EP*, 303.

⁵³⁶ *EP*, 306.

⁵³⁷ *EP*, 311. Tony Wilson is a character whose masculine poise and uneducated ways are very much like Evan Shepard in *Cold Spring Harbor*, a working-class brute of a man who impresses women with good looks and his skill at driving a car yet who turns violent and insensitive as a husband.

⁵³⁸ *EP*, 314.

⁵³⁹ *EP*, 315-16. The area is revisited in *Cold Spring Harbor* where the eponymous suburban community functions as the setting for Yates’s last novel featuring the story of the Shepard and Drake family.

⁵⁴⁰ Many geographical and thematic connections might be made between the localization of Sarah’s house in *The Easter Parade* and the rented house of the Shepard/Drake family in *Cold Spring Harbor*. As usual, Yates would reuse and revisit locations, characters, and themes from his earlier work in his later career.

of this rural area in the early decades of the twentieth century.⁵⁴¹ It is revealed, however, that Sarah's move to the suburbs is not exactly an act of social mobility as her husband's family own a large property but lack even the funds to maintain it. Although Tony's English accent and movie-star posing made him attractive to Sarah early on, his manners prove to be those of a working-class uneducated laborer, including a lowbrow ritual which has Tony and Sarah "entwining their arms to take the first sip" of their drinks.⁵⁴² Sarah's delusion about her new suburban privilege is punctured by the image of Tony coming back home from work, "wearing green work clothes with an employee identification badge clipped over his heart, carrying his tin lunch box under his arm."⁵⁴³ According to Daly, despite the harsh reality of Tony's dead-end job and growing boorishness, Sarah "is able to affect the image of a happy housewife,"⁵⁴⁴ and it is her ability to believe in merciful lies about her life as happy and successful that she differs from Emily whose refusal to accept anything less than truth when it comes to love, career, and identity contributes to her lifetime of disappointment, loneliness, and suffering.

Since her childhood, Emily knows that she is too intelligent to accept the shallow and pretentious interpretations of life which make her sister and mother deluded but content and happy. When Emily gets a full scholarship for college study, her sister and mother are unimpressed and the only praise comes from Emily's father, himself a college dropout, who she has lunch with.⁵⁴⁵ Emily's adolescence ends with two major events—she loses her virginity to a soldier she meets by chance on the street (after deciding to go see a movie to escape a tedious afternoon spent at home with her mother) and, soon after, her father dies.⁵⁴⁶ When mourning his loss, Emily is stunned to learn that her father preferred her sister Sarah and realizes that her own sorrow, slow and difficult in coming, is dishonest as "these tears, as always before in her life, were wholly for herself, for the poor, sensitive Emily Grimes, whom nobody understood, and who understood nothing."⁵⁴⁷ Emily is portrayed as the unhappy victim of her own intelligence and superior but unhappiness-bringing ability to see through other people's pretention and shallowness. In Horneyan terms, Emily's response to stressful situations is a neurotic moving "away from people," a response corresponding to her "estrangement from the self" which also shows as her inexplicable "numbness to emotional experience, an uncertainty as to what one is, what one loves, hates, desires, hopes, fears, resents, believes."⁵⁴⁸ As Charlton-Jones explains, Emily "cannot accept any facile

⁵⁴¹ Baxandall and Ewen, *Picture Windows*, 5-9.

⁵⁴² *EP*, 316.

⁵⁴³ *EP*, 316.

⁵⁴⁴ Daly, "Emily Grimes Is Me," 45.

⁵⁴⁵ *EP*, 317-19.

⁵⁴⁶ *EP*, 319-25.

⁵⁴⁷ *EP*, 324-5.

⁵⁴⁸ Karen Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts* (New York: Norton, 1945), 73-4.

answers to anything“ and much of the unhappiness she experiences in her life comes from her inability to accept “the easy comfort others take from a romanticized or sentimental reading of a situation.”⁵⁴⁹

While Emily studies at Barnard, Sarah gives birth to three sons in quick succession, to the condescending commentary of her mother Pookie (“O dear, the way they’re *breeding* [...] I thought only Italian *peasants* did things like that.”)⁵⁵⁰ By now, the social and temperamental differentiation of both sisters is complete—while Sarah grows to embrace her domestic roles of wife, mother, and homemaker, Emily focuses on her university education and thinks of a future professional career rather than being included in the postwar ideal of suburban domesticity. Ironically, when Pookie asks Emily, “can you imagine me as a grandmother,” Emily quips, to herself, “I can’t even imagine you as a mother“ in a fit of sobering honesty that forever eludes the shallow Pookie and Sarah but makes life all the more painful and lonely for Emily whose astute observations have to be kept hidden from others as they are too socially unacceptable to be expressed aloud.⁵⁵¹

When Emily joins Pookie to make “the first pilgrimage to the Wilsons’ estate“ to visit Sarah in her dilapidated cottage house, Pookie is embalmed with her delusion of going on a lovely trip through the dream suburban country while Emily, ever the realist, observes the lengthiness of the trip which includes taking a sequence of trains that were all “loud and dirty and badly in need of repair,” and hates seeing herself ruin her spectator pumps which “kept turning under her as she walked“ during the endless walk from the train station to the Wilson estate.⁵⁵² When the Grimes women finally meet at Sarah’s house, they sit “around the sparsely furnished living room in attitudes of forced conviviality [...] with nothing much to say to one another.”⁵⁵³ During the visit Pookie invents the snobbish epithet of “Great Hedges“ as the new name for the crumbling estate. Fussell explains that naming one’s house “as if it were something like Windsor Castle“ is a pretentious and lowbrow way in which some Americans like to fancy their impersonation of British country gentility.⁵⁵⁴ There is, however, nothing genteel about the way Pookie behaves at Sarah’s home (or at parties anywhere). Emily suffers from having to “watch her mother get drunk“ and see her “monopolize the talk, telling long pointless anecdotes about houses she’d lived in, hunching forward in her deep chair with her elbows on her slightly parted knees“ which would move

⁵⁴⁹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 145.

⁵⁵⁰ *EP*, 326.

⁵⁵¹ *EP*, 326.

⁵⁵² It is typical for the mother characters in *A Special Providence*, *The Easter Parade*, and *Cold Spring Harbor*, to be obsessed with suburban lifestyle while being unable to drive in the predominantly car-oriented suburban communities where even the distance to a suburban house from the train station requires a car drive rather than the longish and unpleasant walk which they have to undertake.

⁵⁵³ *EP*, 328.

⁵⁵⁴ Fussell, *Class*, 77.

“as she talked and drank, [...] farther apart until they revealed the gartered tops of her stockings, the shadowed, sagging insides of her naked thighs and finally the crotch of her underpants.”⁵⁵⁵ The devastating exposure of Pookie’s delusion about class, privilege, and her inability to see the embarrassing nature of her attempts at socializing with her relatives is conveyed through Yates’s clinical description of her drunken slovenliness.

While Emily thrives during her college study years, she realizes she feels “more intelligent than her sister” after having felt more intelligent than her mother for years.⁵⁵⁶ This knowledge comes to Emily during another visit to Sarah’s when it becomes evident that Sarah does not understand foreign words such as “to capitulate” in newspaper headlines while calling attention to these words herself.⁵⁵⁷ During her studies, Emily starts to date Andrew Crawford, a philosophy teaching assistant who is a real intellectual, a person who likes to impress people with “a wide general knowledge and so many well-reasoned opinions.”⁵⁵⁸ Andrew’s problem is that he is impotent, and he tries to solve the situation by breaking up with Emily for a year to go into psychoanalysis in order to do better with her in the future.⁵⁵⁹ During her time without Andrew, Emily has a string of sexually apt lovers who all abuse her, including Lars Ericsson, a well-read merchant seaman who satisfies her in bed but leaves her for a male lover, a leftist law student who drops her for being “ideologically impure,” and a jazz drummer who cheats on her with three other women.⁵⁶⁰

When Andrew returns a year later, Emily agrees to date him again and when he is finally able to consummate his relationship with her, a hasty marriage of two intellectuals follows.⁵⁶¹ The marriage is, however, doomed to fail before it even starts since, as Daly explains, Andrew “constructs a fantasized image of Emily [as an ideal woman for him] that he convinces himself he loves and can easily make love him.”⁵⁶² While the idealized Emily is a submissive woman who “does not allow for the reality of Emily and her thoughts,” Andrew’s delusion about being a good match for Emily is typically Yatesian as in *The Easter Parade*, as well as in other Yates fiction, “everyone, men and women, are set at crossed purposes, unable to communicate with each other, constantly missing connections, and pursuing a false dream of entitlement.”⁵⁶³ Interestingly, Daly also argues that Emily’s reason for marrying Andrew, even though she knows him to be an inadequate sexual partner, is an

⁵⁵⁵ EP, 329. The pathetic exposure of Pookie Grimes’s inability to see herself as socially embarrassing during parties is reenacted in *Cold Spring Harbor*, Yates’s last published suburban novel, with the equally scathing portrait of Gloria Drake.

⁵⁵⁶ EP, 333.

⁵⁵⁷ EP, 334.

⁵⁵⁸ EP, 337.

⁵⁵⁹ EP, 337-41.

⁵⁶⁰ EP, 341-45.

⁵⁶¹ EP, 345-7.

⁵⁶² Daly, “Emily Grimes Is Me,” 45.

⁵⁶³ Daly, “Emily Grimes Is Me,” 45.

unwittingly shared “quest for flair“ that she grew up to see in her mother Pookie. By marrying Andrew, “an educated intellectual“ who is an excellent conversationalist, Emily pursues her own deluded dreams of social acceptance and in this she copies, albeit with a difference, the social striving of her sister and mother (whose preference is for shallow but elegant and good-looking people).⁵⁶⁴

Social visits to the newlyweds’ mothers are done after the wedding, with Pookie being intimidated by Andrew’s intelligence but praising the way “he’s really awfully nice,” and, based on “the formal way he talks,” Pookie concludes he “must be very intelligent“ and a good fit for Emily.⁵⁶⁵ A visit to Andrew’s mother proves equally stressful as she, “a blue-haired, wrinkled and powdered woman wearing knee-length elastic stockings“ humiliates her son into playing the piano for them, which he grudgingly does, “hurrying through it, seeming to play sloppily on purpose.”⁵⁶⁶ When the newlyweds visit Sarah’s family, in a used car which Andrew buys for the occasion, the meeting proves a disaster. After the Crawfords find their driving route by following the local “landmarks“ such as the BLOOD AND SAND WORMS store for fishermen, they observe the GREAT HEDGES hand-lettered sign written by Sarah to lend the Wilson estate the feel of an aristocratic country mansion.⁵⁶⁷ The first sight of Sarah’s family suggests the gap between the two sisters is deepening as “the young Wilsons sat on a blanket on their front lawn with their three sons toddling and chirping around them in the afternoon sunshine“ and “were so absorbed in each other that they didn’t see their guests arrive.”⁵⁶⁸ When the two couples have drinks later, the Crawfords [ie Emily and Andrew] have to “sit and watch with fixed smiles while the Wilsons [ie Sarah and Tony] went through the old [...] business of entwining arms for the first sip“ and conversation between the two couples stalls until Andrew has had too much to drink and grows “a little over-earnest in recommending a Jugoslavian movie, or “film“ that he and Emily had seen“ as an example of art that is bound to move “anyone with belief in humanity.”⁵⁶⁹ This patronizing remark is caught on by Tony who drunkenly agrees that he, too, believes in humanity and likes “everyone but coons, kikes, and Catholics.”⁵⁷⁰ The racist bigotry of Tony’s response brings “an uneasy silence“ until the visit ends with “a ceremony of small talk and smiles and good nights.”⁵⁷¹ During the drive back, Andrew bitinglly dismisses Tony as the incongruous “Country Squire“ who “was raised with the English upper-middle-class,” is now a factory worker who “lives in a place called Great Hedges,” has “sired three sons

⁵⁶⁴ Daly, “Emily Grimes Is Me,” 45.

⁵⁶⁵ *EP*, 347.

⁵⁶⁶ *EP*, 348.

⁵⁶⁷ *EP*, 349.

⁵⁶⁸ *EP*, 349.

⁵⁶⁹ *EP*, 350.

⁵⁷⁰ *EP*, 350.

⁵⁷¹ *EP*, 351.

out of his beautiful wife“ and “comes up with a [racist] remark like that. He’s a Neanderthal. He’s a pig.”⁵⁷² When Andrew turns his own impotence and feelings of sexual insecurity to a violent misogynist attack on Emily (“I hate your body,“) she divorces him.⁵⁷³

For Andrew Crawford, college education and superior intelligence is a means towards intimidating other people who he perceives as social rivals. According to Castronovo and Goldleaf, he is a typical American intellectual of the late 1940s, “at once self-righteous, complaining, patronizing about bourgeois values, and capable of inhumane inflexibility,“ moreover, he is traumatized by being an asexual person who “imagines that he loves Emily and persuades her that he does“ while actually being a “misogynist masquerading as a gentle, awkward lover.”⁵⁷⁴ Unable to feel aroused by Emily and resolve his own inner conflict of feeling unloved and unsuccessful, he resorts to what Horney calls neurotic aggression against people, taking it for granted that everyone, including his wife Emily, “is hostile and refuses [or is unable] to admit that they are not.”⁵⁷⁵ For the neurotic who responds to stressful situations [such as Andrew’s impotence with Emily] with aggression against other people, such a response is often “covered with a veneer of suave politeness.”⁵⁷⁶ When Andrew meets simple-minded, uneducated, but healthy and vigorous people like the Wilsons, he responds with mocking their snobbish unculturedness and denigrates them for reading just a tabloid paper while exposing his subconscious envy of the Wilson’s vibrancy and fertility that he himself lacks. Although Emily divorces Andrew after he insults her with words that betray his ambivalent sexuality and deep misogyny, she does share with him the impulse to use intelligence and education to patronize other people and divert people’s attention away from his masculinity crisis. However, unlike Andrew, Emily’s intelligence and condescension are never used by her openly to humiliate others—these feelings of knowing better than others are what she keeps to herself, which only makes her own life more lonely and miserable.

After divorcing Andrew, Emily becomes a career woman in the city, working first as a librarian, then a magazine writer, and, finally, as a copywriter for an advertising agency. In an echo of Frank Wheeler’s sanctimony about being a liberal arts college graduate with an authentic and original identity, Emily thinks of her education as something that has freed her mind and, while “it didn’t matter what you did for a living; the important thing was the kind of person you were.”⁵⁷⁷ Emily embraces being single and moves to a fashionable

⁵⁷² *EP*, 351.

⁵⁷³ *EP*, 350-52.

⁵⁷⁴ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 131.

⁵⁷⁵ Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts*, 63.

⁵⁷⁶ Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts*, 63.

⁵⁷⁷ *EP*, 355. See also *Revolutionary Road*, 21, as Frank Wheeler smugly thinks that the failure of his wife’s opening night performance of the Laurel Players production “wasn’t worth feeling bad about” since even

Chelsea apartment “with tall windows facing a quiet street,” which makes “a snug little temporary home for two” where she is able to indulge the company of “a good many men.”⁵⁷⁸ Yates refrains from suggesting Emily becomes promiscuous but does mention the fact that Emily, in the early 1950s, “had two [illegal] abortions” and then started to write an article on the topic of abortion from the woman’s perspective, a project which she ultimately abandons and stores away.⁵⁷⁹ As Charlton-Jones explains, through Emily’s failed attempts at writing, Yates conveys “the harsh truth about what abortion is and points out [...] an uncomfortable corollary to the sexual freedoms his characters enjoy” while “it is the women [in Yates’s fiction] alone who carry this burden.”⁵⁸⁰

Although Emily continues to live alone, she is urged by her mother and sister to become more conventional and settle down, get married, and have children. When Emily confronts Sarah with this notion, asking whether marriage is “supposed to be the answer to everything,” Sarah, hurt, responds in the affirmative: “It’s the answer to a lot of things.”⁵⁸¹ When Emily starts dating Jack Flanders, a divorced father of two children who has a notable literary career as a recognized poet, it seems a match made in heaven as the couple easily survive a visit to Sarah and Tony Wilson. Ironically, while Emily grows dismissive of her sister’s uneducated suburban pretension, it is to Sarah that she pays repeated social visits with each new boyfriend as she unwittingly depends on her sister’s approval of her partner choices. When Emily takes Jack to visit Sarah, the visit proves a success thanks to Jack’s ability to take Tony’s boorishness and Sarah’s shallow provincialism in stride. When Sarah bores her visitors with reading from her amateurish manuscript about a pioneer ancestor from Tony’s family, Jack reacts with polite interest and, unlike Andrew Crawford, does not disparage Sarah and Tony even though he is, like Emily, their intellectual superior.⁵⁸²

According to Charlton-Jones, Sarah’s writing project, although “thwarted by the restrictions of her marriage and the loss of any self-respect consequent on that marriage,” still “features in her life both as an ambition and as something to which she commits time and energy; it literally puts life into her and briefly offers her a means of escape.”⁵⁸³ By this time, the beautiful facade of Sarah’s marriage has crumbled to reveal an ugly side of her husband’s vicious and violent temper. Emily admits that she gets “the most terrible

“the larger absurdities of deadly dull jobs in the city and deadly dull homes in the suburbs” would not touch him since “the important thing was to keep from being contaminated [...] to remember who you were.”

⁵⁷⁸ *EP*, 355.

⁵⁷⁹ *EP*, 355-6. It is interesting to compare the space Yates devotes to the subject of abortion in *Revolutionary Road*, where April’s third pregnancy and its planned termination becomes a plot-structuring event within the novel, and *The Easter Parade*, where he laconically mentions the fact that Emily experienced two abortions and wound up childless.

⁵⁸⁰ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering*, 117.

⁵⁸¹ *EP*, 363.

⁵⁸² *EP*, 362-8.

⁵⁸³ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering*, 115.

headaches“ when visiting Sarah, reflecting her ambivalent attitude toward her sister’s family which oscillates between unwitting admiration and sanctimonious dismissal.⁵⁸⁴

When Emily follows Jack Flanders to Iowa where he gets a teaching position in the famous Writers’ Workshop program, their relationship starts to crumble as she realizes that she is bored in the Midwest and does not really love Jack enough to serve him as a traditional stay-at-home woman. Faced with having to care for Jack, an older man in need of emotional support during his writer’s block period, she chooses to leave him instead. Her new piece which she tries writing while in Iowa, titled “A NEW YORKER DISCOVERS THE MIDDLE WEST,” remains another aborted attempt at writing by an impassioned amateur who fails to put down her thoughts on paper. She realizes that “she hadn’t discovered the Middle West, any more than she had discovered Europe [during her European trip with Jack].”⁵⁸⁵ They go to Europe over the summer but the trip intensifies their growing discord as Emily realizes “she didn’t want to travel with a man she didn’t love”⁵⁸⁶ while Jack keeps being disappointed when trying to relive his European memories with Emily.

