

# Suburban Narratives Revisited:

## Problematics of Gender and the American Family in Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*

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## Introduction

The American post-war author Richard Yates has largely been overlooked by scholars of literature for quite ambiguous reasons. His authorship often draws a gloomy but brutally honest picture of American society in the 1950s and is by several present day critics seen as one of the most important American post-war writers. Jeremy Lerner sees the novel as highly relevant in relation to contemporary society and contemporary issues when he argues that, 'To read *Revolutionary Road* is to have forced upon us a fresh sense of our critical modern shortcomings: failures in work, education, community, family, marriage...and plain nerve.'<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, a novel about 1950s suburbia that did not gain an immense popularity when it was published in 1961, is now seen by critics as a highly relevant source of critiquing contemporary issues.

His authorship experienced a surprising renaissance in 2001 when *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates* was published posthumously and Richard Yates became for the first time a national bestseller. Yates eventually became a far more popular writer posthumously than he had ever been when he was alive. Ronald J. Nelson goes as far as claiming that the limited scholarly attention paid to Yates has in itself contributed to Yates' limited readership.<sup>2</sup> Yates' own daughter even asked if he was 'still in print' in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Due to the fact that Yates has such an interesting history of readership and that his work also gives important historical perspectives on an almost mythical decade, I believe that it is important for scholars to start examining his work. Despite his at times limited readership Yates has been called the 'great writer of the age of anxiety'<sup>4</sup> and that in itself deserves the attention of a literary critic. The so-called anxiety that Stewart O'Nan refers to is the post-war climate in America that was highly affected by the anxiety of Communism and nuclear war. This thesis will examine many of these aspects of anxiety in his first novel *Revolutionary Road*, a novel set in 1950s suburbia.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Lerner as cited in Blake Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates* (New York: Picador, 2003) pp. ix- 671 (p.229)

<sup>2</sup> Ronald J. Nelson, 'Richard Yates's portrait of the artist as a young thug: 'Doctor Jack-o'-Lantern', *Studies in Short Fiction* vol. 32, no. 1 (Winter 1995) pp. 1-6 (p. 1)

<sup>3</sup> Blake Bailey, 'Poor Dick: Looking for the Real Richard Yates', *Harvard Review*, no. 25 (Fall 2003) pp. 53- 63 (p.55)

<sup>4</sup> Stewart O'Nan, 'The Lost World of Richard Yates: How the great writer of the Age of Anxiety disappeared from print', *Boston Review*, vol. 24 no. 5 (1999) pp. 1- 16 (p.1)

Richard Yates was born in Yonkers, New York in 1926. He came from an unstable family and his parents divorced when he was three. Similarly to the novel's main character Frank Wheeler, he also served in the army during World War II, being stationed in Normandie, France. He was married three times and was an alcoholic during most of his life, something that often affected his ability to write. Yates biographer Blake Bailey claims that 'If the prerequisite of any great writer's life is an unhappy childhood, then Richard Yates was especially blessed.'<sup>5</sup> Like Yates himself, his mother had also been an alcoholic and Yates would often tell stories about her alcoholism or her involvement with strange men, that is, if he was drunk enough.<sup>6</sup> What bothered Yates the most, however, was 'That he knew all too well how alike he and his mother was. This awareness was painful for him, due to the fact that he despised, but also loved his mother. He saw her flaws in himself and his alcoholism.'<sup>7</sup> It is obvious that the memories of his mother were painful due to the fact that she resembled everything Yates hated about himself and everything that he struggled with coming to terms with.

When reading *Revolutionary Road*, we get a clear sense that Yates was a man who hated snobbery and vanity and often ridicules this in his novel, but Bailey suggests that he resembled a great deal of Frank Wheeler's vanity in the sense that 'Yates liked few things better than being admired by writers he admired.'<sup>8</sup> Yates then seems to have an ambiguous personality who is constantly contradicting both his literary work and the character he himself wants to be seen as. Perhaps this constant negotiation of self and identity, in addition to his alcoholism and difficult childhood, led to many of the mental problems he suffered from during his life. His daughters claimed that he was suffering from depression and mental illness on and off throughout his life, something his daughter characterized as 'He wasn't well even when he was well.'<sup>9</sup> The first novel he published was *Revolutionary Road*, something he always claimed was his big misfortune as an author: That he had simply written his best work first.<sup>10</sup> Yates' authorship has now received more attention than it ever did when he was alive, but it comes as a surprise to many, that Yates also worked as Robert

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<sup>5</sup> Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty* (p.7)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, (p. 7)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid (p. 17)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid (p. 255)

<sup>9</sup> Bailey, 'Poor Dick' (p. 55)

<sup>10</sup> Nelson, 'Richard Yates's portrait' (p. 4)

F. Kennedy's speech writer for six months, writing 'the man's most moving speeches on civil rights.'<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps one of the reasons why Yates has been so greatly overlooked by readers, is that Yates was always considered what Michael Shinagel called 'a writer's writer' by his contemporaries.<sup>12</sup> Richard Yates was unfortunately considered an author that was of little interest to the common reader, but mainly an author admired by other writers. However, O'Nan, notes the fact that Yates never fit into the role as an archetypical writer's writer due to the fact that Yates wrote about 'The mundane sadness of domestic life in a language that rarely if ever draws attention to itself.'<sup>13</sup> Yates' language can be seen in many ways as 'simple or traditional, conventional, free of the metafictionalists, or even the modernist tricks.'<sup>14</sup> However, Bailey claims that the simple language of *Revolutionary Road* is 'deceptively simple...like the glossy surface of a deep and murky loch.'<sup>15</sup> His language may appear simple and traditional, but under the surface there is a deeper message where he tells the story of human failure in an east coast suburb. Paradoxically, writers always admired Yates, perhaps because he was overlooked by the common reader<sup>16</sup> and therefore possessed more credibility in the literary milieu. It might also be that Yates' work was simply too honest and painted an image of America and the American Dream that was too bleak for him to gain a large reading audience, because Yates' fiction is first and foremost concerned with the pathetic failings of ordinary mediocre Americans, who are nothing special at all. He speaks directly to all the millions of Frank's and April's of America in a language that does not leave any room for misunderstandings: That most people will fail in their quest to live a life according to their ideals.