When Emily breaks up with Jack and returns to New York, she gets a good job writing copy for a small advertising agency whose owner is Hannah Baldwin, a woman who likes and respects her.⁵⁸⁷ As the years go by, Sarah and her husband inherit the main house on the Wilson estate, and Emily’s mother has a breakdown and is institutionalized, with both sisters having to share the hospital costs.⁵⁸⁸ When Emily shares childhood memories with Sarah once, it proves another disappointing occasion as Emily learns of the secret confidences her sister had with their father, only to transcend her disappointment in a moment of shared grief as “with their mother lying in a coma twenty miles away, they clung together drunkenly and wept for the loss of their father.”⁵⁸⁹ According to Naparstek, this crying episode “suits Sarah’s melodramatic nature“ while exposing “Emily’s closeness to the father“ which he sadly did not reciprocate while he was alive.⁵⁹⁰ In the subsequent years, Emily settles into her single life in the city which is defined by her devotion to the copywriting job and includes an occasional sophisticated lover while Sarah starts seeking out Emily’s help as it is revealed that her husband beats her on a regular basis yet she, as Castronovo and Goldleaf pinpoint, “is pathetically resisting the prospect of a separation from

⁵⁸⁴ *EP*, 368.

⁵⁸⁵ *EP*, 384.

⁵⁸⁶ *EP*, 382.

⁵⁸⁷ *EP*, 389.

⁵⁸⁸ *EP*, 389-97.

⁵⁸⁹ *EP*, 401.

⁵⁹⁰ Naparstek, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 102. While Emily thought that her father understood her better than her mother and sister, he, too, preferred the shallow affection from Sarah to the more honest and sophisticated affection of Emily, which is what Emily learns from Sarah after their mother is hospitalized. The past, while mythologized by the shallow Sarah and Pookie, is one endless source of pain and disappointment to Emily.

Tony,⁵⁹¹ being unable to fashion a life on her own. According to Richard J. Gelles, female “victims of conjugal violence [often] stay with their husbands” despite a having a long and traumatic history of being beaten, for several reasons.⁵⁹² These include the severity and frequency of the conjugal violence as “the less severe and the less frequent the violence, the more a woman will remain with her spouse and not seek outside aid.”⁵⁹³ The second factor that influences a woman’s choice to remain silent about conjugal violence in her marriage may be her experience of violence as a child as “victimization of a child raises the wife’s tolerance of violence [against herself] as an adult.”⁵⁹⁴ The third major factor that influences the decision of many wives to stay with abusive husbands is the influence of “educational and occupational factors” as the “wives who do not seek intervention are less likely to have completed high school and more likely to be unemployed.”⁵⁹⁵ In the case of Sarah Grimes, her decision to put up with her husband’s beatings is based on a combination of all three factors mentioned by Gelles—having a history of suffering from the absence of her father, she is afraid to lose Tony despite his abusive behavior, and with the increased frequency of his beatings she becomes more tolerant of the abuse and accepts it as normal. Last, her lack of advanced education and subpar intelligence (she only graduates from high school with lackluster results and Emily repeatedly calls attention to the fact that Sarah is the dumber of the two sisters) as well as embarrassment which escape from her abusive husband would bring prevents her from realizing the escape and seeking psychological or therapeutic help.

In the final section of *The Easter Parade*, Emily starts dating a client’s lawyer, Howard Dunninger, who seems an ideal partner who pleases her in all aspects except for the fact that he is still “in love with his [young and beautiful] wife.”⁵⁹⁶ Nonetheless, Emily confesses “she had never really enjoyed herself so much with anyone.”⁵⁹⁷ When Howard starts reminiscing about the way he first fell in love with his wife, Emily is hurt and asks him to stop the confession. Through this conversation of two lovers, Yates conveys the double standard for men and women in a close relationship—while it is all right for a man to confide to his woman everything about his past love life, a woman is not allowed to share her secrets and expect her man’s sympathy, so Emily “could tell Howard Dunninger anything about any of her men, or all of them, and he wouldn’t care.”⁵⁹⁸ When Sarah calls Emily in another half-baked attempt to escape from Tony, pleading for Emily’s help in

⁵⁹¹ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 126.

⁵⁹² Richard J. Gelles, “Abused Wives: Why Do They Stay,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 38, no. 4 (Nov. 1976): 659-668, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/350685>.

⁵⁹³ Gelles, “Abused Wives,” 666.

⁵⁹⁴ Gelles, “Abused Wives,” 667.

⁵⁹⁵ Gelles, “Abused Wives,” 667.

⁵⁹⁶ *EP*, 424-5.

⁵⁹⁷ *EP*, 425.

⁵⁹⁸ *EP*, 428.

setting her up in town, Emily, for once, refuses to help, explaining to Howard who eavesdrops on the conversation that he has “no idea how helpless [Sarah] is—a funny little middle-aged woman with terrible clothes and bad teeth and without a skill to her name [...] I don’t *want* her dragging down my life.”⁵⁹⁹ Naparsteck argues that by refusing to help Sarah when she, for once, seems earnest in her attempt to run away from her husband, Emily only tries “to impress her boyfriend” with her cool rejection while allowing “her sense of superiority [to her sister] get in the way of her own and other people’s happiness.”⁶⁰⁰ According to Charlton-Jones, when Emily is required to support her high opinion of herself with action by helping Sarah, she refuses, acting “out of self-interest” that challenges the reader’s empathy for her but also allows identification with “her very human mistakes.”⁶⁰¹ Emily may feel superior to her sister and mother but when she is to help them, she refuses for selfish rather than practical reasons.

Soon after Emily rejects her sister, Sarah is put in hospital with acute alcoholism and a strange injury to her head. When Emily finally is able to visit, she takes one carton of cigarettes for Sarah and one for their mother, who is institutionalized in the same hospital.⁶⁰² In an uncanny resemblance to Yates himself, the Grimes women are portrayed as habitual drinkers and chain smokers. Emily realizes that her sister is far too gone for any help to reach her as she “would keep her troubles to herself from now on. There would be no more confidences now, no more telephone calls and no more requests for help.”⁶⁰³ When Emily and Howard visit Sarah and her family at home later, Sarah looks prematurely old and sunken, having forgotten to put her teeth back in, but Emily is surprised to see Sarah’s second son Peter turn “into a striking young man” whose career decision to become a minister is already just one more year of college study away.⁶⁰⁴ After Peter resists his mother’s pathetic request for him to play his guitar and sing to the guests, Emily and her boyfriend leave. When Sarah dies shortly after, Emily reminisces about her sister and finds it hard to accept the fact that her sister is gone. When Emily sees the Easter Parade framed image of young Sarah and Tony in the hallway after Sarah’s funeral, she straightens it, thinking it must have been tilted “from the impact of some heavy blow that had shuddered the wall.”⁶⁰⁵ The marital violence that preceded Sarah’s premature death is hinted at through the exposition of Emily’s doubts about the matter.

⁵⁹⁹ *EP*, 430.

⁶⁰⁰ Naparsteck, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 101.

⁶⁰¹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering*, 149.

⁶⁰² *EP*, 432.

⁶⁰³ *EP*, 433.

⁶⁰⁴ *EP*, 438-9.

⁶⁰⁵ *EP*, 448.

The rest of the novel is a chronicle of advancing loss as Emily's mother dies, the Great Hedges suburban estate is sold by Tony Wilson (who remarries and moves away) and when Emily's nephew Peter, by now an ordained minister, takes Emily to see Tony at his new place, he remembers his mother's naive evaluation of Emily as "a free spirit [...] who doesn't care what anybody thinks [...] is her own person and she goes her own way."⁶⁰⁶ As Klinkowitz astutely explains, Emily "only *appears* independent" while, in reality, she is "less liberated than lonely and excluded" and "her fortunes are rarely self-directed, usually tied to the initiatives of a man."⁶⁰⁷ It is ironic that Emily has little substance when on her own, no matter how hard she tries to stake out an existence based on intellect and professional achievement. When Emily's boyfriend Howard travels to California on business again, his absence becomes "filled with silence and dread."⁶⁰⁸ Emily is haunted with getting old and, when she looks in the mirror, she sees "the face of a middle-aged woman in hopeless and terrible need."⁶⁰⁹ When Howard returns, he admits to leaving Emily to reunite with his young wife (with whom he has been cheating on Emily for years), and Emily's downfall escalates as she leaves important business documents in a cab and is fired for her blunder.⁶¹⁰ While receiving unemployment benefits for a year, Emily starts (and aborts, as usual) her final piece of writing titled "ON THE DOLE—A WOMAN'S STORY."⁶¹¹

As Charlton-Jones explains, Emily's final unfinished article "carries with it a central irony; her writing about unemployment fails *because* she is unemployed and female and has neither the focus nor the force to gain any perspective on her position."⁶¹² Moreover, as Klinkowitz suggests, Emily's history of starting and failing to finish her pieces about various chapters from her own life may be also caused by the fact that she, "as a woman in a male-dominated society [...] has found it hard to express herself in any form except that of passivity."⁶¹³ In a society where women are supposed to be silent and submissive supporters of their men within marriage, Emily tries to win respect and acceptance for her own professional and creative work as a single woman, a path which proves unsatisfactory and futile.

By the end of her year of living on unemployment benefits, Emily "began to fear she was losing her mind."⁶¹⁴ While she manages to get invited to a party of Grace Talbot, a friend

⁶⁰⁶ EP, 455.

⁶⁰⁷ Klinkowitz, *The New American Novel of Manners*, 46-7.

⁶⁰⁸ EP, 458.

⁶⁰⁹ EP, 459.

⁶¹⁰ EP, 461-2.

⁶¹¹ EP, 463.

⁶¹² Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering*, 118.

⁶¹³ Jerome Klinkowitz, *The New American Novel of Manners*, 46.

⁶¹⁴ EP, 463.

from the advertising business, this proves another disappointment as there are no unattached men at the party and an impromptu visit of the party attenders to a neighbor's masturbation clinic for women only deepens Emily's loneliness, so she leaves for home.⁶¹⁵ After a few more days, she plucks up the courage to call her nephew Peter, by now an ordained minister in New Hampshire with a beautiful young wife and a daughter. When Peter senses Emily's despair, he invites her to stay with his family. On arrival, Peter picks her up, and repeats his interpretation of his aunt as "the original liberated woman [...] from the old, outmoded sociological concepts of what a woman's role should be."⁶¹⁶ Emily is amused and saddened by the way even her favorite nephew, despite being a good student of human character, has misread her temperament and life. Daly explains that the way other people misread Emily's real identity is caused by the fact that "she is so good at deluding herself, like everyone else in the novel, that she is able to project a carefree image of herself that everyone believes" but which is at odds with the way she really feels—like a lonely, love-seeking woman whose deluded dreams and superior intelligence have only brought disappointment in her relationships with men and unhappiness in everyday matters.⁶¹⁷

When Peter drives Emily to his house, Emily breaks down and accuses Peter's father of killing Sarah and insults Peter and his wife with lecherous fantasies about their sex life.⁶¹⁸ According to Klinkowitz, Emily's rant is explicable by her inability to accept "her nephew's success, encompassing a happy marriage, a beautiful child, and a comfortable home [...] all the things that Emily never had and that her sister lost."⁶¹⁹ Naparsteck considers the embarrassing scene which Emily makes as "clear evidence of the beginnings of a nervous breakdown" which is "brought on by her intense loneliness"⁶²⁰ yet the novel ends on a note of hope and redemption as Peter's compassionate reaction to his aunt's crazy outburst is full of quiet authority that befits an older man. When he suggests his aunt must be very tired and needs rest, she agrees: "Yes, I'm tired [...] And do you know a funny thing? I'm almost fifty years old and I've never understood anything in my whole life."⁶²¹ According to Castronovo and Goldleaf, Yates successfully portrays Emily as the proud, lonely, unhappy female protagonist who garners the reader's interest, even though his work "has been characterized as hostile to women," as he, in *The Easter Parade*, successfully foregrounds Emily's "bitterness and her confusion over what, exactly, went wrong in her life."⁶²² To Emily's moment of awakening at which she realizes the fact that she has spent her life doing always

⁶¹⁵ *EP*, 464-7.

⁶¹⁶ *EP*, 471.

⁶¹⁷ Daly, "Emily Grimes Is Me," 46.

⁶¹⁸ *EP*, 473-5.

⁶¹⁹ Klinkowitz, *The New American Novel of Manners*, 47.

⁶²⁰ Naparsteck, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 103.

⁶²¹ *EP*, 475.

⁶²² Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 127.

the wrong thing and making the wrong decision, her nephew Peter reacts with the professional sympathy and compassion of an experienced social worker: “All right, aunt Emmy. Now. Would you like to come on in and meet the family?”⁶²³ For Charlton-Jones, the novel ends with “Christian forgiveness and the suggestion of [Emily’s] inclusion” in Peter’s young family.⁶²⁴ Moreover, by accepting Peter’s invitation, Emily finally gives in to “the pretense that is offered by both the idealized fiction of the modern American suburban family” whose conformist appeal she smugly resisted while Sarah, Peter’s mother, was alive.⁶²⁵

The role of the suburb in *The Easter Parade* is not that of the primary background for the mapping of Emily Grimes’s lonely and unhappy life, yet its repeated usage by Yates as the place where pretension and prejudice of the characters get exposed is essential. While Emily lives in the city all her life except the suburban decade of her childhood, she pays regular visits to the Great Hedges suburban home of her sister Sarah who Emily considers her intellectual and cultural inferior yet whose approval she craves. For Sarah, the home in the Long Island suburbs is the bourgeois dream realized, suggesting a suburban mythology of domesticity that she does not consciously understand but still desires. As Joseph George explains, “the very act of buying a [suburban] house, of interacting with neighbors, of understanding a national heritage is highly mediated and motivated by a variety of assumptions, beliefs, and expectations.”⁶²⁶ For Emily, each visit to Sarah becomes an exercise in social tolerance as the intellectual and cultural difference between the two sisters deepens with the passage of time. While Sarah and her abusive husband Tony blame each other for refusing to sell Great Hedges and move out, it is Tony who does sell the estate immediately after Sarah’s death.⁶²⁷ By the end of the novel, with Emily crushed by loneliness, unemployed in the city and on the verge of going crazy, the New Hampshire suburb where her favorite nephew Peter Wilson has moved and lives, functions as the locus of her possible redemption and salvation.⁶²⁸

Peter Wilson seems Yates’s only sympathetic male character who also happens to be associated with the church. In all of his work, Yates’s characters (both male and female) are ambivalent, or plainly indifferent to the role of faith and organized religion in their lives. When Pookie Grimes selects “a small Episcopal church” for Sarah’s wedding, it is on the basis of the social prestige such a venue might bring rather than the result of faith running in

⁶²³ *EP*, 475.

⁶²⁴ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 145.

⁶²⁵ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering*, 145.

⁶²⁶ George, *Postmodern Suburban Spaces*, 183.

⁶²⁷ *EP*, 454.

⁶²⁸ *EP*, 470-5.

her family.⁶²⁹ Peter, as a child of two shallow, uneducated parents (ie Sarah and Tony Wilson) who are not religious, improbably grows up to become a goal-oriented, serious, compassionate, and intelligent young man with the goal of becoming a minister (and the first educated person in his family). Unlike his primitive father and two brothers, whose working-class boorishness is evident in their scornful treatment of women and their incessant talk of cars, fishing, and fighting, Peter grows up serious, goal-oriented, and caring, until he reaches out and helps his aunt Emily when she is in need. Castronovo and Goldleaf also pinpoint the fact that Peter is the only character in *The Easter Parade* (and perhaps in all of Yates's fiction) who finds his job enjoyable and fulfilling while the other characters, from Emily Grimes's string of city lovers to male protagonists of other Yates novels such as Frank Wheeler and Michael Davenport, make a pretentious show of hating their jobs for the way the jobs supposedly stifle their authentic identity and their creative ambition.⁶³⁰

Emily Grimes is easily the most complex and saddest woman character in all of Yates's fiction. She is portrayed as a lonely, intelligent, disappointed person who is mostly worthy of the reader's sympathy.⁶³¹ From her childhood, she is plagued by "anxiety and chronic self-awareness."⁶³² Ever contrasted with her more beautiful older sister and domineering mother, and feeling doomed to remain in their shadow, Emily grows up to become a withdrawn neurotic who knows too much but is not allowed to say what she knows and feels since doing that would make her socially unacceptable. As a woman who chooses to live single (if one ignores her short and unhappy marriage to a misogynist and a couple of lovers who use her but do not provide a stable long-term relationship), she suffers from what Winifred Beines sums up were the "characteristic problems for single heterosexual American women in the 1950s [and beyond]" who were unsure about their selves, lonely, isolated, and felt that, as career women who chose to succeed outside the domain of marriage and homemaking, they were "prisoners in a culture" at a time when "many possibilities [for professional and personal growth and fulfilment] had opened up and yet women were punished [by ostracization] for taking advantage of them."⁶³³ When Sarah and Pookie suggest Emily should get married again and have children, they unwittingly join the

⁶²⁹ *EP*, 315.

⁶³⁰ See Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 130. Elsewhere in this survey I document the way other Yates characters such as Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*, Michael Davenport in *Young Hearts Crying*, and Evan Shepard in *Cold Spring Harbor* find their jobs a means towards sustaining a lifestyle while professing their dislike of their job's dullness and conformity. It is Yates's skill as ironist to expose the pretension and silliness of these characters' sanctimonious view of themselves—in fact, the reader is made aware of the fact that they have little real and authentic identity to waste in their dull jobs.

⁶³¹ The one exception is mentioned above—when Sarah really wants to run away from Tony and asks Emily to help her get started in the city, Emily backs down, for selfish reasons.

⁶³² Daly, "Emily Grimes Is Me," 46.

⁶³³ Winifred Beines, "Alone in the 1950s: Anne Parsons and the Feminine Mystique," *Theory and Society* 15, no. 6 (Nov. 1986): 839, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/657408839>.

dominant social dictum of their time which privileged married women with children over unmarried, childless, and divorced ones who could be successful in their profession but were viewed as different, unstable, and potentially as dangerous as communism.⁶³⁴

Daly places Emily Grimes within a broader history of masculinity crisis in postwar America, considering her unhappy life as determined by “a larger national identity question in American culture, one that affects both men and women.”⁶³⁵ I agree with Daly, but the problem of Emily’s identity and the way it affects her life is more complex. Arguably, *The Easter Parade* does not only address the usual Yatesian crisis of masculinity through the presentation of misogynist intellectuals such as Andrew Crawford. Emily’s unhappy life is also determined by the inexorable fact that, as Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Samantha Lindsey explain, “white female power is defined in limited and hegemonic terms: white woman must conform to the disciplinary regimes of whiteness, heterosexuality, and gender in order to gain social power.”⁶³⁶ On the one hand, Emily wants to be admired and respected as a woman, which means having to be as feminine, beautiful, and desirable as her older sister. On the other hand, when she grows up being denied the advantages of mainstream feminine beauty, she resorts to using her superior intelligence and advanced education to impress people with. After a disappointing childhood spent in the wake of her mother’s deluded pursuit of flair and prestige and observing her more beautiful older sister’s first loves and marriage, Emily strikes out on her own when she wins a college scholarship and comes to greatly enjoy her liberal arts education, not as the conventional good preparation of a young woman for marriage, but for its own sake, as a period to read a lot of great books and do a lot of critical thinking before having to think of a career.⁶³⁷ Unlike Lucy Davenport of *Young Hearts Crying*, for whom college education is just an extended hunting time during which to catch an adequate husband, Emily finds she enjoys the serious study of books and talking about them so much that she may rate herself an intellectual:

It was a brave noun, a proud noun, a noun suggesting lifelong dedication to lofty things and a cool disdain for the commonplace. An intellectual might lose her virginity to a soldier in the park, but she could learn to look back on it with wry, amused detachment. An intellectual might have a mother who showed her underpants when drunk, but she wouldn’t let it bother her.⁶³⁸

⁶³⁴ For the discussion of the 1950s popular views that made socially unacceptable any identities of men and women who deviated from the heteronormative codes of behavior and the model nuclear family pattern, see May, *Homeward Bound*, 89-108.

⁶³⁵ Daly, “Emily Grimes Is Me,” 41.

⁶³⁶ Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Samantha Lindsey, “Reckoning Loyalties: White Femininity as “Crisis,”” *Feminist Media Studies* 3, no. 2 (2003): 187, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1468077032000119308>.

⁶³⁷ In a fit of prescient wisdom, this is what Emily’s father predicts her college experience would turn out to be for her shortly before he dies, see *EP*, 318.

⁶³⁸ *EP*, 336.

As Daly explains, Emily also “sees the world of further education as a means of escape from her dysfunctional family” since her education and claim to being an intellectual become “her way of ascribing some meaning to her life and marking it as different from her mother’s shambolic existence and her sister’s chaotic marriage.”⁶³⁹ When meeting other intellectuals, including Andrew Crawford and Jack Flanders, their male-chauvinist attitude to women bogs Emily down as they expect a woman to play the supportive and submissive role, not the role of an intellectual equal who bravely competes in the male-dominated world of educated ideas and opinions. The tragedy of Emily is thus in the fact that after she fails to win social recognition for being feminine and charming, her intelligence and aloofness comes to be seen by people as a frightening element of a “liberated woman’s” aggressive identity that puts off prospective male lovers and leaves Emily lonely and withdrawn. Daly also pinpoints another dimension of Emily’s problem with finding a spouse and fulfillment in life as she is “just as deluded and anxious as her sister and mother before her, but she also follows in the long line of male characters Yates wrote about almost obsessively, who seek some form of exceptionalism in their lives without ever developing the ability to articulate their desire with any coherence.”⁶⁴⁰ It is ironic that even Emily does not realize the limits of her intelligence and writing skills, which is evident in her ridiculous attempts at capturing the major stages of her life in a series of aborted articles which are clearly presented by Yates as amateurish, naive, and unpublishable. As Charlton-Jones explains, the women characters in Yates fiction including Emily Grimes typically search for “something more than just marriage and motherhood” which results their suffering “in bewildered silence as they experience their personal sense of fulfillment declining, in ways and for reasons they often do not understand.”⁶⁴¹ While Yates portrays strong and energetic women like Emily Grimes with an unusual degree of sympathy for a masculinity-haunted writer who professed to hate feminism and women’s liberation, intelligent women like Emily are presented in his fiction “in ways that suggest their cold-heartedness” as the woman who defies the socially-prescriptive roles of traditional submissive lover/wife/mother, is forced to relinquish “viable, mutually interdependent relationships with men.”⁶⁴² When Emily realizes she should care more for Jack Flanders during their Iowa stay as he struggles with his writing, she chooses to dump him rather than provide him the emotional support he needs. In fact, Emily desires a serious relationship with a man that includes sexual attraction and intellectual communion, but without having to commit to it like a person whose identity would be lost in caring for her partner. When a man she dates is a perfect mixture of strength, charm, and independence,

⁶³⁹ Daly, “Why Is Your Brand Crisis?“, 99-100.

⁶⁴⁰ Daly, “Emily Grimes Is Me,” 45.

⁶⁴¹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering*, 156. See also my discussion of Lucy Davenport’s futile search for fulfillment in the arts in the discussion of *Young Hearts Crying* above.

⁶⁴² Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering*, 206.

such as Howard Dunninger, the relationship fails anyway since he has never unattached himself from his wife and ultimately leaves Emily to return to his wife.

Through the tracing of Emily's rich but unhappy love history, Yates seems to imply that an educated woman in postwar America has no choice but to abandon her intellectual and professional ambition to become a traditional wife and mother, otherwise she faces social ostracization and winds up alone or used by opportunist men who do not respect her and only use her. It is only by lowering the pretentious standards of being a proud woman intellectual that Emily partially comes to terms with her life by the end of the novel as she enters her nephew Peter's happy family as a guest whose sojourn might become permanent. With *The Easter Parade*, Yates pays memorable tribute to the plight of postwar American career women whose lives could be revolutionized by the acceptance of the revolutionary claims of the women's liberation movement, yet who may have chosen, like Emily Grimes, to stake out an identity outside the radical activism of the second-wave feminists. The fact that such a course only brings about neurotic withdrawal from people and loneliness for the woman protagonist is something Yates does not try to hide.

The last novel that Richard Yates published during his lifetime is *Cold Spring Harbor*.⁶⁴³ Although this slim book was published in 1986, twenty-five years after *Revolutionary Road*, *Cold Spring Harbor* actually is framed within an earlier period in U.S. suburban history than *Revolutionary Road*, Yates's famous first novel.⁶⁴⁴ The story of *Cold Spring Harbor* starts in 1935 and ends by 1942, in the middle of the U.S. involvement in World War II, at a time when young American men expected to be drafted at any moment.⁶⁴⁵ The novel title refers to an eponymous village in the suburbanized North Shore area of Long Island which ranks among the most life-friendly New York City prewar suburbs. As Kenneth T. Jackson explains,

the north shore of Long Island—from Great Neck to Lloyd Harbor—best epitomized the desire of wealthy Americans to take up country residence. Lured by the island's natural beauty, by its bays and coves and rolling hills, and especially by its proximity to the nerve center of American industry and finance, socially prominent families began spreading over the farmlands in the 1870s.⁶⁴⁶

⁶⁴³ See Richard Yates, *Cold Spring Harbor* (New York: Delta, 2008). First published 1986. All subsequent references refer to the 2008 Delta edition. Hereinafter referred to as *CSH*.

⁶⁴⁴ As I show above, *Revolutionary Road* is set over the space of one calendar year, from 1955 to 1956.

⁶⁴⁵ On the way the draft system worked in the late 1930s and early 1940s, see, for example, James A. Huston, "Selective Service in World War II," *Current History* 54, no. 322 (June 1968), 345-350, 368, 384, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45311922>.

⁶⁴⁶ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 88.

Cold Spring Harbor in the novel functions as a prewar suburban community which boasts clean coastal environment and landscapes of considerable natural beauty. The principal setting in the novel is that of an early railroad suburb that is within reach of the city and metropolitan area yet retains a small-town and country feel of a coastal summer resort.⁶⁴⁷ There is a diversity of architecture in communities like Cold Spring Harbor, from the lavish mansions on the large estates of the Gilded Age elite to the modest houses of the working class which are more a reflection of the region's early European settlement by fishermen and whalers.⁶⁴⁸ As Baxandall and Ewen explain, "the North Shore [by the 1920s] was home to the largest concentration of wealth and power in the United States," exemplified by the greedy acquisitions of the rich landowners who "bought as much North Shore land as possible, private and public, to create a totally enclosed world of their own with no noisome public to bother them."⁶⁴⁹ As dramatized in the suburban parties in *The Great Gatsby*, by the 1920s, the North Shore mansions became the subject of much media and public attention as what was originally "hidden behind an arrogant veil of gated privacy [of the Gold Coast mansions], the life styles of the rich were now grist for a new media-driven popular culture."⁶⁵⁰ It is the diversity of suburban housing that is portrayed in *Cold Spring Harbor* to reflect Yates's typical preoccupation with "class, prestige, and power"⁶⁵¹ as crucial elements of American identity whose connection to the suburban domestic space in Yates's fiction is possible to make, yet it should always be questioned in view of the author's ambivalence about the role of the suburban setting as a catalyst for the dramatization of the conflicts that affect the protagonists of each suburban novel.⁶⁵² The suburban shore of Long Island in the novel is utilized as an environment into which the author places the characters' "longings and assumptions and opportunities for success and failure."⁶⁵³

Cold Spring Harbor is a tale of two unexceptional American families, the Drakes and the Shepards, whose ordinary lives intersect following a chance meeting in New York City. Critics have called it a novel of small, unambitious people who are crushed by the

⁶⁴⁷ See Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 87-102. The other setting used in the novel is New York City, which is where the Drakes originally live and where the Shepards go to dream (see my analysis below).

⁶⁴⁸ For a survey of the North Shore mansions, see, for example, Paul J. Mateyunas, *North Shore Long Island: Country Houses, 1890-1950* (New York: Acanthus Press, 2007); and, for a pictorial history of the Cold Spring Harbor community, see Robert C. Hughes, *Cold Spring Harbor* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2014).

⁶⁴⁹ Baxandall and Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened*, 10.

⁶⁵⁰ Baxandall and Ewen, *Picture Windows*, 12.

⁶⁵¹ See Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 13.

⁶⁵² One of the major conclusions of my analysis of *Revolutionary Road* above is the argument that the suburban space and setting does not typically function as a deadening environment that fosters conformist and consumerist lifestyle of intellectual dullness. As I have shown above, the protagonists of Yates's suburban novels, especially the Wheelers in *Revolutionary Road*, tend to blame the suburbs for their own character faults and neurotic responses which originate elsewhere, for example in their traumatic childhood.

⁶⁵³ Naparstek, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 138.

failure of their modest dreams.⁶⁵⁴ For this reason, the novel might be related to the American fiction tradition about lonely dreamers who fail or just become unlucky (or both) that includes *Winesburg, Ohio* and *The Great Gatsby*. According to Michiko Kakutani, the dreams of characters in *Cold Spring Harbor* are treated by the author with sympathy, yet his protagonists face defeat by a mixture of poor genes, bad luck, and unforgiving social forces, leaving them, as in a typical Yates story, exposed, broken and bewildered as to what has happened and why.⁶⁵⁵

The protagonist of *Cold Spring Harbor* is Evan Shepard, a young, good-looking, empty-headed mechanic who loves to act masculine and impress women with a worldliness he learned from watching Hollywood films. Like Frank Wheeler, Evan thinks of himself as an original and authentic character, unlike Frank, he has no intelligent narrative of his life to support this claim. By 1935, at age 17, Evan has grown beyond the adolescent penchant for “bullying of weaker boys, his thick-witted ways of offending girls, his inept and embarrassing ventures into petty crime,” and starts to behave like an adult who has found “a high romance in driving fast and far,” a hobby which showcases Evan’s manual skill as he is “meticulously taking a car apart or putting it together in the dust of his parents’ driveway.”⁶⁵⁶ Evan is very different from his father Charles who is “a retired army officer, a man with poetic habits of thought that he’d always tried to suppress” in the wake of his undistinguished army career that was cut short by his eyesight problems and by the mental illness of his wife whose “nerves gave way and fell apart.”⁶⁵⁷ Using his retirement pension, Charles buys “a small but adequate brown frame house on the north shore [of Long Island].”⁶⁵⁸ Bearing all his woes with civility and resignation, Charles is known in the community “as a dignified, courteous man who always did his family’s grocery shopping, and took care of their laundry, because his wife was said to be an invalid.”⁶⁵⁹ Charles’s wife Grace is a withdrawn, stay-at-home alcoholic who spends her days sitting on the porch, drinking and looking “ruined: heavy, dissatisfied, apparently grieving in silence for the loss of herself.”⁶⁶⁰ Seen through the Horneyan perspective on neurosis in marital relationships, Charles and Grace’s marriage might be understood in terms of “a morbid dependency” of Grace on Charles to meet her neurotic needs, or, as a dysfunctional relationship between Grace and her husband, wherein Grace is the “arrogant-vindictive” person, and Charles assumes the role of “the self-effacing” partner to Grace.⁶⁶¹ Although the arrogant-vindictive

⁶⁵⁴ See Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 139-144; and Naparsteck, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 138-144.

⁶⁵⁵ Michiko Kakutani, “Dashed Dreams,” *New York Times* September 27, 1986, 17.

⁶⁵⁶ *CSH*, 1.

⁶⁵⁷ *CSH*, 3.

⁶⁵⁸ *CSH*, 5.

⁶⁵⁹ *CSH*, 5.

⁶⁶⁰ *CSH*, 6.

⁶⁶¹ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 247.

partner is typically the man and the self-effacing partner the woman, as Horney explains, both the self-effacement and aggressive vindictiveness and arrogance are general “neurotic phenomena“ that have “nothing to do“ with gender and one or the other neurotic symptom may be applicable to a man or a woman, respectively.⁶⁶² In the Shepard home, Evan grows up to rebel against the stifling atmosphere fostered by his withdrawn and vindictive mother who relies on the household keeping by his melancholic and resigned father.

The novel flashbacks to Evan’s high-school courtship of Mary Donovan, “a slender girl with rich, loose, dark red hair and the kind of pretty face that other girls called “saucy“.⁶⁶³ Although Evan isn’t athletic, Mary falls in love with Evan’s “strong and nimble“ appearance and his authoritative image of “a boy born to drive.“⁶⁶⁴ When her anxiety about failing to catch the young man of her dreams is over and they have a date, they go to the movies and later sit “clasping and kissing like young movie stars.“⁶⁶⁵ Evan and Mary soon consummate their relationship, which is followed by a hasty marriage to make Mary’s pregnancy socially acceptable. However, soon after their child, a girl named Kathleen, is born, their marriage falters. Mary, a strong-willed woman with unfulfilled dreams of higher education and hopes for a professional career in the city, resents being stuck in her domestic roles of young dependent mother and wife so early.⁶⁶⁶ Evan, an attractive but hollow shell of a man with no mind, begins to sulk, taking “long, aimless drives at night, so he could frown in the darkness and think.“⁶⁶⁷ Ironically, Evan is not a man of ideas, so all his thinking turns to aggressive physical action in the end. For him, working in a dead-end factory job that his wife’s parents had to secure for him is not a dream life, and “he would sock the steering wheel with the soft part of his fist, again and again, because he couldn’t believe his life had become so fixed and settled before he’d even turned nineteen.“⁶⁶⁸ Mary realizes she is not a mother-woman as sometimes, when cradling her baby daughter, she “would find she had to will her own face into an expression of kindness because she was afraid even an infant might recognize the looks of resentment and blame.“⁶⁶⁹ When Mary asks Evan whether he is ever going to let her “be a person,” Evan misreads Mary’s annoyance and angrily accuses her of trying to sleep around, to which she reacts by mocking Evan’s inability to understand her: “Oh, if only you knew, Evan. If only you had an inkling of how dumb you really are.”⁶⁷⁰ Following their divorce, Mary gets the college

⁶⁶² Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 247.

⁶⁶³ *CSH*, 8.

⁶⁶⁴ *CSH*, 9.

⁶⁶⁵ *CSH*, 10.

⁶⁶⁶ *CSH*, 11-12.

⁶⁶⁷ *CSH*, 11.

⁶⁶⁸ *CSH*, 11.

⁶⁶⁹ *CSH*, 11.

⁶⁷⁰ *CSH*, 13.

education she craved while her parents care for Mary's daughter whereas Evan keeps his dead-end factory job and gives up his dreams of higher education for good.⁶⁷¹ Seen from the Horneyan perspective on neurosis, the failure of Evan's first marriage to Mary is caused by their immaturity and incompatibility—while Evan needs a compliant woman who would admire and respect him, Mary grows beyond her initial attraction toward Evan to resent his uncultured aggressiveness and her earlier attitude of compliant admiration for Evan's masculine posturing and sexual prowess turns to hatred and vindictiveness.⁶⁷²

By the time Evan turns twenty-three, he has become a bitter slacker who is “still working in the factory and living in his parents' house.”⁶⁷³ His father hates to see his only son settle into a routine of “pure lassitude” since women still give his son “startled looks of helplessness wherever he went.”⁶⁷⁴ Charles invents a reason to go to New York for an eye clinic appointment to have his poor eyesight fixed and asks Evan to drive him there, hoping to “have an unhurried, serious talk, as other fathers and sons were said to do.”⁶⁷⁵ During the drive, Charles tells his son about passing up an opportunity to leave the army and move into radio sales years ago, “making excuses and shying away from it, backing down, trying to laugh it off by saying I couldn't picture myself as a salesman.”⁶⁷⁶ Evan responds with the unrealistic dream of college study for which he lacks the funding and talent (it is revealed that he never even completed high school).⁶⁷⁷ Although Evan's temperament is very different from his father's, he cannot rewrite Charles's unhappy life by living a memorable life in his place, a dramatic irony which neither of them realizes. Still, when they reach New York's Queensboro Bridge, the city skyline makes Evan feel

like a young pioneer, like a courageous man, like the very man his father might always have wanted him to be, and from there on the ride might as well have been something in a dream: across town and then swiftly down toward lower Manhattan, where Charles might find a pair of glasses that would bring about remarkable improvements in his daily life.⁶⁷⁸

This view of the city as the idealized setting in which dreams might come true resembles the view experienced by Nick Carraway, narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, who claims that New York, “seen from Queensboro Bridge, is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world.”⁶⁷⁹

⁶⁷¹ CSH, 13.

⁶⁷² See also Paris, *Imagined Human Beings*, 20, for a useful overview of the major neurotic responses to inner conflicts based on the work of Karen Horney.

⁶⁷³ CSH, 15.

⁶⁷⁴ CSH, 15.

⁶⁷⁵ CSH, 15.

⁶⁷⁶ CSH, 17.

⁶⁷⁷ CSH, 18.

⁶⁷⁸ CSH, 19.

⁶⁷⁹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 68.