The theme of failure, dullness and humiliation spans most of Richard Yates' authorship. In his collection of short stories *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (1962) the setting is different from that of *Revolutionary Road*, but the characters are 'young and insecure and coming to grips with their less than ideal lives.'<sup>17</sup> The theme of not managing to fulfil our ideals and the

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<sup>11</sup> Bailey, 'Poor Dick' (p. 56)

<sup>12</sup> Michael Shinagel, 'Richard Yates: An Introduction', *Harvard Review*, no 25 (Fall 2003) pp. 50- 52 (p. 50)

<sup>13</sup> O'Nan, 'The Lost World' (p. 2)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* (p. 2)

<sup>15</sup> Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty* (p. 230)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* (p. 3)

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* (p. 5)

cowardice of not managing to face up to the situation one is in, are all common issues of Yates' literary world. His novel *The Easter Parade* (1976) revolves around the main character Emily Grimes, who is a constant failure but does not have the ability to realize it. Yates is also here using the literary device of revealing the main character's flaws and their failure, without the main character seeing it herself: 'She can't see the pattern of her mistakes and ends up making them over and over again, never coming closer to happiness but never truly giving up on the possibility.'<sup>18</sup> Like April's humiliation on stage with the Laurel Players the reader is brutally exposed to Emily Grime's failures. His 1978 novel with the ironic title *A Good School* is set in a second- rate boarding school desperately trying to create the impression of being a first rate institution. But as O'Nan marks, 'Dorset Academy is second rate and in the red, and all its quaint Cotswold architecture can't disguise the fact from the boys.'<sup>19</sup> Similarly to April and Frank, the main characters are trying to disguise their failure and in this case the fact that their institution is second rate, but as always in Yates' fiction, their failure of facing the truth is always exposed.

The reception of *Revolutionary Road* when it was first published in 1961, was almost exclusively positive. Yates even won the National Book Award in 1961, so we clearly get a sense that Yates was obviously a critically acclaimed author, greatly respected within the literary circles of his contemporaries. However, the critics seemed to be slightly divided when it came to whether they sympathised with the Wheeler's or not. One of the most outspoken and opinionated critics labelled both of the Wheelers as 'mentally ill' and claimed the novel was really about 'two psychopathic characters.'<sup>20</sup> Martin Levin however, clearly sides with April and almost goes as far as saying that April's problem is Frank, and calls Frank 'a human husk'.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the reason why critics so militantly disagreed on whether to sympathise with the Wheeler's or not, has something to do with whether the critics believed that the Wheeler's could be personally blamed for their failure or if the decade and political climate they lived in simply strangled them. Levin goes on to claim that Frank is 'far more deluded than his bride' and seems to claim that Frank is manipulating April through a mixture of patriarchal confinement and his own delusions.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid (p. 9)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid (p. 11)

<sup>20</sup> Orville Prescott, 'Books of the Times: Revolutionary Road', *The New York Times* (March 10, 1961)

<sup>21</sup> Martin Levin, 'With a Fingerhold on Reality', *The New York Times* (March 5, 1961)

This leads us to Yates' own assessment of his novel. The novel was in many ways received as a novel shaking up the founding pillars of 1950s society, criticizing contemporary institutions such as the nuclear family and suburbia. Paradoxically, Yates claimed in an interview that that was far away from his intention. 'The Wheelers may have thought that suburbia was 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.'<sup>22</sup> Yates clearly seems to suggest that individuals are to be blamed for their failure and that the ideology of conformity and limited job opportunities for women had little to do with Frank and April's demise. However, Bailey suggests that 'Amid the affluence of postwar America, the temptation was particularly keen to accept the easy rewards of suburban comfort, an undemanding job, and to fill the emptiness that followed with dreams of potential greatness or adventure. But to pursue such dreams in fact- as Yates well knew- required a resilient sense of autonomy that resisted the siren call of, say, a comfortable house in Redding as opposed to a roach- infested basement in the Village.'<sup>23</sup> We get a clear sense that many young couples who wanted to pursue an adventurous lifestyle had to consciously resist pressure from mainstream society of settling down in suburbia, and that those people who managed to be true to themselves and choose differently, needed a lot of courage and integrity.

Interestingly, this is still a crucial debate when it comes to 'the battle over the 1950s': Whether individuals can be blamed for their own dullness or if society creates an ideology that shapes these dull individuals. This debate is perhaps more crucial when it comes to the 1950s than any other twentieth century decade, because the 1950s was seen as a decade that held an especially strong domestic ideology of containment and conformity. Yates however, obviously holds a very American (perhaps naive) belief in the individual who supposedly is able to triumph over the constraints of a conformist society. When April and Frank fail to be autonomous individuals within a constrained society, it seems to be Yates' view that it is their own personal responsibility if they fail. This is based on the archetypal American thought that individuals prove themselves to be worthy through transcending societal constraints.

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<sup>22</sup> Henry DeWitt and Geoffrey Clark, 'An Interview with Richard Yates', *Ploughshares*, vol. 1, 3 (1972) pp. 65- 78 (p.66)

<sup>23</sup> Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty* (p. 232)



Another issue the novel raised and that the critics argued over was Yates' seeming denouncement of the institution of marriage. When a journalist asked whether Yates was 'knocking marriage', he answered: 'Who but a maniac or a God damn fool would sit down and write a novel attacking marriage? And who'd want to *read* such a novel?'<sup>24</sup> Yates' here seems far removed from the counter- culture figure he was thought to represent at the time, choosing instead to distance himself from the image of an author engaging in institutionalized criticism, claiming that people who saw his novel as a criticism of marriage must be 'maniacs' and 'fools.' Again, the Wheelers' bad marriage and the claustrophobia of suburban bliss they seem to be experiencing, according to Yates, has little to do with society or a limiting institution, but is again due to their own delusions and dullness.

The novel evokes a picture of an inauthentic American society, and the emptiness and hypocrisy that follows the American Dream of material comfort in the suburbs. Therefore, the socio- historical context of the 1950s is crucial in terms of understanding Yates's fiction and his social critique. As we have previously encountered, Yates believes that he is not engaging in social critique, however I will throughout my thesis argue that he does, although he might have been unaware of it at the time. Yates himself believed that the title of his novel suggested that 'The revolutionary road of 1776 had come to something very much like a dead end in the Fifties.'<sup>25</sup> The 'dead end' Yates is pointing to is the well- established American Dream of comfortable suburban bliss and family life, which in this case ends up destroying everything close to diversity and individuality. What we must keep in mind however, was that Yates was quite a traditionalist, as we previously encountered in his response to whether he was 'knocking marriage' and that he for example believed deep down 'that a woman was better off as a wife and mother.'<sup>26</sup> We might then conclude with the fact that Yates was a reluctant social critic, not fully understanding the social and cultural implications of his own work and how he would be viewed as a counter- culture figure after his death.

Yates claims that the revolutionary road of the War of Independence ended up as the dead end Revolutionary Road of his novel where individuality is constantly being negotiated against the expectations of a conformist society. Yates seems to evoke a very particular

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid (p.67)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid (p. 66)

<sup>26</sup> Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty* (p. 245)

sense of American history that often liberal Americans embrace: A view of America representing democracy, freedom and individualism and America as a revolutionary haven. He is obviously proud of America's revolutionary roots and it seems that Yates saw the previous radicalism of the American Revolution as dead in the 1950s conformity. Interestingly, we can argue that Yates suggests something very different in regards to suburbia than his contemporaries: That suburbia is an 'Un- American' institution because it represents the end of the celebrated American individualism. Yates here seems to suggest that suburbia with its identical houses and people represents an ideal that was far from American.