The city thus functions, for the Shepard men in Yates's last novel, as the environment which promises the glamorous fulfillment of one's dreams, something that cannot happen in the mundane suburban provinciality of their home. While Evan hopes to become an authentic hero in the film script of his life, he lacks both the temperament, intelligence, and ability to become such a figure. The hope for a bright turn in the lives of Evan and his father Charles is crushed when their car breaks down in lower Manhattan and Charles misses his eye clinic appointment. When they cannot find a phone booth to call a garage, they ring a random apartment doorbell and thus get to meet Gloria Drake and her children.⁶⁸⁰

Gloria welcomes the Shepards "into her sad living room which smelled of cat droppings and cosmetics and recent cooking," appearing as "a nice person down on her luck" whose visage Charles mistakes for the "wretched gentility" that he thinks is typical for New Yorkers.⁶⁸¹ Gloria "may not have been more than fifty, but there wasn't much left of whatever she'd had in the way of looks."⁶⁸² Her manner "suggested an anxious need to be heard and understood, and to be liked if possible."⁶⁸³ Based on Yates's mother Dookie, Gloria is the author's most devastating portrait of the pathetic, deluded mother who lives, unemployed, on modest alimony payments from her ex-husband, while her neurotic anxiety and search for glory manifests itself in her perennial dreaming of upward social mobility and in her attempts to create a semblance of class privilege to impress other people. As Charlton-Jones explains, Gloria Drake and other dominant and overbearing mother characters in Yates's fiction present "maternal failure and the consequent family dysfunction that accompanies it."⁶⁸⁴ In the absence of a healthy relationship with an adult male partner, the surrogate relationship of Yates's mother characters such as Gloria is with their children (especially sons) or with the rare adults they meet (such as Charles Shepard), and their deluded ambition is the pursuit of upward social mobility on the basis of persuading other people of their own exceptional merit as women, mothers, and social beings. As Castronovo and Goldleaf explain, the dominant atmosphere of Gloria's household is "bewilderment and lack of control" which "can be warded off only by the sound of her own blather or a favorable glimmer in the mirror."⁶⁸⁵ Gloria's two children are Rachel, "a vulnerable, illusion-filled young girl" with movie-fuelled dreams of a glamorous relationship with a perfect man,⁶⁸⁶

⁶⁸⁰ *CSH*, 20.

⁶⁸¹ *CSH*, 20.

⁶⁸² *CSH*, 21.

⁶⁸³ *CSH*, 21.

⁶⁸⁴ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 170.

⁶⁸⁵ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 142.

⁶⁸⁶ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 140.

and Phil, a boy who looks too young for his age and struggles with finding proper male models to follow in the feminized Drake household.⁶⁸⁷

Cold Spring Harbor is a novel in which Yates repeatedly mocks the protagonists failure to read signs of class and privilege (or their lack). In their inability to distinguish the classy from the tasteless, the Drakes resort to the stereotypes they get from films, radio, and magazines. While Charles mistakes Gloria's social standing in the city for better than it really is, Gloria, similarly, mistakes Charles for an 'old money' man from the Gold Coast, someone who probably lives in a community of "large or modest family fortunes husbanded through the generations."⁶⁸⁸ Learning of the Shepards' address reminds Gloria of a trip taken to that part of Long Island years ago, on the basis of which she claims she would "never forget how lovely that part of the north shore [of Long Island] is."⁶⁸⁹

A few drinks later, the Shepards realize that "only a long-divorced woman would ever talk as if talking were sustenance, talk until veins the size of earthworms stood out in her temples, talk until little white beads of spit were gathered and working on each other near the corners of her mouth."⁶⁹⁰ Using such extremes of embarrassing physical details, Yates conveys Gloria's loneliness and pathetic struggle to endear herself to her visitors as she finds Charles "the most congenial person she'd met in years" and develops a silly romantic interest in him which he, as a reserved gentleman, does not reciprocate.⁶⁹¹

Verbal communication for characters such as Gloria Drake is the author's way of undermining his character's communication goals as her listeners typically grow annoyed and embarrassed by her talk.⁶⁹² While the chance visit of the Shepard men to the Drakes proves tiring due to Gloria's endless conversation, when her children come back, the atmosphere improves. Rachel is "herself: a little thin and soft, but with a wonderful look of having newly come to life."⁶⁹³ Evan considers Rachel "a girl you could cherish and protect," knowing that his good looks "gave him a decided advantage with girls."⁶⁹⁴ Rachel's younger brother Phil likes to play with the cat and prefers not to go out, avoiding play with boys in the street, for which he earns Evan's scorn: "Why didn't he get into stickball games in the street, or get into fights with Italian kids and learn a few things about life?"⁶⁹⁵

⁶⁸⁷ Phil is modelled after the young Yates himself. Beside the autobiographical element in the characters of Gloria and Phil Drake, *Cold Spring Harbor* is a departure from the extreme autobiography of *A Special Providence*. There is an absent father, Curtis Drake, who counterpoints his exwife's financial irresponsibility with sound advice and regular alimony payments.

⁶⁸⁸ CSH, 43.

⁶⁸⁹ CSH, 21.

⁶⁹⁰ CSH, 23.

⁶⁹¹ CSH, 29.

⁶⁹² CSH, 21-23, 29-30.

⁶⁹³ CSH, 24.

⁶⁹⁴ CSH, 24.

⁶⁹⁵ CSH, 25.

When Gloria proudly presents her son as a future prep school boy, Charles reacts with disbelief as “there was nothing about this place, or these people, to suggest the kind of money a preparatory school would probably cost.”⁶⁹⁶ Although Evan takes an instant and visceral dislike of Gloria and Phil, he is attracted to Rachel, sensing his manly posturing might win her naïve and inexperienced heart. He promises to take her on a date later since “she might easily turn into a woman who’d be worth your blood, worth your life, worth everything.”⁶⁹⁷ While Gloria makes embarrassing passes at Charles Shepard, Rachel begins to flirt with Evan, feeling suddenly “like an exceptionally pretty girl [...] almost like a girl in the movies, because meeting Evan Shepard had given her the opening episode of a movie she could play over and over in her mind whenever she felt like it.”⁶⁹⁸ Rachel (and other Yates characters including Evan) falls prey to what Charlton-Jones disparages as the “effects of the Hollywood machine” which includes the glamorization of “America as an egalitarian, classless society” where anyone can dream big, work hard, and be rewarded.⁶⁹⁹ It is a major achievement of Yates, in *Cold Spring Harbor* and other novels such as *Revolutionary Road*, that he manages to expose the gap between the unrealistic idealized images of professional success, social recognition, and model relationships, and marriage as presented in the Hollywood films, radio, and other mass media, and the reality of American lives, which are often lackluster rather than glamorous, and full of bad turns, misery, failure, disappointment, and anxiety.

Having little authentic identity of their own, both Evan and Rachel live their lives as if they were the actors in the movies of their lives, governed by the habitual impulse to step back and consider what an actor would do in a particular situation. Rachel’s feelings about Evan or other facts of life originate not in her authentic emotions but, rather, in “borrowed cinematic reactions; real emotion is buried under the model and weight of synthetic, glossy, pre-determined Hollywood responses.”⁷⁰⁰ The Drakes (Gloria as well as her two children Rachel and Phil) are also portrayed as compulsive mirror-gazers who have “a weakness for the mirror that hung on the living-room wall of this current, temporary apartment,” and it is in front of the mirror that each of them practices an attractive public face or posture with which to impress people.⁷⁰¹ As Andrew Sobanet explains, “mirror scenes, across genres and media, often mark or coincide with a crucial narrative moment. Be it an instance of self-awareness, a pivotal moment of transformation, or a marker of alienation from the self, mirror scenes frequently indicate to the reader or viewer a key element about the mirror-

⁶⁹⁶ *CSH*, 25.

⁶⁹⁷ *CSH*, 26-7.

⁶⁹⁸ *CSH*, 27.

⁶⁹⁹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 33.

⁷⁰⁰ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 37.

⁷⁰¹ *CSH*, 28-9.

gazing character in question.”⁷⁰² The Drakes in *Cold Spring Harbor* (which might be said of other Yates characters such as Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*) also unwittingly use posing in front of the mirror to relieve their neurotic anxiety caused by the discrepancy between the less-than-positive image they feel they normally present to other people and the idealized image of cool, attractive, self-confident people that they see in the movies and think it their duty to emulate in real life.

The unstable atmosphere of the Drake household is caused not only by the absence of the father and husband and Gloria’s unrealistic management of family finances, sloppy housekeeping, and warped notions of the parental and gender roles. Another destabilizing factor is the family’s frequent moving since the Drakes “had changed their place of residence twelve times in thirteen years,” including two cases of eviction, as Gloria “would often be impelled to find a new place only because the old one seemed alien to her nature in ways she seldom felt obliged to define.”⁷⁰³ Seen through the Horneyan perspective, Gloria’s obsession with frequent moving corresponds to the manifestation of the neurotic pride of a person whose unusually high expectations of being respected and admired in a particular community are destined to be repeatedly crushed (as she, as a divorced woman of dubious means and family history, is hardly a person to win social respect at any place she moves to). In this situation, being ignored or snubbed by the community, Gloria repeatedly responds by packing up her family and moving to another address where the vicious cycle of her social (un)recognition may start all over again.⁷⁰⁴ Gloria’s children, Rachel and Phil, react to the pattern of perennial uprootedness by forging a firm mutual bond that includes private micro quarrels followed with reconciliation as “apologies were as common as blame in this small, fatherless family, and forgiveness was always in the air.”⁷⁰⁵ The recurring pattern of settlement and dislocation of the Drake family leaves a mark on Rachel and Phil who “found they could only cling together like disaster victims, warding off a vast bewilderment with the laughter of artificial bravery or with groundless, pitifully tearful quarrels; then they’d settle uneasily into new surroundings and wait once again for a stirring of forces beyond their control.”⁷⁰⁶ One way of coping with the situation is by following parental (or other

⁷⁰² Andrew Sobanet, review of *Mirror Gazing*, by Warren F. Motte, *French Forum* 41, no. 3 (Winter 2016): 309, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90001142>.

⁷⁰³ *CSH*, 28. Gloria Drake’s peripatetic lifestyle is similar to what Alice Prentic practises in *A Special Providence*. The one difference between the two mother characters is in the setting they choose for their lives of habitual mobility—Alice jumps from suburban house to house while Gloria rents a string of city apartments.

⁷⁰⁴ On the details of how neurotic anxiety and pride affects one’s change of lifestyle choices including an address, see Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 87-8.

⁷⁰⁵ *CSH*, 28. Again, connections could be made between the bonding of Rachel and Phil Drake in *Cold Spring Harbor* and the defense mechanism of Emily and Sarah Grimes in *The Easter Parade*. In both novels, sibling rivalry and animosity is suppressed while the children try to cope with the destabilizing pattern of constant moving imposed by their mothers.

⁷⁰⁶ *CSH*, 28.

adult) models of socially-accepted behavior. In Rachel's case, choosing her mentally unstable and pathetic mother for a role model is, understandably, out of the question, so she resorts to reading popular magazines, listening to the radio, and watching the movies for inspiration on how to live.⁷⁰⁷ For Phil, his search for a male identity is even more complicated, as he searches in vain for guidance in Gloria's feminized home and grows up, similarly to Bobby Prentice in *A Special Providence*, as a weak and passive son. Phil's development into a man is hampered by the absence of his father and the stifling influence of his overly protective mother.⁷⁰⁸

Following the first visit to the Drakes, Evan buys a used car and starts dating Rachel. She goes out with Evan to escape "the reek of catshit [...] the grubby upholstery, and the torrentially talking mother" while Evan takes Rachel out to prove his own self-worth after the his humiliation in the marriage to Mary.⁷⁰⁹ Rachel admires his "authority" in everything he does while he enjoys her freshness and innocence. Typically, Evan takes Rachel to a spot to enjoy the New York skyline which,

seen from this cliff across the Hudson, was more than enough to take your breath away. It let you know at once that all those yellow- and orange- and red-struck towers, with their numberless blazing windows, [...] were there for you, as if you'd wished them into being, and their higher purpose was to enhance your aspirations and accommodate your dreams.⁷¹⁰

Rachel is enchanted by Evan's worldliness and his movie-star looks and behavior: "It wasn't only Evan Shepard's face that Rachel found hard to believe; it was everything else about him. The broad-shouldered, meaty, graceful way he moved and turned was an unconscious performance that she thought she would never tire of watching."⁷¹¹ She even gets over the shock of his admitting, in a restaurant he has carefully chosen to impress her, that "he'd been married and divorced and had a daughter of six."⁷¹² Evan's admission of his past history deepens Rachel's fascination as she considers him an experienced man who will initiate her into love. Rachel's sex education does not come from her mother whose "unspoken view seemed to be that nice people didn't find it necessary to discuss things like that," yet Gloria's evasive comments on the subject of sex "seemed always to come from carelessness, or

⁷⁰⁷ The negative effect of a peripatetic mother's frequent moving of the prewar American family is a recurring theme in Yates's fiction—the same problem is something Bobby Prentice faces in the second part of *A Special Providence*.

⁷⁰⁸ For more details on the identity problems of sons who have domineering and over-protective mothers, see May, *Homeward Bound*, 73.

⁷⁰⁹ *CSH*, 31.

⁷¹⁰ *CSH*, 32.

⁷¹¹ *CSH*, 33.

⁷¹² *CSH*, 34.

laziness, rather than from any kind of principle.”⁷¹³ As Charlton-Jones explains, Gloria’s refusal to communicate with her daughter about the facts of life gives Rachel a falsely “sentimental and romantic view of life” which leaves her vulnerable and prone to making mistakes similar to those of her mother.⁷¹⁴

While Rachel is nervous about losing Evan due to her ignorance in sexual matters, he does not mind taking his time with her: “All he wanted tonight, it seemed, were kisses—long, embracing, Hollywood kisses with open mouths and a sweet mingling of tongues.”⁷¹⁵ In a Yatesian manner, Evan and Rachel both reenact their fantasy of being the lovers in a romantic Hollywood movie. Driving home after his date, Evan realizes that getting married again might ruin his dreams of college education until it dawns on him that “marriage and college wouldn’t necessarily have to rule each other out,” since a person at “twenty-three and in command of your life, you could do anything.”⁷¹⁶

When the relationship of Evan and Rachel becomes serious, Gloria tries to persuade them to marry, but they respond with bemused detachment.⁷¹⁷ Then Charles invites Gloria for a drink in order to discuss their children’s future, which she mistakes for a romantic tryst: “She felt as thrilled as a girl, because it had been years since she’d gone out into the city alone to meet a man, and so she had to caution herself not to be ridiculous.”⁷¹⁸ In her deluded selfishness, Gloria ignores the real reason for meeting Charles and thinks he “looked like the kind of man who might still, somehow, turn out to be the hero in the story of her life.”⁷¹⁹ According to Horney, a neurotic person such as Gloria Drake “sees others [...] in the light of her externalizations [...] does not experience her own self-idealization; instead she idealizes others.”⁷²⁰ Gloria’s foolish idealization of Charles Shepard assumes increased intensity while her attitude to ex-husband Curtis grows more aggressive and vindictive.⁷²¹

When Gloria returns from her meeting with Charles, persuaded by his argumentation to stop urging Evan and Rachel to marry soon, the young couple surprise her with a triumphant entry and a fresh decision to marry immediately, a decision apparently made “for the sex of it.”⁷²² Rachel exudes the quiet confidence of a young woman who has reached an important decision, and weathers any attempts by her mother to thwart the marriage plan.

⁷¹³ CSH, 35.

⁷¹⁴ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 176.

⁷¹⁵ CSH, 36.

⁷¹⁶ CSH, 37.

⁷¹⁷ CSH, 39–40.

⁷¹⁸ CSH, 40.

⁷¹⁹ CSH, 43.

⁷²⁰ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 292. Horney’s passage speaks of the neurotic person as of a “he”, here, as applied to Gloria Drake, the gender of the pronoun has been changed to “she”

⁷²¹ For the intensification of Gloria’s hatred of exhusband Curtis, see my analysis of the end of the novel below.

⁷²² CSH, 45.

After a life spend in drowsy anticipation she suddenly becomes “the most stable member of the family.”⁷²³ Gloria grows jealous of Rachel’s incipient happiness with Evan since getting married based on sexual attraction of the couple is the “one mistake she’d never made,” as she herself only got married at thirty as “a veteran of several affairs and extremely anxious about her future.”⁷²⁴

On the wedding day, Rachel snubs her mother and takes an earlier train to spend time with her father before the ceremony while Gloria puts on “a splendid new dress that had cost almost a third of this month’s check from Curtis Drake,” but no one cares.⁷²⁵ Ever obsessed with pretending to be a respected woman of high social standing, Gloria is “preoccupied now with how awful her cheap old winter coat looked; she could only hope there would be some inconspicuous place to hang it, or dump it, before walking into the hush of the nondenominational chapel.”⁷²⁶ As usual, Gloria is unable to realize that other people either ignore her or are annoyed by her selfish, deluded, and ridiculous attempts to persuade them of her social value and charm.

When Gloria rides in a cab from the Cold Spring Harbor train station to the wedding venue, she passes through the suburban country of her dreams, trying take in “all she could of the subtle community sweeping past on either side.”⁷²⁷ However, her dream of at least a glimpse of the beautiful classy suburban mansions of Cold Spring Harbor fails since the “one important characteristic of the people here was their disdain for ostentation of any kind.”⁷²⁸ Paul Fussell defines the “out-of-sight” upper class house owners in the United States as opposed to the obvious display of wealth and privilege.⁷²⁹ The real upper class citizens of Cold Spring remain invisible to a passing cab rider, hidden beyond “a blue-white pebble driveway, uncommonly clean and wide between two elegant stone pillars.”⁷³⁰

When seated in church for the wedding, Gloria nervously fingers a cigarette before realizing “you weren’t supposed to smoke in church, which seemed a cruel deprivation.”⁷³¹ After the ceremony, when Gloria sees the Shepard family house, “small, ordinary, all made of brown-painted wood and too-closely flanked on both sides by bigger, better houses,” she hides her disappointment with false words of praise: “Isn’t this a nice house.”⁷³² After the wedding and the modest reception at the Shepards’, Gloria rides the train back alone, realizing “she’d be going home to an empty place. Her daughter gone for good, her son away

⁷²³ CSH, 46.

⁷²⁴ CSH, 46.

⁷²⁵ CSH, 48-9.

⁷²⁶ CSH, 49.

⁷²⁷ CSH, 50.

⁷²⁸ CSH, 50.

⁷²⁹ See Paul Fussell, *Class* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984), 16-22.

⁷³⁰ CSH, 50.

⁷³¹ CSH, 51.

⁷³² CSH, 51.

for many more months [in prep school], she would now awaken to the hours of each new day alone, in silence, and never with anything to do.”⁷³³ In Horneyan terms, Gloria by now is a self-effacing neurotic whose vindictive jealousy turns towards her own daughter whose love with Evan is all the more painful and unbearable for Gloria in the context of the habitual absence of a love relationship in her own life. Her dependency on being able to play the omnipotent and smothering mother figure to her children only intensifies while her daughter manages to gradually move away from her stifling influence, rejecting Gloria’s destructive love and her “protection, support, affection, encouragement, sympathy, [and] understanding.”⁷³⁴

In the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Charles and Evan respond to the situation in different ways. While Charles, as a retired officer whose career ended too soon, would love to return to the army but knows his age and poor eyesight prevent him from doing so, his son is indifferent to the patriotic duty and prefers to stay at home.⁷³⁵ For personal rather than patriotic reasons, Charles tries to make Evan enlist in order for his son to “serve to justify his father’s life.”⁷³⁶ Although Evan overcomes his initial indifference and finds “a surprising pleasure in the visions of soldiering”, he fails in the draft medical exam due to a defect (perforated eardrums) of which he was unaware. This result delights his wife but leaves him disappointed, “knowing he’d need a little time and quiet to sort things out.”⁷³⁷ He forbids Rachel to spread the news to her mother and father, realizing the difference between his first and second wife: “As a boy, he’d had to contend with a proud and resentful girl; now, fully grown, he had earned the right to have a wife as placid as the wives of other men.”⁷³⁸ Evan realizes that his inability to join the army will forever harm his status of a man who relies on displays of masculinity and mark him second-rate compared to all the drafted men whose army experience will “invigorate every waking moment of their [subsequent civilian] lives.”⁷³⁹ When Evan calls his father about the matter, Charles is consoling, suggesting college education at wartime might be more accessible to stay-at-home men.⁷⁴⁰

While the male characters in *Cold Spring Harbor* see the advent of war as a possibility to prove their manhood, the women see it as a dangerous threat to the family cohesion and prosperity. Soon after Evan’s failed draft examination, Rachel introduces the possibility of renting a house in Cold Spring Harbor, the only catch being they would have

⁷³³ CSH, 53.