The novel itself deals with the young pseudo- intellectual Wheelers who live in the suburbs after having moved from New York City. Despite of their seemingly dull life style, they have some grandiose dreams of moving to Paris in order to finally escape the American conformity they claim to despise, in order to 'find themselves'. The escape metaphor is constantly re-enacted by Yates, among others through the romantic dream of a Europe many Americans had only read about in novels and seen in films.<sup>27</sup> From the beginning of the novel, most readers understand that the Wheelers are never going to Paris. The reader then embarks on a journey through middle- class mediocrity that mainly consists of conversations on 'the hopeless emptiness of everything'<sup>28</sup> mixed with a hodgepodge of pseudo- intellectual phrases of how men become emasculated by suburbia and how children grow up 'in a bath of sentimentality.'<sup>29</sup> We are then capable of understanding from early on that the premise of the Wheeler's suburban existence is that they are somehow 'different' and 'unusual.'

Interestingly, Catherine Jurca, associates the rhetoric of being different from the rest of the suburbanites as distinctly suburban, when she claims that the suburban dweller is characterized by the mindset that 'Everyone else is happy being a corporate drone, except from me.'<sup>30</sup> This mindset becomes present when Frank declares with bitter irony that he has 'the dullest job you can possibly imagine'<sup>31</sup> Jurca expands this notion when she claims that the reason why *Revolutionary Road* is such a fascinating and complex novel, is that it paints a

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, (p.29)

<sup>28</sup> Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (London: Vintage, 1961) pp. 3- 338 (p. 190)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid (p. 65)

<sup>30</sup> Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth- Century American Novel* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001) pp. vii- 238 (p. 139)

<sup>31</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 13)

picture of the typical suburbanite as the anti- suburbanite, whose existence is based on a protest against the conformity they daily engage in.<sup>32</sup> The Wheelers somehow believe that they are not really part of the suburban community; that they are outsiders, but this notion seems to unite and not divide the suburbanites.

Suburbia has also been seen as an institution that represents not only the cold war, but resembling a war- zone in itself. What characterized the 1950s was the fear of the nuclear war and that Russia would drop a bomb on American soil any day. Michael Moreno alludes to the image of the suburban trench war when he claims that 'Yates' image of the post- war nation is one in which a new enemy (the Communists) fuels the paranoia and passion for American conformity and technological advancement. In this new campaign by the cold warriors, the societal attributes of compliance and progress would be battled domestically in the new suburban trenches.<sup>33</sup> Moreno envisions a suburbia that is an extension of a trench war, where suburbanites are fighting 'the war of Americanness' against the Communist Soviet Union. American consumerism is held up as a sharp contrast to the anti- materialist Soviet Union where suburban consumerism represents the essence of the comfortable American 'good life.' We might also think about how American suburbia ironically is interdependent on the nightmare vision of the Soviet Union. The Soviet enemy and the Soviet ideology paradoxically manage to shape and construct a suburbia that is supposed to function as its polar opposite. 1950s suburbia might even be said to be a 'negative product' of the Soviet Union.

Elaine Tyler May paints an interesting picture of the cold war, when she suggests that the cold war was first and foremost a war of values. She writes about how Richard Nixon met Nikita Krushchev in Moscow and what they discussed was not nuclear warfare, but social values and domestic culture.<sup>34</sup> She continues by claiming that 'For Nixon, American superiority rested on a utopian ideal of the home, complete with modern appliances and distinct gender roles.'<sup>35</sup> Here we also understand that gender is at the very heart of the battle between the nations. The American female is supposed to be domestic in order to

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<sup>32</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 148)

<sup>33</sup> Michael Moreno, 'Consuming the Frontier Illusion: The Construction of Suburban Masculinity in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*', *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, no. 3 (Fall 2003) 84- 95 (p. 84)

<sup>34</sup> Elaine Tyler May, 'Cold War- Warm Hearth' in *The Eisenhower Presidency of the 1950s*, ed. Michael S. Mayer (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998) pp. xiii- 239 (p. 213)

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid* (p.213)

pose as a contrast to the working Soviet female and the values that come with this view of gender equality. Interestingly, we might think that the masculine role assigned to men would be a role that embraces individualism and private initiative, but during the 1950s large corporations started to strangle small businesses, something that led to fewer small business men and therefore a masculine role different from the role of the American entrepreneur and 'from rags to riches' business man.<sup>36</sup> The American male instead ended up in an anonymous role working for larger corporations, supporting the American corporate capitalism instead of the pursuing the ideal of the independent man working for himself and his own business. This can be clearly linked with Frank and his dead end job that serves the corporate interests of his nation, but is distinctly separated from the typical American entrepreneur spirit.

There are multiple angles in which we can explore *Revolutionary Road* from. The perspective that I have chosen is an attempt to debate issues of gender and American family life in the 1950s, since I believe that critics have not given enough attention to those aspects of his fiction. What my thesis will attempt to do, however, is to look at the American family in relation to April's abortion and how her abortions are linked with the demise of the American family. I will argue that these issues are at the heart of the novel and strongly contribute to the fall of the main characters. I will attempt to give a socio- historical reading of the novel with great emphasis on the 1950s context of gender roles and family life. The aspects of social history that will be of great concern to this thesis, will be that of suburbia, masculinity and femininity in the 1950s, women and work, the cold war domestic ideology and the nuclear family. These aspects will be of crucial importance to my thesis due to the fact that I aim to pursue an interdisciplinary perspective on the novel, seeking to understand it through the history of the 1950s. The focus will be on how other disciplines can inform our understanding of literature and how seeing the narrative in a socio- historical context can expand our knowledge not only on the novel but on a decade as well.

The structure of my thesis will be divided into three chapters. Chapter one will examine gender and masculine anxiety in the 1950s, whereas the second chapter will deal with the issues of the American family, domesticity and how this relates to Yates' abortion metaphors. I will also give a reading of domestic space in chapter two to illustrate the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid (p. 215)

claustrophobia of the American family and how the domestic space in some ways narrates the demise of the Wheelers. My final chapter will attempt to place *Revolutionary Road* in dialogue with two other novels in order to view it within the larger context of suburban narratives and the issues that suburbia raises concerning gender, family relations and conformity. I will focus on two other narratives, Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (written in 1994 about 1970s suburbia) and Tom Perrotta's *Little Children* (2004). The reason why I chose the perspective of examining two other narratives from different decades, is that I want to use these two narratives to see how surprisingly similarly suburbia is portrayed throughout completely different decades and why that might be the case. From these narratives I will attempt to draw a line between suburbia, family life and gender roles during three different decades. Another reason why I am pursuing this approach is that I want to look at the continuity, but also the disruptions of the American middle- class family throughout three decades. I will pursue questions like: What do these narratives tell us about middle- class gender roles? How is masculinity and femininity portrayed? Has gender roles and family life in suburbia remained stagnant from the 1950s onwards, or can we claim that women do occupy a more powerful role in today's suburbia? These will be some of the questions my theses will deal with.

## **Chapter 1: Conflicting Gender Roles in Suburbia: Masculine Anxiety and self- doubt in *Revolutionary Road***

In this first chapter I will look at how gender roles in suburbia are played out within the 1950s context, since gender roles here will function as my vehicle into the 1950s. Gender roles in the 1950s are worth examining due to the fact that they served as the main communicators of American values and these roles were distinctly constructed to fit the nuclear age. The chapter will be especially concerned with the issues of suburban masculinity and the fear of the suburban male to 'go soft'. This will be examined in the context of the nuclear age and the fear of the Soviet Union due to the fact that these masculinity issues are distinctly related to the socio- historical context of the 1950s. In addition, I will put the female and male roles in dialogue with each other in order to see how they are mutually dependent. I will constantly attempt to relate the analysis of the characters and how they perform their gender to a social context. The chapter will touch on issues of April's voice in relation to her identity as a woman. These issues of the 'voicing' of female experience will be linked to notions of women's identity in post- war America and how the questions of female identity started to become urgent for some women looking for an identity outside the domestic realm. Issues of suburban collective performance will also be touched upon, in the sense that suburbia may be seen as a stage where the inhabitants engage in what I will term 'collective acting.' Finally the chapter will seek to explore the dualities of Frank as shown in the mirror. I will look at how those so- called dualities communicates to the reader that Frank's role and identity is both 'mirrored' and fluid.

Lewis Mumford paints an image of the suburban male as 'Little more than a boy, an overgrown child himself.'<sup>37</sup> This issue of the suburban male as insecure and childish is something the reader frequently encounters through Frank. In one of the reader's first meetings with Frank Wheeler, we are immediately presented with his masculine angst and self- doubt. His self- consciousness is evident when he 'Looked at himself in the mirror, tightening his jaw and turned his head a little to one side to give it a leaner, more commanding look, the face he had given himself in the mirrors since boyhood and which no

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<sup>37</sup> Lewis Mumford as cited in Robert Beuka, *SuburbaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) pp. ix- 284 (p. 109)

photography had ever quite achieved.<sup>38</sup> What is interesting is that Frank's way of achieving a more masculine look makes the reader aware of his flawed and insecure masculinity in the sense of his deliberate and conscious performance. Therefore we may say that he is failing masculinity.<sup>39</sup> The myth of masculinity that affirms masculinity as 'natural' in comparison to the artificial femininity is clearly dismantled by Frank's artificial staging of his gender. Frank has to concentrate in order to look masculine. He has to strike a pose in order to achieve a masculinity that he believes he should 'naturally' embody. This again leads to his constant anxiety of being revealed as a man of flawed masculinity and a failure. Among others the reader witnesses Frank becoming hysterical when April accuses him of not being able to 'call [him] self a man.'<sup>40</sup> Her awareness of his theatrical performance therefore threatens his masculine legitimacy.

Frank feels threatened if he does not get constant approval of his masculinity. April, however, is usually the source of his insecurity due to her reluctance of giving him an ego boost and living up to his expectations. We may say that April's expected role is very much what Virginia Woolf mentions in *A Room of One's Own*, where she claims that women are supposed to serve as men's looking glasses as a way of maintaining male supremacy.<sup>41</sup> This is evident since Frank's masculine self-esteem constantly depends of April's confirmation of its legitimacy. During an incident when April wanted to have an abortion, Frank immediately feels that his masculinity is threatened, ironically by her failure of femininity. April does not embrace motherhood, which makes Frank so insecure that he again becomes hysterical: 'Listen. *Listen* to me. You do this and I swear to God I'll...'<sup>42</sup> When April succumbs to his expectations of womanhood and femininity he again feels reassured about his masculinity. After the fight 'It seemed to him now that no single moment of his life had ever contained a better proof of manhood than that, if any proof were needed: holding that tamed submissive girl and saying; 'Oh, my lovely; oh, my lovely,' while she promised to bear his

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<sup>38</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 15)

<sup>39</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) pp. xxxvi- 236

<sup>40</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 28)

<sup>41</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929)

<sup>42</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 50)

child.<sup>43</sup> Frank's masculinity is constantly dependent on April being successful at her feminine performance.

At the same time, Frank is torn between different masculine expressions, perhaps both of them inadequate. Frank's existence revolves around a 'gray- flannel suit' masculinity that is often seen as stereotypical of the white 1950s middle- class man where his main function is to be an anonymous office worker working in a dull job to serve American capitalism. This kind of middle- class masculinity led to the anxiety of men 'going soft in peacetime suburbs'.<sup>44</sup> This anxiety stemmed from the fact that many suburban husbands had settled down in the suburbs after having fought in World War II, where a more traditional and aggressive masculinity was expected from them. Catherine Jurca however, complicates the masculine role when she suggests that men occupied a diasporic marginal space in terms of being alienated by no longer owning the land that they worked on.<sup>45</sup> Jurca here suggests that men were alienated by no longer 'taming the land' as in the traditional frontier spirit and that that left men feeling a sense of loss. It might also be interesting to think about this in relation to men being split in a sense that they are constantly negotiating in between two distinctly different spaces: The public and the private. Obviously both of those spaces left men feeling alienated.

The domesticated gray flannel suit male became a national concern in the 1950s. The national fear was that men would become emasculated by living a life in the female- centred suburbia and working for a big corporation instead of setting up a small business in the traditional American entrepreneur spirit. The gray flannel suit male is also a figure that is distinctly associated with suburbia and in some ways the gray flannel suit represented a replacement of the frontier role that several men had had as soldiers in WWII. Frank is narrating this fear of anonymity and domesticity when 'He felt as if he were sinking helplessly into the cushions and the papers and the bodies of his children like a man in quicksand.'<sup>46</sup> This evokes his inner fear of not only emasculation, but of being rendered powerless and castrated in a female- centred environment illustrated by a claustrophobic

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, (p. 50- 51)

<sup>44</sup> Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) pp. vi- 313 (p.41)

<sup>45</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 145)

<sup>46</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 56)



interior filled with cushions. Him sinking into the cushions might also literally illustrate the fear of 'going soft' since we get a sense of Frank sinking into softness.

Moreno claims that 'Frank Wheeler, is caught at the crossroads of his yearning to return to a more bachelor- like frontier world of masculinity, intellect, and adventure and his obligation to perform the blurred roles of organization man, suburban father, and compatible husband.'<sup>47</sup> We are here given a portrayal of a man who is caught between his obligations and his dream of frontier freedom. However, I would claim that both the frontier and gray flannel suit masculinity are both limited roles, as gender roles are in general, due to the fact that these roles are limited in expression and obviously policed with restrictions and boundaries, as they are meant to. I believe Frank is given few alternatives of self- expression in a world that wants him to conform to a set type of masculinity. Moreno makes an interesting point when he claims that 'The suburban male is a role Frank does not want, yet, as the only form of masculinity offered to him, he cannot allow that role, however ridiculed or demeaning, to be usurped from him as well.'<sup>48</sup> Frank militantly defends his role as a gray flannel suit suburbanite not because he is comfortable in his role, but because it is the only masculinity he feels is available to him.