⁷³⁴ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 240.

⁷³⁵ CSH, 55.

⁷³⁶ CSH, 57.

⁷³⁷ CSH, 58.

⁷³⁸ CSH, 59.

⁷³⁹ CSH, 59.

⁷⁴⁰ CSH, 60.

to share it with Gloria and Phil Drake. After Rachel's tirade about how she hates her mother, Evan surprisingly agrees to the renting.⁷⁴¹ The suburban house they inspect looks "ramshackle," being "long, two stories high, white clapboard with a black tarpaper-shingled roof [...] similar to other cheaply built houses around."⁷⁴² They decide to rent the house since it is cheaper than their overpriced apartment in town, and it has "plenty of space" for all, including a bedroom fireplace and rug which they instantly like for its lovemaking potential.⁷⁴³

When Phil joins the young Shepards and the Drakes at the new house to spend the summer holiday after his first year of prep school, he responds to the new arrangement with dismay as "all he could predict about Cold Spring Harbor was that his sister would be lost to him there—a married, pregnant woman—and that he would have to find some way of making peace with the taciturn, intimidating stranger she was married to."⁷⁴⁴ Indeed, Phil's greatest problem in the new household is his inability to deal with his brother-in-law Evan who spares no opportunity to humiliate Phil. When Evan comes home, he sees Phil kissing his cat and their handshake also fails as "Evan's hand closed so abruptly around Phil's that it clasped only the fingers instead of the palm; it must have felt as if he were shaking hands with a girl" while, as Phil sees Evan coming home in his factory clothes, he feels ready "to apologize for attending a private school."⁷⁴⁵ Still, Phil's new prep-school worldliness shows in his disparaging evaluation of "the rocking, clangoring Long Island train" and the house decoration which "must be part of some thrifty Long Island method of building."⁷⁴⁶ Without having the money or family background to act like this, Phil adopts the sanctimonious attitude of his rich schoolmates. Although Phil's prep school experience was humiliating at first as he developed "a hole the size of an apple in one elbow of his [only] tweed jacket" and became a social outcast, by spring he began to enjoy the experience as he was able "to attract less public ridicule" and succeeded in making "two or three respectable friends."⁷⁴⁷

There are two problems with the suburban house arrangement. One, the house is damp, with "a faint tang of mildew in the air," and, two, the fact that Evan, Rachel, and Phil are "having to live with Gloria Drake."⁷⁴⁸ Through Gloria's pretentious posturing as the symbolic head of the new suburban household, Yates exposes the false conviviality of the suburban family dinners, which thanks to Gloria's artificial conversation become "the most

⁷⁴¹ *CSH*, 66

⁷⁴² *CSH*, 68.

⁷⁴³ *CSH*, 68.

⁷⁴⁴ *CSH*, 70.

⁷⁴⁵ *CSH*, 74.

⁷⁴⁶ *CSH*, 70-1.

⁷⁴⁷ *CSH*, 70.

⁷⁴⁸ *CSH*, 73.

oppressive event of the day.”⁷⁴⁹ When Charles Shepard finally pays a visit, he leaves his wife behind, and Gloria again succeeds in making everyone uncomfortable with rekindling her naïve crush on Charles, believing that “if you could go straight to the root of a social awkwardness and bring it out into the open, it nearly always worked to your advantage.”⁷⁵⁰ When Evan’s prospect of being promoted from machinist to parts-control supervisor is mentioned by the newlyweds, Gloria is unimpressed since “mechanical engineer [...] seemed scarcely a term to put stars in a girl’s eyes.”⁷⁵¹ To Gloria, Evan seems “a very dull young man” while, ironically, she considers his father to be full of “an innate and unfailing elegance.”⁷⁵² Toward the end of Charles’s visit, Gloria embarrasses Charles with her insistence on calling him ‘captain’ even after Charles explains that the army captain’s rank carries little of the prestige that the captain of the navy does: “There was probably nothing to be done about a woman like this.”⁷⁵³ Ironically, after the unbearable barrage of Gloria’s talk, Charles finds himself “hung smiling in the open doorway, all but dying to go home.”⁷⁵⁴ Of all the pathetic pretentious women characters in Yates’s suburban fiction, Gloria Drake is portrayed with the most brutal honesty that exposes her delusion about herself as a model homemaker, mother, and suburbanite of prestige whose dreams of seducing Charles Shepard are unrealistic and ridiculous, yet she uses any situation to try to realize them.

Evan once subdues his dislike of Phil and offers to give the boy a driving lesson, an occasion for improving their relationship: “If they could begin to do things together, almost as if they were friends, it might make all the difference; besides, there was a blood-quickenning sense of adulthood in the very idea of knowing how to drive a car.”⁷⁵⁵ The lesson proves a disaster since Phil’s nervousness keeps getting the most of him and after he almost ditches the car, fails to shift gears properly and then floods the carburetor, the angry Evan drives back in silence.⁷⁵⁶ However, Phil feels superior in the area of education. As a prep school student who is beginning to succeed academically and socially, Phil snidely thinks that Evan is an uneducated brute destined to “spend the rest of his life on the factory floor with all the other slobs.”⁷⁵⁷ Phil also takes solace in the knowledge that he might be drafted in the near future, prove a man in the army, and that is what will tip the balance of power and masculine authority in his favor as “there would be nobody to remember what a jerk he’d been, [...] the army might be the making of him; it might be the time of his life.”⁷⁵⁸

⁷⁴⁹ CSH, 74.

⁷⁵⁰ CSH, 77.

⁷⁵¹ CSH, 78.

⁷⁵² CSH, 78.

⁷⁵³ CSH, 79.

⁷⁵⁴ CSH, 79.

⁷⁵⁵ CSH, 80.

⁷⁵⁶ CSH, 81-5.

⁷⁵⁷ CSH, 85.

⁷⁵⁸ CSH, 83.

Through the uneasy relationship of Evan and Phil, Yates conveys the traditional clichés about working-class resentment of middle or upper-class educational and occupational privilege while dealing with the general crisis of masculinity which the male characters in his fiction always worry about.⁷⁵⁹ For years, Phil has been plagued by the absence of his father, now his brother-in-law fills the position of a dominant male in the family with condescending displays of aggressive masculinity that Phil feels impelled to resist and combat.

When Rachel introduces her regular western radio show for all to listen to, Gloria disapproves, claiming “the dinner hour was for conversation.”⁷⁶⁰ Ironically, while Gloria is jealous of Rachel’s enjoyment of the radio show, she is not opposed to liking Hollywood movies which present a similarly idealized version of the American reality to a mass audience. Reflecting their lifelong love of the movies as a source of inspiration on how to act, pose, and look in real life, Gloria, Rachel, and Phil once reunite and walk to the movies to watch a show or two as a shared secret before the sulky and disapproving Evan comes home from work:

When the Drake family went to the movies [...] they never bothered to find out what time the main feature began: much of their pleasure came from waiting for a prolonged confusion to clarify itself on the screen [...] The movies were wonderful because they took you out of yourself, and at the same time they gave you a sense of being whole. Things of the world might serve to remind you at every turn that your life was snarled and perilously incomplete, that terror would never be far from possession of your heart, but those perceptions would nearly always vanish, if only for a little while, in the cool and nicely scented darkness of any movie house, anywhere.⁷⁶¹

As Charlton-Jones explains, the obsession of Yates’s characters with cinema and cinematic posing in real life situations (such as posing in front of a mirror) is “an indicator of [their] immaturity,” an inability to live in the present without resorting to face-saving delusion about themselves.⁷⁶² From this perspective, the secretive trip of Gloria, Rachel, and Phil to the movies while Evan is at work is not a rare moment of communion but an example of their over-reliance on pop-culture ideas and habits that provide false yet likable identities to the people who need them. The movies thus function as “a wonderful escape for people

⁷⁵⁹ On the problem of masculinity of the male characters in Yates’s fiction, see Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 188-190.

⁷⁶⁰ CSH, 86. See also my discussion of the masculinity crisis of Michael Davenport and Tom Nelson in *Young Hearts Crying*.

⁷⁶¹ CSH, 88.

⁷⁶² Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering*, 31.

whose lives are dull and riven by poverty and disappointment“ while also serving “like a narcotic, preventing those same people from facing their problems.”⁷⁶³

When Gloria, Phil, and Rachel meet a boy from Phil’s prep-school, Gerard “Flash” Ferris, Gloria realizes he comes from a rich local family and she humiliates Phil into pursuing a summer friendship with Flash since their friendship might be “an opportunity to meet a few congenial people out here.”⁷⁶⁴ When Ferris duly phones back a few days later with a formal invitation to his grandmother’s mansion, Gloria jumps at the opportunity to visit Ferris’s family. Ignoring Phil’s annoyance, Gloria forces him to walk to the distant mansion of Ferris’s grandmother:

There were acres and acres of Mrs. Talmage’s property: wide rolling lawns in a perfect state of maintenance, with evergreens in the distance. Her handsome old house, probably her ancestral home, stood at the end of a well-raked pebble driveway that met your heels in unexpectedly buoyant, invigorating clicks and crutches. “Isn’t this beautiful?” Gloria asked her son in a near-whisper of reverence, as if they were in church.⁷⁶⁵

While Gloria’s refusal to see her ostracization in the Cold Spring Harbor community hurts the sensitivity of her class-conscious son, Yates juxtaposes her suffering, which is based on material want and social exclusion, with the situation of Mrs. Talmage, Flash’s grandmother and an upper-class widow who lives in a huge mansion in Cold Spring Harbor yet is lonely and unhappy in her own way due to her strained relationship with her wastrel daughter Jane:

[Mrs. Talmage] wouldn’t live long enough to make sense of the coarseness and vulgarity that had come to blight every decent impulse in the world today, and she would die without hope of finding any explanation of her daughter’s life. Three stunted, broken marriages, an only child left here as an infant for Harriet herself to raise, and now this bewildering parade of “friends”—what kind of life was that, dear God, for a girl who’d started out with every advantage?⁷⁶⁶

While Mrs. Talmage has the regal manners of an “old money“ American aristocrat, her daughter Jane has turned out to be “an indolent slattern“ who spares no opportunity to humiliate her classy mother with her spoiled and insulting behavior. After the early death of her husband, Mrs. Talmage’s social standing is at risk as her daughter will not maintain the family property by a proper marriage and financial management, so Mrs. Talmage as a widow who sees her world crumbling puts all her effort into raising her grandson Ferris.

⁷⁶³ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering*, 38.

⁷⁶⁴ *CSH*, 91.

⁷⁶⁵ *CSH*, 93.

⁷⁶⁶ *CSH*, 94.

Gloria's ignorance of how to behave and talk at a party makes Mrs. Talmage react with noblesse oblige, as she is "able to take [Gloria's transgressions] with a fixed, pleasant social smile" while her daughter Jane is "chewing with her mouth open and staring at Gloria Drake in the way a rude child will sometimes stare at a cripple."⁷⁶⁷ When Flash takes Phil away to show him his room, they are mocked by Ralph, a lecherous servant who insults the boys about their budding sexuality, then flirts with Amy the maid.⁷⁶⁸ Watching Amy as she runs away from Ralph, Phil decides "not to think too much about girls this summer [...]" but at moments like this he knew what a futile decision it was. If he didn't start finding out a few things about girls, soon, he was going to go crazy.⁷⁶⁹ The visit to Mrs. Talmage dramatizes the delusion of Gloria who is not aware of being ridiculous and inappropriate in her self-endearing attempts to befriend her social superiors, while Phil suffers silently the indignity of being manipulated into a friendship with Flash who he despises for being too young, rich, and naive.

Interestingly, what Phil and Flash Ferris share is having a mother who fails to function as a parent—Gloria keeps Phil enmeshed in her deluded ideas about seeking prestige anywhere while the daughter of Mrs. Talmage is a distant, spoiled, selfish, "too thin and sharp-faced and sarcastic" person who spends her time with her boyfriend away in the city while ignoring her son.⁷⁷⁰ The visit is embarrassing for Phil who feels he should not be pushed by his mother towards socializing with a schoolmate who is a few years his junior, so he tries to "get through it, write it off, pretend it hadn't happened."⁷⁷¹

The two boys do strike a friendship after the party when Flash persuades Phil to accept the gift of a refurbished bicycle that Flash's grandmother has paid for. This is humiliating for Phil who, to save face, insists on getting a summer job to pay back the money to Mrs. Talmage in "a tone of righteous, stubborn pride that he guessed he must have learned from movies about the Depression."⁷⁷² Although Phil is vaguely aware that at sixteen, "boys and even girls [...] were [already] expected to be driving cars," he grudgingly admits that cycling with Flash around the Gold Coast, he "was having a pretty good time, if only because he hardly ever had to be at home, and he liked to discover how bright and inviting all these other parts of Long Island could seem."⁷⁷³

The friendship ends abruptly when Phil ridicules Flash for dreams of being drafted several years too early and Phil uses his summer job as a pretext "to arrange the necessary

⁷⁶⁷ *CSH*, 96.

⁷⁶⁸ *CSH*, 98.

⁷⁶⁹ *CSH*, 99.

⁷⁷⁰ *CSH*, 94-5.

⁷⁷¹ *CSH*, 95.

⁷⁷² *CSH*, 101.

⁷⁷³ *CSH*, 102.

break⁷⁷⁴ with the younger boy. Ironically, by snubbing Flash in order to maintain a sense of pride in the budding ability to earn his way in life, Phil tries to fight a situation that his mother has known all her life—being snubbed by the people whose wealth, social position or intelligence is superior to her own. Unlike his mother, Phil is sensitive to these differences and manages to behave appropriately even without a parental model to imitate.⁷⁷⁵

The relationships in *Cold Spring Harbor* are often defined in relation to masculinity, power, and class. When Flash Ferris momentarily wins Phil over and forces him to accept a bike which cost Flash's grandmother twenty-five dollars, Phil accepts the gift but only on condition that he pays the money back as soon as he earns enough in his new summer job. When Phil starts working as a parking lot attendant, he at first gets no tips until he buys a chauffeur's cap and starts wearing it to look more professional.⁷⁷⁶ Coming from a home where one parent is absent and the other is an unemployed self-deluded talker of no substance, Phil becomes proud of having even a temporary job which brings in pocket money that he intends to save and put to good use. Although Phil remains a youthful outsider to nightlife whose young age does not permit him to even enter the bar he works for, "with money in his pocket and his firm tires whirring over asphalt and concrete, it never took him long to feel much better."⁷⁷⁷ When he earns enough, he pays back Mrs. Talmage, buys a packet of candies for Rachel and a jackknife for himself. Yet his joy proves short-lived as, after Rachel makes him show the knife to Evan, his brother-in-law again humiliates Phil: "When I was that age I was out getting laid."⁷⁷⁸ The uneasy relationship between Phil and Evan is never mended as Evan resents Phil's prep-school privilege and mocks his lack of masculinity while Phil is not able to counter such humiliation.

When Evan pays a regular visit to his daughter Kathleen, he learns that his ex-wife Mary and their daughter have kept his surname. He then seeks out his ex-wife and falls in love with her again.⁷⁷⁹ However, the intellectual abyss between Mary and Evan is reopened as they are good in bed but have nothing to say to each other afterwards. Significantly, Evan likes to have coffee in the kitchen "where there weren't any emblems of anybody's higher-than-average intelligence."⁷⁸⁰ While Evan admires Mary's mature toughness and independence, so very much unlike the placid ignorance of his second wife Rachel, Mary's condescending remarks regarding his lack of education again highlight their incompatibility.

⁷⁷⁴ CSH, 104.

⁷⁷⁵ Unwittingly, Phil in this takes after his absent father Curtis, whose mild and courtly manner is contrasted with Gloria's attitude of hysterical pretension that marks her deluded notions of self, family, and community.

⁷⁷⁶ CSH, 106.

⁷⁷⁷ CSH, 110.

⁷⁷⁸ CSH, 112.

⁷⁷⁹ CSH, 113-126.

⁷⁸⁰ CSH, 127.

When Rachel naively shares her joyful feeling (“I love everybody“) her innocent remark is taken up by Gloria who exploits the phrase “for all the sentimental wear it would bear“ until everybody, including Rachel herself, is embarrassed, sick and angry.⁷⁸¹ While Rachel focuses on her advancing pregnancy, both Evan and Phil try to escape the stifling atmosphere of the house as much as they can—Phil by working at the parking lot, Evan by taking night drives to see his ex-wife Mary. At this point, Phil has a momentary existential crisis and despite his realization that the summer job leads nowhere, he sticks to it as “going to work would be better than staying home.”⁷⁸² When Phil is invited to a farewell staff party by a colleague from the bar who leaves to join the army, his mood improves and he is “almost ready to believe once again that things could make sense.”⁷⁸³ The invitation to the party means that Phil becomes a young man whose future ability to take part in the war effort is no longer questioned by others and it might bring, in Phil’s case, either “glory or mere drudgery,”⁷⁸⁴ yet it does not matter which way his participation will turn out as long as Phil can hope to be included in the narrative of army service that has been denied to his nemesis Evan. After the party, Phil finds himself “on easy, jolly terms with the kitchen staff and the waitresses at Costello’s“ where, after being ignored for so long, “succulent suppers were prepared for him with the manager’s tacit approval,” with the explanation that a future army man might put on some weight before enlisting.⁷⁸⁵

When Evan drives away one evening to meet Mary, they make love and then share their recent histories with Evan becoming “a little sorry he’d gotten [Mary] started on this particular line of talk.”⁷⁸⁶ When Mary confesses to like being single and independent, which she credits to her college experience, Evan reacts angrily, feeling again humiliated by his lack of education: “Yeah, well, and so what the hell else did you learn in college? How to read all these fucking books? How to make your bed six inches off the fucking floor?”⁷⁸⁷ When Mary again patronizes Evan with recommending further study, he angrily returns to lovemaking, his strong suit, “as if she were the only girl he had ever known.”⁷⁸⁸ While Mary considers Evan her intellectual inferior, as he leaves, she praises his pose and style:

Oh, it’s such a pleasure just to watch you walk and turn and move around; it has always been. And you know what else I used to love? I loved to watch you

⁷⁸¹ *CSH*, 128-9.

⁷⁸² *CSH*, 133.

⁷⁸³ *CSH*, 137.

⁷⁸⁴ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 144.

⁷⁸⁵ *CSH*, 165.

⁷⁸⁶ *CSH*, 138.

⁷⁸⁷ *CSH*, 139.

⁷⁸⁸ *CSH*, 141.

get into your car and drive away—just because it meant you knew exactly what you were doing, and because you always did it so well.⁷⁸⁹

For Mary, then, college education has brought self-confidence, financial independence and satisfaction while for Evan, the lack of education is a perennial reason to feel angry, outclassed, and humiliated.⁷⁹⁰

The Drake/Shepard suburban home then sees two unexpected visits which converge.⁷⁹¹ First, Grace Shepard finally agrees to come, so she forces her husband Charles to invite themselves at short notice. Second, Mrs. Talmage has the same idea based on her grandson's urgings to reconnect with the Drakes and decides to visit Gloria and her family completely unannounced. The elder Shepards, Mrs. Talmage and her grandson, and the young Shepards and the Drakes thus meet together at the shabby rented suburban house in a farce that highlights Gloria's inability to act normal in an awkward social situation. Since Charles's short-notice call does not give "Gloria enough time to do very much about straightening up the living room," she chooses "to attend to her clothes and her hair instead."⁷⁹² While trying to mitigate the awkward atmosphere of the visit with her endless talk, Gloria is aware that "in times of social tension [...] her children were presentable" as agents whose good manners would save the day.⁷⁹³ After the exchange of pleasantries with Charles and his wife, Gloria is annoyed to see that her daughter has been on loving terms with her in-laws without her knowledge, thinking

that these three strangers [ie daughter Rachel, Charles Shepard, and his wife Grace] were trying to cut her off and shut her out; they wanted to make her feel alone in the world, and they might as well have been trying to kill her. But she could still fight for her life in the only way she knew; she started talking again.⁷⁹⁴

When Grace Shepard shares her memories of having fallen in love with Charles, Gloria wishes her dead while smiling politely.⁷⁹⁵ At this point, Mrs. Talmage and her grandson Flash arrive. While Mrs. Talmage is able to pay a visit to Phil's family and be regally civil with her social inferiors, "finding her ease almost anywhere," Phil is annoyed at Flash for having orchestrated the humiliating visit in the first place: "It seemed to Phil that he would never understand how he'd come to be standing here with one of the worst outcasts of the

⁷⁸⁹ *CSH*, 141.

⁷⁹⁰ Evan experiences this when meeting exwife Mary as well as when dealing with brother-in-law Phil whose budding prep-school ways highlight Evan's working-class aggression and verbally abusive behavior he uses towards the family members when challenged on intellectual grounds.

⁷⁹¹ *CSH*, 142-153.

⁷⁹² *CSH*, 145.

⁷⁹³ *CSH*, 146.

⁷⁹⁴ *CSH*, 147.

⁷⁹⁵ *CSH*, 148.

Irving School [ie Flash], each of them nursing a bottle of Coke, while an ill-assorted company of grownups pretended to enjoy themselves.⁷⁹⁶ When Phil takes Flash out for a walk in the garden, Flash embarrasses Phil again by asking him to revive their cycling friendship for the rest of the summer. When Phil refuses, claiming he has to work to earn spending money for his next year of school, Flash blunders by offering money from his grandmother again, which elicits Phil's angry refusal.⁷⁹⁷ Much to her own surprise, Mrs. Talmage starts to enjoy the awkward party as she takes a liking to Charles, "this melancholy army man with his quiet wit and his furtive glances of hoping she hadn't yet noticed how stiff with alcohol his wife had grown [...] Harriet felt sure he would fit in admirably with her own small circle of friends."⁷⁹⁸ Rachel suddenly has had enough of the party during which two women [ie Gloria Drake and Mrs. Talmage] try to lure Charles Shepard away from his all-too-quickly drunk wife. Rachel storms out where her husband picks her up in his car. Over a drink later, she confesses that she can no longer bear to live with her mother, "because she really is crazy, Evan; that's what I've come to recognize. And I don't mean 'crazy' in any harmful or funny way. I mean out of her mind. Divorced from reality. Off in some other world of her own."⁷⁹⁹ Rachel and Evan agree to move out to the apartment of a friend. During their dinner in a restaurant, Rachel starts giving birth, and her son is born in hospital the next morning.⁸⁰⁰

Gloria reacts with a mixture of indifference and jealousy to the news of Rachel's baby, preferring to have her morning-after drink and prattling about not feeling like a grandmother.⁸⁰¹ It is telling that Rachel requires the men in the family, her father Curtis and father-in-law Charles, rather than her mother, to visit her first in the maternity ward. When Rachel starts, in a way that unwittingly replicates her mother, babbling about her lofty plans for the baby's future upbringing and education, Gloria falls apart and attacks both her daughter before sliding into a mad tirade against Curtis, calling him repeatedly a coward and swine.⁸⁰² According to Castronovo and Goldleaf, she "goes wild with chagrin and embarrassment when faced with the truth" in a scene that reflects the fact that she "is more than a matter of being out-talked," her abusive attack on everybody present is a reaction to the realization that Rachel has taken a definitive stand to exclude her newborn son from Gloria's destructive influence.⁸⁰³ Following her hysterical outburst, Gloria is taken away by Charles and Curtis, sent home in a cab, and spends two weeks sulking alone in her room

⁷⁹⁶ *CSH*, 149.

⁷⁹⁷ *CSH*, 151.

⁷⁹⁸ *CSH*, 152-3.

⁷⁹⁹ *CSH*, 154-5.

⁸⁰⁰ *CSH*, 156-7.

⁸⁰¹ *CSH*, 158.

⁸⁰² *CSH*, 161-2.

⁸⁰³ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 143.

before her daughter reconciles with her as if nothing had happened.⁸⁰⁴ Gloria deals with Rachel's new status and her daughter's newfound strength and happiness like a neurotic who, according to Horney, responds to being snubbed or outclassed with "vindictive resentment" and with a theatrical show of her own mock suffering whose function is "that of absorbing rage and making others feel guilty, which is the only effective way of [the vindictive neurotic person's] getting back" at the people who have challenged her.⁸⁰⁵

When Evan discusses his and Rachel's decision to move out of the house to distance themselves from Gloria's suffocating influence, Charles disapproves of such quitting on Gloria, but Evan does not care.⁸⁰⁶ Before Phil leaves for another school year, he succumbs to his curiosity and spies for a moment on his sister's lovemaking with Evan by peeking from behind a door curtain to witness "the loveliest and most terrible thing he'd ever seen."⁸⁰⁷ His curiosity quickly turns to shame which "time might never diminish" while it might be "nursed and doctored like an illness" and Phil would forever be "knowing it was there."⁸⁰⁸ Even so, Phil is the only character worth the reader's sympathy as his difficult adolescence includes having to cope with his mother's warped views on love, family, and gender roles. As Naparsteck explains, Phil is no perverted voyeur and "has the capability of being redeemed, [...] that can protect him from the type of lies that Rachel nurtures."⁸⁰⁹ While Gloria, Evan, and Rachel each live, and are crushed by, their self-delusions which become obvious to the reader but not to them, Phil becomes an adult who realizes that he has to break away from his mother to become an independent and adult young man who can make the important decisions and assume responsibility on his own. As Castronovo and Goldleaf pinpoint, even though Phil's "self-determination is [...] spoiled by snobs, one's parents, and one's own anxiety," he emerges as an unlikely, but lovable protagonist of *Cold Spring Harbor* whose awakening is to the fact that he now is to assume his absent father's position in the family as that of a man who will care for mother Gloria in the future as she is, according to father Curtis, "a very fragile person [...] extremely insecure and childish," someone who "always had to depend on someone else for survival."⁸¹⁰

The novel ends with a painful scene in which Evan first informs Gloria of his and Rachel's decision to move away, then insults Rachel for being "soft as shit," then hits her in the face and drives away.⁸¹¹ His violent outburst is contrasted with Rachel's domesticized

⁸⁰⁴ CSH, 162-8.

⁸⁰⁵ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 233.

⁸⁰⁶ CSH, 169-170.

⁸⁰⁷ CSH, 173.

⁸⁰⁸ CSH, 178.

⁸⁰⁹ Naparsteck, *Richard Yates Up Close*, 143.

⁸¹⁰ CSH, 176-7. The role of adult son stepping in as the provider for his unemployed and widowed mother is reenacted in *A Special Providence* as well as in "Regards at Home."

⁸¹¹ CSH, 179-180.

vulnerability, as if the more Rachel behaves like a good submissive wife, the angrier her husband reacts. While Evan tries to drink away his anger in a bar, he decides to leave Rachel and return to ex-wife Mary and daughter Kathleen and take them for a ride West as soon as the war situation might allow: “There would be sorrowful, disorderly elements in that drive across America [...] but he knew they’d be obliged, eventually, to recede into the past.”⁸¹² Yates closes the novel with zooming in on Rachel, who, crying, naively waits for Evan’s return while putting her baby son to sleep. When she starts breastfeeding, she praises his son’s miraculous identity of being a little male who is “going to be a man.”⁸¹³ With Rachel steeped in busy but ignorant motherhood, Yates leaves the conflict between the selfish and destructive Evan and the ignorant and vulnerable Rachel unresolved.

What distinguishes the suburban world of *Cold Spring Harbor* from other pre-war suburb portraits in Yates’s fiction is the author’s preoccupation with dramatizing class differences and the way education influences a character’s growth into a mature identity, suggesting the educated person’s possible inclusion in the narrative of the American Dream. For Evan Shepard, the inability to pursue college education is a lifelong social marker that bogs him down while for Phil Drake, attending a prestigious school becomes a ticket to social acceptance and a way to escape the stifling atmosphere of his unstable family. While his prep school attendance is a humiliating experience at first, it gradually proves to work wonders by making a sissy boy and social outcast whose worldview was warped by his mother’s selfish and female-centered delusion develop into a mature young man who is able to take all the family conflicts in stride as he looks forward to having a future career in the army and beyond.

Despite its brevity, *Cold Spring Harbor* provides a comprehensive probe into the way a character’s life is built on the lies and stereotypization provided by film and the mass media. The protagonists of Yates’s last novel lack the ability to lead authentic lives and distinguish true identity and emotion from their film and radio simulacra.⁸¹⁴ Delusion and disappointment are the dominant emotions that frame the lives of the novel’s protagonists as the real-life situations and conflicts do not end up the way they do in romantic Hollywood films. As consumers of the media narratives which suggest a glamorous appearance and self-confident behavior leads to success and recognition, the protagonists in *Cold Spring Harbor* are deluded into believing they have a chance at rewriting their sad, unhappy, and lonely lives. Ironically, it is only Phil Drake, Yates’s alter-ego in this novel, who grows beyond the

⁸¹² *CSH*, 182.

⁸¹³ *CSH*, 182.

⁸¹⁴ Actually, the problem of inauthenticity is something that plagues the protagonists of all five suburban novels by Yates. Regardless of intelligence, wealth, and status, his characters feel invariably cheated of victory in their pursuit of authentic lives and careers. Their reactions to this situation oscillates between anger, aggression, withdrawal, vindictiveness, and anxiety.

limits of his mother's warped understanding of social prestige and manages to grow up on his own, finding himself in the prep school experience that originally served primarily to satisfy his mother's snobbish ambition and inflated ego rather than his own career advancement. Still, even Phil's minor achievements in school and in his summer job as parking-school attendant become, according to Castronovo and Goldleaf, "weakened by the strong undercurrent of social class that runs throughout the book."⁸¹⁵ In this short novel, Yates implies that class, even in America that has been considered a classless society, is a rigid presence that has been denied by advocates of educational and occupational equality of opportunity, yet the invisible class distinctions are so powerful and life-defining that Yates's characters are unable to ignore them.

What makes *Cold Spring Harbor* unique within Yates's fiction is also the sympathetic portrait of Mrs. Talmage, an upper-class suburban widow who is a living link to the Gold Coast era of appropriation of Long Island's North Shore by the New York rich elite in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She lives to see her world of gated and secluded privilege break down as the community becomes more class-diverse with the proliferation of middle-class and working-class houses built in the 1920s and 1930s. Unlike Mrs. Vander Meer of *A Special Providence*, Mrs. Talmage seems to grow more tolerant of her social inferiors such as the Shepards and Drakes as she realizes her own limited circle of wealthy and distinguished friends is dwindling and the inclusion of a lowbrow but well-behaved pensioner as Charles Shepard into her social circle is a charming idea. By feeling attracted to Charles, Mrs. Talmage makes a similar error of judgement as Gloria Drake, only in the opposite direction, trying to associate with her social inferiors in an attempt to face the growing class diversification of the American suburbs in the early 1940s.

If there is a structural problem with *Cold Spring Harbor*, it is the novel's lack of a conclusion. The conflict between Evan and Rachel is left open, so is the problematic situation of Phil Drake in relation to having left for another year of school while his brother-in-law Evan smarts from knowing about Phil's moment of voyeuristic spying on the young couple. As in all other Yates suburban novels, the protagonists of *Cold Spring Harbor*, too, "propel themselves toward destinies that are neither dully predictable nor fanciful," which reflects Yates's own ambivalence about the American Dream's viability in the prewar suburban community.⁸¹⁶ As Castronovo and Goldleaf pinpoint, Yates typically peoples his fiction with "characters who have lost the connecting threads of their lives and drift from role to unconvincing role. In pursuit of happiness, they are willing to try on any career or love affair that might feed their yearnings."⁸¹⁷ This is primarily the story of Evan Shepard, a

⁸¹⁵ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 143.

⁸¹⁶ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 19.

⁸¹⁷ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 12.

diminished character without a goal in life whose good looks and virile posturing are not enough to secure him a family and social role that he would accept and find happiness in, hence his perennial moodiness and vindictive aggression toward other people. To a lesser degree, Phil Drake, too, is unable to transcend the limits of his family background, yet the author portrays him as a hard-working American character who tries to grow up without any proper male models in the family to imitate and bets everything on his prep school education to propel him upward. In *Cold Spring Harbor*, Yates conveys the sense that America is, after all, a relatively rigid society where “class and status count for so much” and where “money and family standing determine people’s life chances,” so that even characters who try hard at upward mobility do not get very far.⁸¹⁸ Through the portrait of Gloria’s deluded pursuit of a classy suburban lifestyle, Yates exposes “the false dreams that suburban living encouraged,”⁸¹⁹ for, while she manages to force her daughter and son-in-law into sharing the rented house in Cold Spring Harbor with her, the move brings no prestige or recognition by the locals, but, rather, nervous and intense isolation that she fights with her false displays of conviviality at family meals and evenings which others come to loathe. Yates’s prewar suburb in the novel is a community of reserved, isolated souls who are the victims as well as keepers of the invisible class structure that seems to counter the feasibility of the American Dream of egalitarian opportunity for all suburbanites.

⁸¹⁸ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 19.

⁸¹⁹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 197.

Conclusion

The five suburban novels of Richard Yates are, to a varying degree, framed within the historical period that starts in the 1930s and ends in the 1970s. Several major historical developments in the United States, including the 1930s economic depression, the WW II situation with the draft and military service, the postwar redefinition of domesticity along the lines of changing gender roles, and the migration of the young families to the new postwar sitcom suburbs function as important historical background. According to Charlton-Jones, Yates “fuses a sense of the history of the era with the intimate details of relationship and family” and the dramatization of the private and public spheres in his fiction implies that when it comes to the somber realization of the American Dream on the level of the suburban family, “American optimism is not only misplaced but also damaging.”¹ Yates’s suburban novels present the author’s realist probe into the problematic relationship between the suburban ideal, which includes the dream of moving to a suburban house in a quiet, clean environment to improve family togetherness and secure happy domesticity, and the reality that exposes various ways in which suburban families and individual suburbanites do not manage to live up to the suburban ideal as they face a range of social and domestic problems associated with class and gender-based differences and conflicts. As Scott Donaldson explains, much of the twentieth-century social criticism of suburban conformity and alienation comes from the continuing persistence of “the myth of the virtuous and healthy yeoman farmer, at once individualistic and altruistic,” that has been projected onto the suburbs with the expectation of suburban living as comparable to “the realization of the American ideal—a return to nature, a return to the small village, a return to selfreliant individualism.”² Donaldson argues that to blame the suburbs for the social problems that naturally developed in the increasingly urbanized American society and are not specifically generated in the suburbs is untenable as “the suburb is not a natural paradise” and to persist in “sentimentalizing the pastoral ideal” and complain about its social failure in the suburbs is a case of misplaced criticism, even though the American Creed, applied to an ideal American community and lifestyle, has continued to merge “concepts of individualism, a beneficent nature, and the virtuous small village.”³ According to Richard Ford, Yates’s portrait of the migration to the suburbs is the movement of “the hopeful souls who followed

¹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 194.

² Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth*, viii-ix; 22.

³ Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth*, 213-14.

its call out of the city in search of some acceptable balance between rough rural essentials and urban opportunity and buzz."⁴

As Laura J. Miller explains, the experience of American families in the suburbs has shown that the suburban ideal of family togetherness and happy domesticity including "the possibility of an escape from a messy and chaotic social world" is an illusion since "the structural features of the suburban environment designed to promote togetherness may actually be exacerbating the problems felt by all American families who try to live up to this vision of family life."⁵ Yates's novels testify to the discrepancy between the suburban ideal and reality as his characters move to the suburbs with supreme expectations of social success, recognition, and fulfilment, only to find that achieving those in an environment where "public spaces are discredited and private houses are glamorized" is problematic since suburbanites, according to Miller, are not only "excused from learning how to live with those of different classes and races, they are also expected to narrow their social ties to boundaries set by their property lines" and this "impoverishment of other social relationships" further complicates the achievement of any social-climbing dreams for the characters.⁶

One of Yates's principal accomplishments is the fact that his fiction never allows for nostalgic readings of the characters' urban and suburban past and ruthlessly deconstructs his character's dreams of leading authentic, interesting lives in the suburbs. According to Ford, "a [suburban] citizenry's urge to break away and form a community based on clear ideas of who the citizens are, what they need and what they're up against," becomes trivialized and contaminated in Yates's fiction with people who "seem but hungry, aimless foragers in pursuit of not a better life but only an easier, less responsible one."⁷ Suburban living is not an escape from society, rather, it includes individual and collective responsibility within one's family as well as community, and Yates's characters from the Wheelers to the Shepards are notably ignorant of their suburban roles to assume, not having "much of a clue about who it is they are [...]. All are walking paths laid out by forces and authorities other than their own personal senses of right and wrong."⁸

Yates's characters in the suburban novels, male and female, are people who struggle with their frustrations and woes that are only partly attributable to the psychological effect

⁴ Richard Ford, "Essay; American Beauty (Circa 1955)," *New York Times* April 9, 2000, section 7, 16, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/09/books/essay-american-beauty-circa-1955.html>.