Conflicting masculinities is not only problematic for Frank, but an ongoing problem for other male characters in the novel as well. The Wheeler's neighbour Shep Campbell also struggles with his masculine anxieties, especially the fear of having been emasculated by his mother as a child as he narrates his childhood: 'He'd been raised in a succession of brownstone and penthouse apartments in the vicinity of Sutton Place, schooled by private tutors and allowed to play with other children only under the smiling eye of the English nanny or his French ma'm'selle, and that his wealthy mother had insisted, until he was eleven years old, on dressing him every Sunday in 'adorable' tartan kilts that came from Bergdorf Goodman.'<sup>49</sup> Emasculation as a result of the female influence of powerful women is an anxiety that Shep articulates in this context. He also claims that his mother 'Woulda made

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<sup>47</sup> Moreno, 'Consuming the Frontier' (p. 88)

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, (.90)

<sup>49</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 138)

a God damn lollypop outa me!<sup>50</sup> The anxiety of being shaped by females and their sensibilities is a constant fear for Shep Campbell.

We can clearly link this with the same contemporary anxiety of 'going soft.' Both Shep and Frank fear that they are a product of domesticity and feminine influence, which makes them both insecure and vulnerable. This fear of female influence may be linked to suburbia being seen as a matriarchy where women gained influence and were the founding pillars of the family through child rearing.<sup>51</sup> The 1950s experienced a female centred domestic culture and this also led to the fears of Frank and Shep about 'going soft' as a result of the matriarchal suburbia. This fear might also have something to do with the fact that suburban life emphasised the importance of domesticity and the family unit, something that poses a sharp contrast to the G.I Joe masculinity of WWII. Suddenly men were immediately expected to take part in a world of domesticity far away from the combat zone and embrace the domestic ideology of suburbanite and family man. Paradoxically, even though men were supposed to join in the suburban bliss, men were still expected to hold characteristic masculine traits of self- confidence and should not express their vulnerability in an environment they obviously felt alienated from.

Another woman contributing to Frank's castration anxiety is his mistress' roommate Norma. Norma is constructed as the antithesis of the 1950s housewife and evokes Frank's inner fear of emasculation when he meets her for the first time. He describes her as 'solid and duck- footed, wearing a modishly tubular dress, a 'sheath,' in defiance of the fact that it emphasized her breadth and muscularity.'<sup>52</sup> Norma is here constructed as a nightmarish caricature that serves to live up to Frank's image of 'the single working woman,' an identity highly stigmatized in the 1950s. Stephanie Coontz examines the status of working women in the 1950s when she cites a contemporary source claiming that "Old maids,' divorced women, childless women, and working mothers certainly existed in America, he

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, (p. 139)

<sup>51</sup> Bennett M. Berger, 'The Myth of Suburbia' in *North American Suburbs: Politics, Diversity and Change* (Berkeley: Glendessary Press, 1972) pp. ix- 330 (p. 7)

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, (p.269)

acknowledged, but they were of concern mainly to sociologists,' because they existed 'in a society that is not geared for them.'<sup>53</sup>

This becomes more evident when Frank tells Norma, after her having accused him of taking advantage of her friend Maureen, of being 'a meddling, tiresome woman, possibly a latent lesbian.'<sup>54</sup> This clearly illustrates the attitudes towards working women and illustrates the fear of the other. Norma is the polar opposite of the suburban housewife when Frank describes her as 'solid and duck-footed'<sup>55</sup> and we clearly get the sense that she is violating the contemporary norms of femininity and therefore, due to the fact that Frank is dependent on feminine approval of his own masculinity, she ends up posing a threat to the legitimacy of his masculinity. Frank has already suggested that Norma is not a 'real' woman, but Norma loses all her credibility and the little status that she has as a woman when Frank calls her 'a latent lesbian.'<sup>56</sup> Norma is here accused of rejecting not only men, but rejecting the nuclear family unit and is therefore marked Other.

Frank directly addresses the question of emasculation and the fear of masculine domesticity at a late dinner party at the Campbell's house. 'And I mean is it any wonder all men end up emasculated? Because that *is* what happens; that *is* what's reflected in all this bleating about 'adjustment' and 'security' and 'togetherness.'<sup>57</sup> Frank is criticizing the emasculating suburbia from a context that is closely linked with the emergence of the post-war American suburb where the government subsidised suburban homes in order for the houses to become affordable to homecoming Veterans. But as Moreno claims, this benevolent state interference led to increasing masculine anxiety. 'Although the spatial-political terrain of the suburbs conferred to many young men after WWII was intended to reintegrate them into a new American society, this act of seeming benevolence on the part of a paternalistic government rendered these men powerless and delionized.'<sup>58</sup> The 1950s male felt alienated from a world he had not been part of creating, leaving him in a space far removed from the traditionally masculine combat zone of WWII. The state benevolence also

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<sup>53</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011) (p.1)

<sup>54</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p.271)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, (p. 269)

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, (p. 271)

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, (p. 129)

<sup>58</sup> Moreno, 'Consuming the Frontier' (p. 86)

made men feel emasculated, in the sense that the government not only subsidized their homes, but had already set up an environment that the Veterans should automatically conform to. Yates is also pointing to male alienation when Frank speaks with contempt of ideals such as 'adjustment', 'security' and 'togetherness' because those ideals pose a stark contrast to the rampant masculinity of the war zone.

### **Women in Suburbia: April Wheeler and the Reclaiming of the Female Voice**

In contrast to Frank, where the reader is always provided with direct accounts of his masculine anxiety and how he perceives himself, April is rarely provided with a voice that would have enabled her to narrate herself and her story. This clearly alludes to what Betty Friedan called 'the problem that has no name.'<sup>59</sup> April's voiceless situation was a part of a larger socio-political problem facing women in the 1950s, a problem that had no name and that few women, April included, managed to articulate. This issue of a problem that has no name is evident when April's relationship with gender roles and her insecurities are narrated through Frank's perception of her. After April's fiasco as an actress in the local theatre group the Laurel Players Frank observes April: 'She would dissolve and change into the graceless, suffering creature whose existence he tried every day of his life to deny but whom he knew himself, a gaunt restricted woman whose red eyes flashed reproach, whose false smile in the curtain call was as homely as his own sore feet, his own damp climbing underwear and his own sour smell.'<sup>60</sup> In this case, the reader is provided with an image of an insecure, undoubtedly dissatisfied April who is described as not only weak and graceless, but also as a woman deeply uncomfortable with her role as wife and mother, due to the fact that her 'false smile in the curtain was as homely as his own sore feet.'<sup>61</sup> However, this is narrated through Frank and we rarely receive direct accounts from April, whose existence is voiceless until one of the last chapters.

Perhaps Yates is using this device metaphorically as a way of illustrating women's 'voiceless' situation in the 1950s, and that women were first and foremost defined through and by their husbands. Women were however told that they served a national purpose

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<sup>59</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin Books, 1963) pp. xxi- 367 (p. 17)

<sup>60</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 13)

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid* (p.13)

through 'keeping their husbands western.'<sup>62</sup> Wives should build their husband's identity as a solid American citizen through their housewifery and consumption of household goods- in the service of the Western civilization. It was part of women's national purpose to spend time on building their husbands identity, but ignoring their own. As a product of this, April is not given the chance to articulate her own identity and her existence is never directly narrated by herself. This feeds in with what many middle- class housewives felt at the time: That their lives were voiceless. One of the women mentioned in *The Feminine Mystique*, went as far as saying that 'I feel as if I don't exist.'<sup>63</sup> Women's voiceless identity and state of being was not only a problem that affected April Wheeler, but rather a problem that affected a whole generation of women who felt that they did not have an autonomous self-defined identity outside the domestic sphere. This issue of 'voicelessness' was precisely one of the main reasons why second wave feminism gained foothold in the 1960s and 70s.

We are clearly made aware of how the feminine role is confined to the domestic, whereas the masculine role is far more diverse and an ideal that allows for an identity within the public sphere, even though we have previously touched on its limitations as well. However, Halliwell notes that what the two roles might have in common is that according to literary representations in the 1950s, both sexes seemed to feel uncomfortable with them.<sup>64</sup> If we examine the construction of 1950s masculinity, we clearly see how the male role is put up to serve corporate capitalism. Moreno notes that the suburban male's way of displaying success was 'through the accumulation of consumer goods.'<sup>65</sup> This way of displaying masculinity poses a sharp contrast to the well- known entrepreneurial masculinity associated with the American male. In many ways we can say that this represents the domestication of masculinity and that both the masculine and feminine role is constructed to serve the purpose of not only American corporate capitalism, but also to reflect the 'city upon a hill' ideal, being an example that other countries should embrace. The embrace of capitalism through both gender's consumption of consumer goods serves as a sharp contrast to the Communist Soviet Union and their dismissal of capitalism as 'the good life'. Moreno also claims that the 1950s ideal of a life style based on consumption made available by a

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<sup>62</sup> Adlai Stevenson as cited in Paul Carter, *Another Part of the Fifties* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1983) pp. ix- 328 (p. 86)

<sup>63</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (p. 18)

<sup>64</sup> Halliwell, *American Culture* (p. 62)

<sup>65</sup> Moreno, 'Consuming the Frontier' (p. 87)

capitalist economy also served to transform the American male from 'G.I Joe' to an anonymous and domesticated body lacking an autonomous identity.<sup>66</sup> Ironically, we may say that gender roles in general served the national purpose and created two roles that in some ways were quite similar in the sense that they were both distinctly duty-bound roles serving a specific ideology.

The masculine role that Frank longs for when he talks about 'the hopeless emptiness of everything in this country'<sup>67</sup> is the masculinity of frontier idealism, far removed from the domesticity of suburbia. Moreno claims that 'Frank's real conflict... is not just his emasculation by the post-war system, rather the conflict is rooted in his deprivation of the keys to the frontier, the promise of roaming the idealized geography of freedom and independence, the quintessential medal for which he fought in the war and which the Cold War culture denied him.'<sup>68</sup> Paris might be said to represent the new frontier in the novel and Europe is the new 'idealized geography' in which the main characters imagine the perfect escape from the constructed toy land of suburbia. Frank obviously misses the freedom and independence of frontier masculinity, but perhaps even more than his wife, Frank lacks the courage to 'push the frontier' by moving to Paris, which might in the end leave him as a more trapped character than April. When April questions his lack of frontier spirit by asking him how he thinks he can ever be happy living in a setting he hates, his eventual capitulation is marked by the comment 'Suppose we let that be my business.'<sup>69</sup> Frank is here admitting that he has given up on the pioneer spirit of frontier masculinity and succumbs to society's expectations of gray flannel suit masculinity.

Towards the end of the novel, we experience a change in April's attitude and she starts challenging Frank's use of language and his credibility as definer. When Frank is expressing his opinion on how it is the most 'mature' thing to keep the child April is carrying, April challenges him and says. 'But there we are again ...You see? I don't know what 'mature' means, either, and you could talk all night and I still wouldn't know. It's just *words* to me, Frank. I watch you talking and I think: Isn't that amazing? He really does *think* that way;

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid (p. 85)

<sup>67</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 190)

<sup>68</sup> Moreno, 'Consuming the Frontier' (p. 92)

<sup>69</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 219)

these words really do mean something to him.<sup>70</sup> April is here rejecting his masculine set perceptions of what certain words mean and is engaging in the feminist tradition of subverting masculine use of language through questioning the basic meaning of words and how he is using them.

April's questioning of masculine perceptions of set meanings is also evident when she for the first time admits that 'I don't know who I am.'<sup>71</sup> April sees her identity as fluid and as something she must shape herself, not as something biologically inherent or as something she should automatically know. She is here voicing a postmodern doubt that many women struggled with at the time, due to the fact that they were never encouraged to find out who they were outside the definitions of men. Another of Friedan's women articulates the same anxiety and doubt as April when she confesses that 'I begin to feel I have no personality. I'm a server of food and a putter of pants and a bedmaker, somebody who can be called on when you want something. But who am I?'<sup>72</sup> We might say that April in many ways does not fit into the image of the feminine mystique due to her quest for an autonomous identity outside the domestic and her questioning of Frank's language and his perceptions. April is questioning the mystique when she claims that Frank lives with a wife 'who's equally unable to stand the same things.'<sup>73</sup> She here positions herself as her husband's equal and tells him that she has her own dreams that are equally unfulfilled and strangled by a dull life. She is here insisting on herself being a woman with an identity of her own who refuses the domestic role of functioning as a family maid such as Friedan's women.

The only one who is voicing the problems of female identity and how gender roles are constructed is John Givings, an unusually honest and observant psychiatric patient. John represents the stark contrast to the artificial performances of the suburban residences with his clear and direct speech. John claims that 'A feminine woman never laughs out loud and always shaves her armpits. Old Helen is feminine as hell.'<sup>74</sup> John seems to be pointing out the fact that gender is dependent on certain actions and performances for them to be realistic and work the way society intended them to work. John also points out the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid (p. 225)

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, (p. 264)

<sup>72</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (p.19)

<sup>73</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 110)

<sup>74</sup> Ibid (p.191)

distinction between feminine and female when he points out that April is female without being feminine,<sup>75</sup> and is therefore the only one who seems to praise April for not wanting to conform to the suburban stereotype of what a woman should be like.

April is however portrayed as performative in the novel, despite John acknowledging her as 'a female.' The reader observes how April fails as an actress and thus fails to play her role. 'Before the end of the first act the audience could tell as well as the Players that she'd lost the grip, and soon they were all embarrassed for her. She had begun to alternate between false theatrical gestures and a white-knuckled immobility; she was carrying her shoulders high and square, and despite her heavy make-up you could see the warmth of humiliation rising in her face and neck.'<sup>76</sup> April is here portrayed as what she is: An unsuccessful actress who fails at her performance. What is interesting however is that April again is described through other people's impression of her. April is, according to Bailey, 'Filtered through the mingled perspectives of Frank and the rest of the audience at *The Petrified Forest*.'<sup>77</sup> Again, this alludes to April's voicelessness and how women perhaps constructed their selves through other people's perception of them. Performing, as April does, might be seen as expressive and a way of expressing herself, however her theatrical performance is linked with her everyday life performance and she clearly fails at both and is rendered voiceless in both of the situations. We have to keep in mind, that this scene clearly anticipates the other characters failure of performance as well, since the whole suburban community in some ways are all participants in the play, either as viewers, backstage workers or actors. Interestingly, the whole community is engaging in a collective performance on what is literally the suburban stage. Yates here anticipates the failure of performance that will culminate in April's abortion, through letting all the suburbanites be part of the unsuccessful play.