⁵ Laura J. Miller, "Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal," *Sociological Forum* 10, no. 3, (September 1995): 414-15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/684782>.

⁶ Miller, "Family Togetherness," 415. The examples of Alice Prentice and Gloria Drake in Yates's suburban novels testify to this impossible ambition of divorced unemployed women who try to win social recognition in the conservative prewar American suburbs.

⁷ Ford, "Essay; American Beauty (Circa 1955)."

⁸ Ford, "Essay; American Beauty (Circa 1955)."

of the suburbs on their mental health. In accordance with the Horneyan interpretation of human behavior as steeped in neurotic responses to anxiety-inducing situations, the protagonist in Yates's suburban fiction typically tries to "develop his particular human potentialities" including "the faculty to express himself, and to relate himself to others with his spontaneous feelings."⁹ In this pursuit of an idealized self, the protagonists of Yates's suburban novels have to cope with their own unrealistic expectations about the attainment of class, privilege, and wealth. According to Castronovo and Goldleaf, in Yates's fiction "the pleasures of snobbery and material possession vanish quickly" as the characters' pursuit of "the good life and stylishness" is habitually reduced to "routines, pretentious rhetoric, and false management of impressions."¹⁰ Moreover, besides the preoccupation with the historical grounding of his fiction and exposure of the subtle (or not so subtle) class, economic, and gender-based distinctions between people, Yates's suburban fiction also notably comments on the viability of the American Dream whose promise of "prosperity and materialism" is counterpointed with stories of "the grim, lonely, and fractured aspects of human relationships" that showcase Yates's "class consciousness" which forces him to suggest that upward social mobility in America is possible, but it proves more difficult than people tend to believe as it relies on the acquisition of wealth as well as social recognition, and its pursuit often leads to failure, loneliness, madness, and vindictive aggression.¹¹

In all five suburban novels, Yates utilizes the suburban setting and community to dramatize the "inconsistency between America's egalitarian ideals and the fact that social stratification was still very much part" of American society of the twentieth century.¹² The prewar and postwar suburb is not an alienated area of little boxes, medium-sized houses, and regal mansions, rather, it is a conservative environment where people share the ethos of out-of-city migration to an idealized pastoral community that offers superior living conditions to young families with children.¹³ As Vance Packard explains, there exists a discrepancy between the notion of America as a classless and egalitarian society where anybody can achieve anything and the reality of an America in which "the people [...] have, and are refining, a national class structure with a fascinating variety of status systems within it," even though the admission of the existence of a class structure in the United States goes

⁹ Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 17.

¹⁰ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 13.

¹¹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 195. The two most aggressive characters in Yates's suburban fiction are Tony Wilson and Evan Shepard, both representing the working-class masculine hero who turns into an ugly brute who abuses his wife and hates the world for having wound up in a dead-end life which he is unable to change.

¹² Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 208.

¹³ Ironically, Yates's several divorced mother characters who dream of moving to the suburbs (ie Alice Prentice, Pookie Grimes, and Gloria Drake) are an exception to this claim—in the 1930s to 1970s period, American suburbs were predominantly the real estate goal for nuclear families rather than divorced adults with children.

against the traditional myth of equal opportunity to succeed and achieve that should be available to anyone who works hard enough.¹⁴ Catherine Rottenberg mentions another paradox of the American public debate about class and achievement, arguing that while “the American Dream seems to suggest that the United States is not a class society in the European type (because anyone can potentially move up the ladder), [...] the discourse assumes the existence of some kind of class formation, for otherwise the very notion of moving up the hierarchy would be nonsensical,” and the notion of success in the United States is thus “inextricably linked to moving *up* the class hierarchy.”¹⁵ Jennifer Wolak and David A. M. Peterson mention another interesting facet of the American Dream, namely, the belief that the all Americans, “regardless of class or position, can achieve success and enjoy a quality of life better than their parents if they are willing to work hard.”¹⁶ Indeed, the protagonists in Yates’s suburban novels are obsessed with judging their lives and careers not only in relation to the Donaldsons and other generic neighbors who they include in the rat race, but also in relation to what their parents had achieved.¹⁷

In *Revolutionary Road*, a major part of the reason why April and Frank Wheeler become disgruntled, condescending, sanctimonious suburbanites and rebels without a cause is the fact that they have achieved all they could by moving to a good house in a well-designed postwar suburb and having a model family of two healthy children. Having followed the socially prescribed path to the suburbs, they grow vaguely dissatisfied with the achievement of their ideal existence in the suburbs. As Frank’s office job at Knox marks his symbolic victory over his father (who failed to get a good office job in the same company earlier), while April’s household is designed and equipped to the limits of what their purse and taste allow, the Wheelers are strangely haunted by having nowhere to advance (or move to) by way of physical mobility to a better neighborhood or social mobility to the upper class elite (which is absent in the novel as Yates focuses on working-class and middle-class suburbs). Unlike the Raths in Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, the Wheelers do not feel any social pressure to keep moving upward, or, to upgrade to a bigger house in a more prestigious neighborhood. Consequently, the lives of the Wheelers are marred by a sense of stasis and ennui that leads to the neurotic projection of their annoyance with this situation onto their house, community, themselves, and even their children. Ignoring the fact

¹⁴ See Vance Packard, *The Status Seekers* (New York: Pocket Books, 1971), 3-6.

¹⁵ Catherine Rottenberg, “*Salome of the Tenements*, the American Dream and Class Performativity,” *American Studies* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 68, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40643618>.

¹⁶ Jennifer Wolak and David A. M. Peterson, “The Dynamic American Dream,” *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 4 (October 2020): 968, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45295360>.

¹⁷ This parent-child professional achievement comparison is most visible in the case of Frank Wheeler whose early and short-lived satisfaction in his married life comes when he gets a good white-collar job at Knox, the same company where his father worked as a regional salesman and tried to get a head office job but failed. In the other suburban novels, the parents are no match for their children’s occupational achievement as they are either the divorced and unemployed mothers or the absent (or dead) fathers.

that their relationship is already precarious for reasons that have nothing to do with living in a suburban house (both being immature and self-centered neurotics) they try to fix all problems by subscribing to imaginative but unrealistic dreams of escape. April's idea is to boost her self-esteem by acting in the Laurel Players production, and, when that fails, by coming up with the plan to move to Europe where she would be the unlikely breadwinner to allow her husband time to think and find his true calling. The plan, whose implementation would reverse the gender roles of both partners, exposes Frank as a man who talks seductively but is afraid to act on his words, fearing the sudden rise of his wife's power and authority within their relationship. Moreover, as a cynical social talker he knows he is not as interesting and authentic as people mistake him to be, yet he overcomes his initial resistance and agrees with April's plan to save face. It is Yates's supreme achievement that the dramatic irony of the Wheelers' suburban restlessness is clear to the reader who waits to see the full unfolding of their marriage in a sequence of carefully orchestrated conflicts that lead up to April's fateful self-abortion. For dramatic contrast, Yates portrays the suburb where the Wheelers live as a pleasant and peaceful community of young families who live in "white and pastel houses whose bright, uncurtained windows winked blandly through a dappling of green and yellow leaves"¹⁸ so that their frequent quarrels and April's tragic death are all the more misplaced within the idyllic neighborhood.

The novel in which class anxiety causes the social and private downfall of the protagonist is *Young Hearts Crying*. Lucy Blaine is a woman who cannot hope to equal or better the social achievement of her parents whose conspicuous wealth, privilege, and condescension toward everyone including their only daughter causes Lucy to escape through a hasty marriage to Michael Davenport. The marriage initiates her social descent to the level of her husband's working-class bohemianism which she enjoys for a time, sharing with Michael the pursuit and appreciation of art, yet, as the years go by, she grows annoyed with her situation. Unlike Shep Campbell of *Revolutionary Road*, whose career options are broader by virtue of his being a man, Lucy, as a woman in postwar American suburbs, cannot easily rise back up to her original privileged position by virtue of hard work alone. As an impoverished suburban housewife, she finds herself deadlocked in the domestic roles that offer little fulfilment to her and blames her husband for the situation.

Although Robert O. Blood, Jr. and Donald M. Wolfe argue that by 1960, "the roles of men and women [had] changed so much that husbands and wives are potential equals" in the area of marriage,¹⁹ Yates's novels testify to the fact that the male and female suburbanites have different options in life and do not face the same problems in relation to power in

¹⁸ *RR*, 277.

¹⁹ Robert O. Blood, Jr., and Donald M. Wolfe, *Husbands and Wives: The Dynamics of Married Living* (New York: Free Press, 1960), 29.

marriage and relationships. As Dair L. Gillespie explains, “for a wife to gain even a modicum of power in the marital relationship, she must obtain it from external sources, [such as work and community involvement],” so, ultimately, “husbands obtain power within marriage [...] and the woman [...] always loses in the fight for power within the marital relationship” since Americans live “in a system of institutionalized male supremacy” where “the cards are systematically stacked against women in all areas—occupational, political, educational, legal, as well as within the institution of the family.”²⁰ For this reason, unhappy and depressed housewives such as April Wheeler and Lucy Davenport seek realization outside their homes, in art activity pursued in order to cope with what Friedan calls “the feminine mystique,” the gender-specific dissatisfaction of suburban housewives with their limited lives, something which their husbands, who face other specific challenges in their jobs that do not directly affect their family, do not have to face.

As long as Lucy Davenport’s marriage to Michael lasts, their agreement forbids her to convert her considerable inheritance to material comfort since using it would mean intolerable humiliation for her husband. The novel is thus Yates’s exposure of the way wealth brings a curse upon the protagonist who does not know how to use money for status affirmation and decides to succeed on her wits, an all but impossible situation for an traditional suburban housewife with little professional ambition and limited options for self-realization in the materialist suburban society. As Stephanie Coontz explains, the family problems along the gender-based lines are more complex since “men often complain that feminists ignore male insecurities and burdens,” while the contrast between the traditional rhetoric of masculinity as a socially prescribed norm for males “is very painful for men whose race, class, health, or even height does not allow them to wield power, exercise authority, or just cut a figure imposing enough to qualify as a “real man.””²¹ For Michael Davenport, the issue of masculinity becomes a crucial inner conflict as he has to compensate his choice of a poet’s career (considered effeminate or at least not masculine enough) with resorting to the more manly poses of a war veteran, hunter, and occasional boxer at parties.

In *Cold Spring Harbor*, the inability of Evan Shepard to equal the modest social and material achievement of his parents (his father is a retired army officer, his mother a homebound alcoholic) seems a major explanation for his aggressive and vindictive behavior. When he is young, his “embarrassing ventures into petty crime” are a rebellious way of responding to the reserved and conformist marriage of his parents.²² While he comes to resent first wife Mary’s vigor and assertiveness, when his second wife Rachel offers to love

²⁰ Dair L. Gillespie, “Who Has the Power? The Marital Struggle,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 33, no. 3 (Aug. 1971): 457, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/349844>.

²¹ Coontz, *The Way We Really Are*, 21-2.

²² *CSH*, 1.

him with placid submission, Evan is, again, annoyed and reacts violently. He is doomed to remain a traditional blue-collar male, an angry working-class man in a dead-end factory job who fails to be satisfied in marriage, nor is he able to improve his underwhelming career and family status by his own effort, so what is left for him is pretentious tough-guy posturing to impress other people and denigration of those who he can dominate by shows of physical strength. When Evan's father wants him to advance in life, Evan reacts with indifference. He is a typical American "wage-worker" who, according to C. Wright Mills, gets married early and settles into a professional routine which leads to "limit his aspirations" to seeking specific benefits such as "to get more money for this job," or "to change shifts the next week" while the traditional notion of "upward mobility" is "largely confined to those who begin above the wage-worker level [ie the middle class white collar workers]." ²³ By implication, the American Dream is unattainable for an uneducated factory worker like Evan as he is neither able nor willing to put in the effort to get a desirable promotion while his lowly social position is uncontested and promotes his passive acceptance of the way his life has turned out—disappointing but stable.

By contrast, Phil Drake starts off as a confused mother's boy whose sense of gender identity is warped by the absence of his divorced father and by his mother's pretentious display and pursuit of social prestige and ostentatious displays of affection, yet his prep school experience proves a catalyst for Phil's gradual awakening to the fact that for him, getting a good education and working hard might after all bring a successful and fulfilling career, a possibility for advancement that is denied to his mother, sister, and brother-in-law.

Besides criticism of pathetic social climbers who mistakenly think the American Dream is theirs for the taking, Yates also memorably exposes the pretension of people who choose the unusual path of downward social mobility. Shep Campbell in *Revolutionary Road* and Lucy Davenport in *Young Hearts Crying* are two upper class people who reject their privileged background and marry to sink to the niveau of their spouses—Shep out of the snobbish belief that he can succeed on his own, by working his way from the bottom back up the social ladder, Lucy out of necessity as her husband forbids her to use her millions as it would emasculate him in their relationship and perhaps even bring about writer's block. Coincidentally, Michael, too, rejects his own middle-class background to become an impoverished self-made-man in the field of drama and (later) poetry writing, making a social descent of a less radical nature. The reason why the marriage of Michael and Lucy fails is the fact that they stake everything on the ability of Michael to become so commercially and professionally successful as to be able to rival (or even exceed) material achievement offered instantly by using Lucy's inheritance to guarantee wealth and financial stability for their

²³ Mills, *White Collar*, 277-8.

family—an impossible situation that leads to years of life in hypocritical poverty and ultimately causes the breakup of their marriage as Lucy comes to blame Michael for being a loser full of obnoxious mannerisms.

Another aspect of Yates's treatment of class in *Young Hearts Crying* is the way Lucy and Michael Davenport fail to understand the upward mobility of their painter friends. While Michael remains convinced that his poetry will ultimately pay his bills and bring him the desired recognition, Paul Maitland and Tom Nelson are cynical realists who move from impassioned working-class bohemianism of their early painting careers toward middle-class suburban comfort as soon as their bankbooks make this move possible. At the end of the novel, the divorced and lonely Lucy Davenport finally stumbles upon a career that makes her happy—she becomes a modestly-living volunteer who gives most of her wealth away and enjoys working for the benefit of people in need, which contrasts with her earlier ego-centered (and unsuccessful) attempts at acting, writing, and painting. In Yates's fiction, even a rich protagonist like Lucy Davenport faces challenging decisions as her class background and inherited wealth become a curse which she fights most of her adult life as she feels oppressed and unhappy at home and unable, for long, to find fulfilling civic or artistic activity.

In *A Special Providence*, Alice Prentice is an impoverished, pretentious social climber without much substance whose sculpture and art classes for wealthy suburban women hardly bring enough cash to live on. Still, she defies the odds of succeeding in a noncommercial career in the Depression-beset 1930s suburbs where a divorced mother with a shy and lonely son cannot hope for respect from her conservative neighbors. Her immature management of household finances even brings her into trouble with law and she is forced to give up her suburban lifestyle for good by the end of the novel. Although the American Dream has not worked out in Alice's case, she ignores the fact and keeps living in the delusion of past success as an artist while she harbors "boundless faith in the future."²⁴

In *The Easter Parade*, Pookie Grimes pursues "flair" and class even at the cost of being pathetic and ridiculous. Similarly to the other mother characters with the upward-mobility ambition in Yates's fiction, Pookie is a case study in "class consciousness and elitism,"²⁵ exposed by the author as a failed real estate broker and a silly dreamer and a pathetic fraud who pretends to be more socially privileged and intelligent than her identity, modelled after identities borrowed from film and the media, accounts for. In Yates's fiction, the pretension of the mother characters is not a ticket to acceptance and admiration—it only

²⁴ *SP*, 315.

²⁵ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 13.

brings ridicule and ostracization while they do not care and persist in their pursuit of the unattainable social and material recognition.

In terms of the psychological approach to analyzing Yates's suburban novels, the theory of Karen Horney has proved useful for understanding the motivation and origin of the protagonists' responses to their inner conflicts and to stressful situations involving their contacts with other people. For example, while the gradual progression of April Wheeler from a vaguely dissatisfied housewife to the withdrawn person whose decision that self-abortion is the only way she can go on living is mysterious and inexplicable, Horneyan analysis of her motivation using the flashback information from her childhood and early marriage in the context of neurotic responses to stimuli helps explain such a decision. Similarly, the Horneyan interpretations of the neurotic responses to the inner conflicts of characters in fiction are useful when applied to the pathetic delusion of Yates's mother characters such as Alice Prentice, Pookie Grimes, and Gloria Drake. Their pretension and posturing, while representing their "search for glory" via faux manifestations of class and privilege, becomes exposed as vindictive compensation of their failure to accept their lackluster lives and identities at face value. Similarly, the Horneyan analysis of neurotic responses of Yates's male characters has proved equally enlightening as it is useful to consider reticent, aggressive neurotic characters such as Evan Shepard and Tony Wilson within the context of unsuccessful self-realization, which brings about aggression as a response with which the individual battles the feelings of anxiety, hostility, and fear.

The role of the suburban setting in the five Yates novels under review is crucial, with a varying degree of prominence. While the suburban community and house is the dominant setting of *Revolutionary Road*, *A Special Providence* (part II), *Young Hearts Crying*, and *Cold Spring Harbor*, the suburban environment in *The Easter Parade* is a minor setting used for the dramatization of Emily Grimes's city-based life on the occasions when she visits her suburb-based sister Sarah to get feedback on her life while feeling superior to her sister's naïve provincialism. As I have shown and argued in the previous chapter, Yates is critical of the suburban environment in his novels, presenting it as alienated and destabilizing, yet he avoids embracing the common critical mode of blaming the suburbs directly for any problems and conflicts of the people who live there. The problem Yates's suburban characters face when searching for authentic identities may be partly caused by the fact that, as Mumford emphasizes, they have to do this searching alone in a potentially hostile environment since "suburbia offers poor facilities for meeting, conversation, collective debate, and common action" while it promotes "silent conformity, not rebellion or counter-attack."²⁶ Confronted with more privacy and alienation than they wish for, suburban

²⁶ Mumford, *The City in History*, 513.

characters, especially mothers such as April Wheeler and Alice Prentice, try to reach out by taking up community activities (such as acting and teaching art) that might alleviate their intense isolation and unhappiness. This problem plagues the housebound women such as April Wheeler and Lucy Davenport more than the breadwinning husbands who commute to work in the city on a regular basis and are able to enjoy the company of their male peer groups before returning to their wives. For example, when Frank Wheeler has a problem, he can talk about it with colleagues or friends in the city, while when his wife finds herself in a similar situation, all she can do is call another housewife she knows or just deal with the problem on her own as her husband comes back home tired and expects her to care for him rather than offer a helpful ear.