April's failed performance does not only occur as a single incident with the Laurel Players, but stretches far beyond the stage and mere theatrical performance. However her failure is also present in the role she is performing every day, the role of the 1950s middle-class housewife. In one of the few incidents where April is successful at living up to her role, the reader becomes aware of the artificial staging of April's housewife role, when she welcomes

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, (p.191)

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, (p.9)

<sup>77</sup> Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty* (p. 230)



Frank after a day at work, ready to tell him about her plans of moving to Paris: 'He saw April come running from the kitchen door and stand waiting for him in the carport. She was wearing her black cocktail dress, ballet slippers, and a very small apron of crisp white gauze that he'd never seen before.'<sup>78</sup> We learn that it is Frank's birthday and April has put every effort into staging a successful performance of her feminine role. The reader might be tempted to blame April for conforming to a stereotype, but as May notes, the literature of marriage manuals of the 1950s stressed how women should 'cultivate good, looks, personality and cheerful subservience.'<sup>79</sup> Women were constantly told that their marriages depended on a certain performance that might seem both theatrical and artificial, in order for their marriages to be successful. In this way we can see how April's failed theatrical performance with the Laurel Player's is related directly to the failure of her own gender performance, and in the end of the novel, a rejection of that very role in itself.

The role of the homemaker was such a part of the national identity that not even Betty Friedan cares to suggest that men should do household chores in order for women to focus on full- time (or even part- time) employment. We may say that the 'woman's sphere' of the home was rarely questioned even by contemporary feminists such as Friedan. However, even though we might say that the 'woman's sphere' was not questioned by contemporary feminists April Wheeler is a good example on how women sometimes dreaded that exalted sphere. When April is more in tune with herself and is not putting every effort into her acting, we learn that she is a reluctant and bored housewife who 'had spent her day at a kind of work she had always hated and lately allowed herself to neglect: cleaning the parts of the house that didn't show.'<sup>80</sup> April hardly lives up to Friedan's stereotype of the wife who felt a 'mysterious fulfilment waxing the kitchen floor.'<sup>81</sup> She therefore decides that the only way she can find and indeed make room for an identity of her own is through the escape to Paris.

We get a distinctly claustrophobic image of the 1950s when Robert Beuka claims that every effort was made to persuade women into a domestic role. 'Popular magazines,

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, (p. 103)

<sup>79</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988) pp. ix- 279 (p. 102)

<sup>80</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 206)

<sup>81</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (p. 17)

television sitcoms, and even the discourses of popular psychology and sociology were filled with admonitions ranging from the subtle to the absurd- designed to persuade new suburban housewives to accept a domestic role.<sup>82</sup> This stands as a sharp contrast to how Yates narrates suburbia as a place you constantly want to escape, and not a place of domestic bliss. The escape metaphor is early enacted in the narrative and plays a significant part of the story and interestingly the escape metaphor concerns not only April and women in general, but many of the other suburban residencies.

After the fiasco of the Laurel Players, Yates describes the audience as ‘Anxious, round-eyed, two by two, they looked and moved as if a calm and orderly escape from this place had become the one great necessity of their lives; as is, in fact, they wouldn’t be able to live at all until they were out beyond the rumbling pink billows of exhaust and the crunching gravel of his parking lot, out where the black sky went up and up forever and there were hundreds of thousands of stars.’<sup>83</sup> This scene anticipates the Wheeler’s attempt of escaping a world they insist that they cannot stand. We also get a sense of the claustrophobia that surrounds the apparent suburban bliss. What is interesting about this is that Yates constantly narrates suburbia as the antithesis of what it should represent. The literature and popular culture of the 1950s constantly portrayed suburban domesticity as what will automatically lead to a happy life, whereas Yates insists on escaping suburbia as the only alternative to achieve a meaningful life. Domesticity was meant to represent a safe haven, but for Yates the domesticity of suburbia leads to a nightmare vision of confinement that leads to death. We may also claim that Yates’ narration of suburbia supports the previous claim of suburbia as an anti- American construct where the American spirit of individualism is dead.

The claustrophobia she feels can be seen in April’s contrasting images of herself and her role as a woman. April leads the life of a traditional 1950s homemaker, but dreams of a different life as a working mother in Paris. Her desire to work and leave suburbia is at the heart of the Wheeler’s demise. This is a paradox, Kate Charlton- Jones notices due to the fact that April is constantly crafting her argument in a way that is supposed to make Frank

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<sup>82</sup> Beuka, *SuburbaNation* (p. 152)

<sup>83</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 11)

believe that she is first and foremost doing this for him and not out of selfish interests.<sup>84</sup>

April constantly appeals to her husband's self-interest when she says that 'For the first time in your life you'll have time to find out what it is you want to do.'<sup>85</sup> Ironically, Frank sees this as a threat, not a liberation, and again it affects Frank's masculine self-image. The reader is not provided with how April pictures herself in the role as career woman in Paris, but we are ultimately presented with Frank's first reaction. 'He had a quick disquieting vision of her 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.'<sup>86</sup> Frank envisions himself in a passive role where the power relationship is now turned upside down.

April's now lost femininity clearly poses a threat to Frank's masculinity and he now envisions himself as castrated by this new powerful female who has now taken over his masculine role as breadwinner. I believe that Frank's fear is a fear that has to be contextualized within the 1950s social climate. As May notes, gender roles were associated with consumerism: The homemaker and the breadwinner.<sup>87</sup> Men provided money in order for the housewives to consume the American Dream. April's suggestion does not only violate every gender norm at the time, her suggestion also challenges the roles American capitalism has designed for the two sexes, at a time where family idyll and corporate capitalism walked hand in hand. April's dream of taking on the role as breadwinner violates the gendering of American consumerism and capitalism to the extent that it can be labelled, to use Senator McCarthy's favourite expression, 'Un- American.'