Yates's suburban novels also highlight the complex effect of the suburban lifestyle on men and women based on gender differences. While men like Frank Wheeler or Michael Davenport may feel emasculated in their suburban homes where their wives dominate, their wives, in turn, feel tired, trapped, and unable to escape their domestic roles of homemaker / mother / wife in the ways that are available to their husbands. As Gillespie explains, if "the marriage contract is a mutual mobility bet for gaining ascendancy in power, personal autonomy, and self-realization, [...] the woman [...] is already at a disadvantage [...] for women are [...] deprived of their opportunities to develop their capacities, resources, and competence in competition with the males."²⁷

As Stephanie Coontz explains, "acceptance of domesticity [by the 1950s] was the mark of middle-class status and upward mobility" where "a middle-class man's work was totally irrelevant to his identity" while "the problem of working-class families did not lie in their economic situation but in their failure to create harmonious gender roles."²⁸ In this light, Frank Wheeler's job at a corporation (a job he pretends to hate but actually likes to depend on) makes him a typical middle-class organization man of his time, yet his refusal to subscribe to the narrative of happy domesticity marks him as a suburban outsider by choice rather than necessity. By contrast, working-class suburban breadwinners such as Tony Wilson and Evan Shepard do not think of the suburbs as damaging their identities, yet their inability to sympathize with their wives' domestic situation and their aggressive responses to any marital conflict is at the core of their class-related stasis.

In his novels, from *Revolutionary Road* to *Cold Spring Harbor*, Yates portrays the suburbs as a conformist environment for conservative, privacy-loving people, but not as a setting that is to blame for the ways in which his characters fail in their lives. Conformity

²⁷ Gillespie, "Who Has the Power?", 448.

²⁸ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 28.

and consumerism are seen as pitfalls to avoid by many of Yates's suburbanite characters (for example, the Wheelers and the Davenports), but what causes their suburban marriages to fail is the unrealistic nature of their dreams about ~~about~~ uniqueness and authenticity rather than any deadening effect of the suburban environment itself.²⁹

Yates's suburban novels also reflect the complex history of suburban domesticity. As Margaret Marsh has shown, "living in the [American] suburbs meant something different in each period of suburban growth" and it is important to understand American suburbanization in the context of not only "the economical and political dimensions" but also with attention to "the ways in which [suburban] families functioned in their communities—structurally, spatially, and culturally."³⁰ The prewar suburbs of the 1930s and early 1940s, as portrayed in *A Special Providence*, in the early section of *The Easter Parade*, and in *Cold Spring Harbor*, are still the safe, elitist haven of white middle- and upper-class leisure, conservatism, and isolated exclusivity in which Yates's divorced mothers and their impoverished and incomplete families do not belong. By contrast, Yates's appropriation of the postwar suburban setting in *Revolutionary Road* and *Young Hearts Crying* suggests the author's sensitivity to the opening up of the suburban housing availability to many people (including working-class families and war veterans) who were not able to embrace this lifestyle before the war.³¹

One of the important aspects of Yates's suburban novels is the ambivalent relationship of the protagonists to their houses. It seems as if the house itself and the utility and comfort it offers is of little importance. Rather, what matters to the suburban characters in Yates's novels, from the Wheelers to Sarah Grimes and Lucy Davenport, is to own a suburban house as a symbol of prestige, class affiliation, and happiness based on one's materialist interpretation of success. However, Yates repeatedly utilizes the suburban house as contested space which becomes infected with its inhabitants' "deep-rooted anxieties" that intensify when they realize the "false promises" of "an ideal of egalitarian living" in the suburbs which they learn from Hollywood films.³² Although the Wheelers grow dissatisfied

²⁹ In the second chapter, I outline the memorable defense of suburban diversity and leisure-time activity potential by Phyllis McGinley, a poet of American suburbia and a major mid-century apologist for the suburban lifestyle.

³⁰ Marsh, *Suburban Lives*, 188.

³¹ While Yates was very sensitive to the economic plight of suburbanites who ran into financial difficulties, having ample experience of an impoverished suburban childhood himself, there is no evidence of the author's interest in portraying the postwar rise of suburban ethnicization from the 1950s onwards. In his fiction, the suburban conflicts and problems are frozen in the 1930s-1970s mainstream narrative of white exclusivity and class consciousness the appearance of ethnic and racially mixed suburban communities since the 1950s is ignored by the author. This failure of Yates is not to say, however, that his fiction completely disregards the major trends in American society. See, for example, my discussion of *Cold Spring Harbor* in the previous chapter on how the US entry into WW II and the possibility of being drafted in the army influenced the male Americans' decision-making in relation to their families, education, and careers.

³² Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 199.

with their house by willing themselves to feel oppressed there, Yates gives no sense of the house itself (or its picture window, a major symbol reflecting the Wheelers' domestic unhappiness) to cause directly their unhappiness and marital discord. Similarly, when Gloria Drake realizes her dream of suburban living, the uncomfortable truth she ignores is the fact that the shabby rented house she comes to share with her daughter and son-in-law is a lowbrow imitation of the idealized Gold Coast mansion she had fancied. For Sarah Grimes, her Great Hedges house is a run-down building in which she lives out her false dream of conjugal bliss while having to accept regular physical abuse from her boorish husband. For Alice Prentice, a sequence of rented suburban houses she lives in is a backdrop for her social-climbing ambition which proves, over and over again, ridiculous and unrealistic, yet she ignores the voices of reason (such as that of her ex-husband) and keeps trying to persuade the other suburbanites of her authentic uniqueness until she economic want forces her to return to the city. According to Constance Perin, Americans imagine themselves "to be on a ladder whose steps lead them through a wholly natural, temporal, and evolutionary progression: first a city-dweller, then a suburbanite; first a RENTER, then an OWNER."³³ Compared to this stereotype, Yates's divorced mothers who strive for suburban living in rented houses wage a losing battle for social recognition as their ostracization by the local community (which favors the presence of complete nuclear families of sufficient means) is inevitable.

In *The Financier*, Theodore Dreiser explains the powerful effect of house ownership on the formation and cultivation of the American identity as he argues that there is an important relation between a house and a person who owns it: "We think we are individual, separate, above houses and material objects generally; but there is a subtle connection with makes them reflect us quite as much as we reflect them, and vice versa."³⁴ In Yates's suburban fiction, the suburban house and setting is often used as a scapegoat for the neurotic responses of the protagonists to their inner conflicts. For example, the Wheelers keep railing against the conformity of their suburban house and lifestyle which includes hateful evaluations of their living room design and especially its large picture window while the real problem is the fact that they are unable to face the reality of being selfish, deluded, and immature in their suburban sanctimony. However, Frank Wheeler has a change of mind about the house, albeit too late to realize his error, when he grows to seek out the safety and comfort of his house after his wife dies, realizing that without his house (and without his wife), he is doomed to be what Dreiser calls "a peculiar figure [...] a spider without its web, [a figure] which will never be its whole self again until all its dignities and emoluments [...]"

³³ Perin, *Belonging in America*, 98.

³⁴ Theodore Dreiser, *The Financier* (New York: Burt, 1912), 187, <https://ia800301.us.archive.org/13/items/financieranovel00dreigoog/financieranovel00dreigoog.pdf>.

are restored.”³⁵ In *The Easter Parade*, the emotional (and factual) ownership of Great Hedges suburban estate becomes the one thing that keeps Sarah Grimes from going insane in the face of her increasingly more unhappy marriage to Tony Wilson, the dashing reincarnation of Laurence Olivier who turns into an abusive monster. In *A Special Providence* and *Young Hearts Crying*, the suburban house ownership is the hard-to-reach ideal that the protagonists such as Alice Prentice and Lucy Davenport yearn for but fail to get, for different reasons. While Alice cannot become a suburban house owner by virtue of being a divorced and impoverished mother whose financial situation is always precarious, the problem of Lucy Davenport is her inability to break the silly agreement with her husband that prevents her from purchasing a good suburban house that she might enjoy living in and any other expensive item that would expose their bohemian life as fraudulent. When she finally does buy a house, it is too late for her to enjoy the house’s potential for enabling domesticity as she is already divorced and unsure about what she wants to do next in life.

Yates is also to be credited as an early suburban fiction author who pays considerable attention to the problems of children in his work. In *Revolutionary Road*, *Young Hearts Crying*, and *A Special Providence*, Yates presents the children as vulnerable victims of their parents’ selfish and deluded actions that cause the children to feel unloved, manipulated, lonely, and confused. Michael Wheeler invents a role-playing game to amuse his older sister Jennifer and to draw her away from being worried about their quarrelling parents, Laura Davenport creates an invisible younger sister Melissa to play with to escape the boredom, loneliness, and lack of affection she experiences at home. Even Bobby Prentice becomes imaginative when being enmeshed in his mother’s delusions as they leave her sister’s house toward an uncertain future: “Let’s pretend it isn’t happening.”³⁶

Contrary to the myth of the suburban lifestyle that promotes family togetherness and domesticity, the family in Yates’s novels is typically a damaged, broken-down social institution as the father is absent or dead, and the mother is more concerned with appearances than with caring for her home and family. The children in Yates’s suburban novels react to the problem of living in unstable homes by inventing new identities, siblings, and games to play. When the Wheeler children are told of the plan their parents have for moving to Europe, Jennifer reacts with horror until she calms down by making a long list of toys to take along. Unlike their parents, the children in Yates’s suburban novels have not lost their “innocence, authenticity and truthfulness”³⁷ as they try to cope with challenging situations that are imposed on them by their parents’ inconsiderate decisions.³⁸ The suburban home in Yates’s

³⁵ Dreiser, *The Financier*, 187.

³⁶ *SP*, 219.

³⁷ Charlton-Jones, “What About the Children?“, 124.

³⁸ For example, in *Revolutionary Road*, *Young Hearts Crying*, and *The Easter Parade*, the children invariably resist the parental decision to move house, fearing loss of friends and connections. In *A Special Providence*

novels thus functions as a destabilizing environment in which the adults quarrel, fight, and suffer from neurotic responses to their inner conflicts while ignoring their children's need for safety, love, and privacy. Still, the children in Yates's suburban novels maintain the ability to respond to anxiety-raising situations with intelligent and ingenious ways.

In the suburban novels, from *Revolutionary Road* to *Cold Spring Harbor*, Yates addresses the problem of social inequality mainly through the unflinching realistic portraits of the deluded mothers (from Mrs. Givings to Alice Prentice and Gloria Drakes) whose snobbish pursuit of upper-class flair is based on the premise that by emulating the ways of American upper class, inclusion in their ranks (and thus upward social mobility) is sure to follow and bring the desired recognition. It is Yates's ambivalence about the feasibility of imitating upper class ways to make such upward mobility possible that the reader finds in his exposure of the characters' pretentious behavior. When Gloria Drake gets the rare invitation to the mansion of Mrs. Talmage, she mistakenly considers the one-time event a permanent mark of entry to the suburban elite of Cold Spring Harbor. Similarly, when Alice Prentice rents an overpriced house from Mrs. Vander Meer, the very act of moving into an expensive rented accommodation on the edge of the Boxwood estate is interpreted by her as having been accepted by her landlady as her equal. Blindness to the invisible class and economic barriers and inequalities in American society is exposed by Yates through the presentation of his characters' unrealistic social striving that leads nowhere and brings only embarrassment and humiliation.

Critics have praised Yates's ability to portray women in a complex, realistic manner. Charlton-Jones explains that his women characters "fall into two categories: young women struggling to communicate with the men in their lives, [...] and older women, mothers, who restrict their sons and daughters, unequivocally damaging them in the process."³⁹ The first group notably includes April Wheeler, Lucy Davenport, and Emily Grimes, while the mother characters include Mrs. Givings in *Revolutionary Road*, Pookie Grimes in *The Easter Parade*, Alice Prentice in *A Special Providence*, and Gloria Drake in *Cold Spring Harbor*. While the young women characters are treated with sympathy and understanding as victims of their "domestic loneliness and lack of intellectual fulfilment,"⁴⁰ the mother characters are portrayed with brutal honesty as pathetic, ridiculous, deluded, and destructive for anyone who comes within their manipulative influence.

and *Cold Spring Harbor*, the son character is all too happy to leave home so as to escape the oppressive influence his mother's deluded love has over him. Bobby Prentice is drafted and goes to fight in Europe, Phil Drake leaves to study at a boarding prep school.

³⁹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 165.

⁴⁰ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 165.

While Yates could in many ways be considered a male-chauvinist who hated to see the advancement of women's liberation and considered women as more suited for traditional domestic roles rather than for professional careers, in his suburban fiction, he is surprisingly sympathetic to the uneasy situation of strong, energetic women who run into difficulties due to the incompatibility of their dreams with the prescriptive social norms of the 1930s to the 1970s. According to Charlton-Jones, Yates is no feminist, yet in his portraits of male and female characters and their suburban conflicts, he perceptively "suggests that the space women occupy is limited by men who diminish them."⁴¹ In his portrait of Emily Grimes, Yates seems to transcend the limitations of his male-chauvinist worldview to portray a memorable female protagonist whose "bitterness and her confusion as to what, exactly, went wrong in her life are convincing without the least condescension."⁴² As Daly explains, *The Easter Parade* is exceptional in the way Yates foregrounds female characters in his attempt to relate "the gender-based [masculinity] crisis narrative" to the general "American obsession with an unattainable dream" of success and social recognition, a failure of a cultural myth that is not gender-specific and affects career women as well as men.⁴³ According to Charlton-Jones, by portraying Emily Grimes and other vigorous women as victims of the social ostracization that their assertive behavior brings about, Yates suggests that "the liberation of women comes at the expense of viable, mutually interdependent relationships with men."⁴⁴ In his treatment of women characters and themes, Yates's purpose is "not to campaign but to illustrate, not to fabricate but depict" the class and gender-based problems that Americans have been facing in the heteronormative relationships in the suburban as well as urban environment.⁴⁵

If Yates's portrayal of women usually focuses on their dominant role within the family which threatens the traditional gender roles, his male characters are invariably portrayed as weak, indecisive victims of the influence that their domineering mothers or vindictive wives have. Ironically, while the suburban women in Yates's novels strive for domestic idyll and fulfilment, their men feel oppressed by the very same myth of suburban domesticity and seek the realization of their identities elsewhere—in the city-based jobs, in the prep school study and life experience, in the arms of a mistress, and in the army. Yates's suburban men are diminished by the failure of their belief in their ability to succeed as men as well as by the influence their women have on them. Deluded notions of the men's own superiority are at the basis of the their masculinity crisis. Through the anxieties of Michael Davenport and Tom Nelson, Yates conveys his ambivalence about what it means to be an

⁴¹ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 210.

⁴² Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 127.

⁴³ Daly, "Emily Grimes Is Me," 47.

⁴⁴ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 206.

⁴⁵ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 212.

American artist who also happens to be male. If some of Yates's male characters do not suffer from masculinity crisis, for example, Tony Wilson and Evan Shepard, they are nonetheless portrayed as abusive brutes who blame others for their professional and marital failure.

Yates's suburban fiction amply explores the role of performance in the public behavior of people. According to Castronovo and Goldleaf, there is a direct relation between one's social performance and the acquisition (or preservation) of social status as affiliation to a class or community is "not a permanent possession but a string of actions that need to be embellished by settings, clothes, and opinions."⁴⁶ Erving Goffman explains that the public presentation of one's self may oscillate between two extremes of performative behavior. At one extreme, the performer "can be fully taken in by his own act, [...] convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality."⁴⁷ In Yates's suburban novels, the deluded and pretentious mothers are a case in point—while their view of reality is warped, they sincerely believe in their deluded notions of having class and authenticity even while the people they meet try to puncture their delusion. Notable examples of the sincere but deluded social performers include Alice Prentice, Pookie Grimes, and Gloria Drake. The other extreme of the public performative behavior is the person who "may not be taken in at all by his own routine," has "no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience," which Goffman considers synonymous with cynicism.⁴⁸ In Yates's work, Frank Wheeler is a prime example of the cynical poseur whose frequent checks on his public face in front of the mirror expose his knowledge of the insincerity of such posturing which he does anyway, to manipulate other people and impress them with his imitations of coolness and masculine flair. His cynical and sanctimonious affectation and ranting works wonders on his wife until she sees him for the fraud and bigmouth he really is and reacts with a would-be dramatic performance of her own.⁴⁹ The obsession of Yates's characters with assuming performative behavior and posturing is not limited to intelligent, educated people such as the Wheelers. In *Cold Spring Harbor*, the mirror in the Drakes' home functions as the silent reflector of their naïve attempts to emulate the attractive poses of film actors which they think should function in their lives as well. Unlike Frank Wheeler, Gloria and Rachel Drake do not realize that their stereotyped poses cannot succeed as they are based on the unrealistic notions of self that stand in contrast to the drab, unglamorous nature of their lives. In different ways, Yates's sincere poseurs as well as his conscious cynics are all after the same goal—to

⁴⁶ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 16.

⁴⁷ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 17.

⁴⁸ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 17-18.

⁴⁹ This, of course, is April's final morning pretension, which persuades Frank of things coming back to normal, and her subsequent abortion attempt which could be read as an act of a defiant woman's affirmation, or an act of destructive selfishness, or a mixture of both.

achieve their dream of passing for socially successful people, a goal rendered unattainable by the hidden complications involving class, gender, and economic barriers that exist in the American suburbs but are ignored by many people who live there.

Yates's suburban fiction could be labelled realist, influenced by the European and American literary precursors such as Flaubert, Anderson, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald. According to Charlton-Jones, "the realist novel had, and always will have, a role to play in commenting on contemporary reality, on social structures, on the role of the writer, and on the ever-changing face of marriage and relationship."⁵⁰ As Castronovo and Goldleaf document, Yates typically exposes, like his literary heroes before him, "the hidden injuries of class, including bleak childhoods, nothing jobs, and barren landscapes" of American city and suburb in a realist mode at a time "when the mode was retreating before the onslaughts of such postmodern experimental writers as Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme."⁵¹ Unlike the postmodern fictional experiments with form, language, and meaning, a traditionalist like Yates chose to spend a career "examining the insecurity and instability of the age [...] through incisive and unsparing characterization and dialogue within a traditional form."⁵² As O'Nan explains, Yates's realism provides an uncomfortable but honest view of American society as his characters "mirror of our weaknesses: passive, uncertain, self-pitying, and foolish" with the resulting vision of America as "populated as it is by mostly unexceptional, imperfect people" who speak in a language "that rarely if ever calls attention to itself."⁵³ Although realist fiction has been dismissed since the 1960s as an outmoded approach to portraying life in the American cities and suburbs, Yates's suburban novels still impress new readers with the way they function like a time-capsule from an era in which the American people still believed in the myth of the American Dream whose realization is possible within the idealized construction of suburban family identity. Yates's attention to the problems and dangers of this dream are in tune with the way his fiction continues to present a vision "of people's social survival, the complexity of the struggle to stay afloat in American society"⁵⁴ which exposes the difficult choices for suburbanites who have to choose between conformity and rebellion, between delusion and realism, between hypocrisy and honesty, in order to deal with the challenges of suburban domesticity, class barriers, and family conflicts.

⁵⁰ Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 214.

⁵¹ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 2.

⁵² Charlton-Jones, *Dismembering the American Dream*, 220.

⁵³ O'Nan, "The Lost World of Richard Yates," <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/stewart-onan-the-lost-world-of-richard-yates/>.

⁵⁴ Castronovo and Goldleaf, *Richard Yates*, 19.

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