Interestingly, the idea of moving to Paris was April's idea as a means of empowering, not emasculating Frank, so he could finally 'find himself', a term she frequently refers to. One of the ongoing problems in the novel is that there is nothing to be found, as far as Frank is concerned. April, however, still believes that Frank has not yet found, what I would characterize, as his masculine identity. She says that 'It's what you *are* that has been denied and denied and denied in this kind of life...Don't you know? You're the most wonderful thing

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<sup>84</sup> Kate Charlton- Jones, 'Richard Yates's Fictional Treatment of Women', *Literature Compass*, vol. 7, no. 7 (July, 2010) pp. 496- 507 (p. 499)

<sup>85</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 109)

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid* (p. 109)

<sup>87</sup> May, *Homeward Bound* (p. 182)

in the world. You're a man.'<sup>88</sup> Ironically she is now suggesting that Frank does suffer from an inadequate masculinity at the present and that he has to 'find himself' in order to give a more successful masculine performance. Again, Frank perceives her comment in a different way, interpreting what she says as a confirmation on his masculinity. Frank's emotional response to April's comment is surprisingly self- satisfactory, underlining his grandiose ego. 'And all of the capitulations in life, this was the one that seemed most like a victory. Never before had elation welled more powerful inside him; never had beauty grown more purely out of truth; never in taking his wife had he triumphed more completely over time and space.'<sup>89</sup> Charlton- Jones claims that Yates had a particular interest in 'the fundamental failings of communication that existed between men and women.'<sup>90</sup> Yates obviously points towards how the communication between Frank and April fails, but perhaps more importantly he reveals how the main characters do not even understand themselves what they are saying and how they are unable to fully comprehend the implications of their own language. Perhaps we may say that this is not only a brilliant example of the breakdown of communication between men and women, but a great example of how the main characters do not even understand what they are saying.

Communication and the issues of finding a voice are prevalent throughout the narrative, especially since April does not have a voice until the end of the novel. When April has made her most important decision, that is, aborting the child she is carrying, she finally finds her voice and now *she* is the one observing her husband and not the opposite. 'The sight of him, in the early blue light, sprawled out and twisted in his wrinkled Sunday sports clothes, had been as much of a shock as if she'd found a stranger in the bed.'<sup>91</sup> Frank has previously been the definer, however in this case the roles are turned upside down and April now observes and defines her husband. Definitions now belong to her and the perspective the reader engages in is for the first time, her perspective, articulated through her own voice. As Bailey points out, most of the story is filtered through Frank and we then see Frank as he sees

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, (p. 115)

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, (p. 115)

<sup>90</sup> Charlton- Jones, 'Richard Yates Fictional' (p. 498)

<sup>91</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p.304)

himself, but occasionally Yates shifts his point of view and we are then observing Frank, in contrast to seeing *through* Frank.<sup>92</sup>

This is exactly what is happening when the reader gets the chance to see Frank filtered through April. The reader might then become aware of the previous bias of narration through constantly having had the events (and April) observed through Frank with the consequence of having rendered April voiceless. April sees her own situation and is more honest and clear-sighted than ever when she narrates her life. 'Then you discovered you were working at life the way the Laurel Players worked at The Petrified Forest, or the way Steve Kovick worked at his drums- earnest and sloppy and full of pretension and all wrong.'<sup>93</sup> We get a sense of this being a turning point for April where she sees her life for what it is. April has here reached a point where she realizes how pretentious her life with Frank is and with this the abortion metaphor starts. This is the first time where April narrates her journey into a life she cannot stand and the first time where the reader is made aware of April's perception of the life she is leading.

The novel constantly uses mirrors and surfaces as a literary device<sup>94</sup> of depicting Frank's masculine anxiety and self doubt. Perhaps Yates is using these domestic objects, such as windows and mirrors, as a way of questioning the home as haven. Here we get a completely different image of the home as elusive and also threatening. The transitory surfaces that Frank mirrors himself in might point to the antithesis of the idea that the home should be a haven that promised certain 'rewards' if you fulfilled your role as solid American citizen. 'In its idealized form, the home would contain sexual enjoyment, material comfort, well-adjusted children, and evidence of personal success for husbands and wives who performed their clearly defined roles.'<sup>95</sup> The transitory surfaces of *Revolutionary Road* hold no such rewards. The transitory surfaces and the mirrors do not only stand as a symbol of the home and theatrical gender performance, but does also allude to split selves and deceptive identity. Bailey argues that 'Every major character has a split self, apart from John Givings.'<sup>96</sup> The psychiatric patient is the only character that does not embody this inner split of the self,

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<sup>92</sup> Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty* (p. 233)

<sup>93</sup> Ibid (p. 305)

<sup>94</sup> Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty* (p. 230)

<sup>95</sup> May, *Homeward Bound* (p. 184)

<sup>96</sup> Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty* (p. 230- 231)

something we may find interesting, due to the fact that having a split self is often associated with mental illness and in particular schizophrenia. Instead of the rewards often associated with the suburban home, the domestic objects are used in this novel as a means of exposing the transitory and split selves of the main characters.

The domestic objects are also used as a way of commenting on gendered behaviour. The surfaces are both used as a tool of confirming and rejecting masculine performance. Frank is early described as a man with a face who lacks 'structural distinction' and that 'his face had an unusual mobility: it was able to suggest wholly different personalities with each flickering change of expression.'<sup>97</sup> The reader is made aware of the fact that Frank is an unreliable character. The windows however, have the function of revealing the instability of his performance when Bailey argues that 'The garish window sometimes rewards Frank with a nocturnal image of himself as 'the brave beginnings of a new personage,' while other windows and 'passing mirrors' sometime surprise him with a very different view.'<sup>98</sup> As we can see, his change in personality and this insecurity that Yates describes is most prevalent in relation to his masculine performance, which is often performed in front of the mirror or a window. 'The black kitchen window gave him a vivid reflection of his face, round and full of weakness, and he stared at it with loathing.'<sup>99</sup> Here the reader is again made aware of 'the other Frank' who is first and foremost a major talent at artificial posing.

Frank is almost perceived as a split personality when Yates narrates Frank's 'meeting with himself': 'The face in the glass, again seeming to anticipate rather than reflect his mood, had changed now from a look of dismay to a wise and bitter smile, and it nodded at him several times.'<sup>100</sup> Frank or 'it' as he is here described as, meets his 'mirrored' and transitory self filled with insecurities and lack of substance. The windows are often associated with the destruction of the self and the fear of being subverted by the mirror, when Frank says to April that 'Still. I don't suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities.'<sup>101</sup> Frank asks an interesting question, since it is sometimes portrayed that the windows and mirrors has the power of destroying Frank's self. However, this is exactly what

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<sup>97</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 12)

<sup>98</sup> Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty* (p. 230)

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, (p. 66)

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid* (p. 66)

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid* (p. 30)

happens in the novel, not because the window destroys Frank, but due to the fact that the window has the power to reveal Frank's flaws and his split and insecure self. We are here made aware of the fact that Frank's character has no more substance than his shallow mirrored self.

The mirror is also used as a device for boosting the masculine ego that was previously threatened when Frank stared at his 'mirrored self'. When Frank has finally denounced April's plans of moving to Paris he looks at himself in the mirror 'And there was a new maturity and manliness in the kindly, resolute face that nodded back at him in the mirror.'<sup>102</sup> This time, the mirror serves as a confirmation of regained masculine pride of having resisted April's attempt of emasculating him through the idea of moving to Paris. The mirror also serves to reassure him of his masculine performance being adequate enough when he is 'Crouching at the mirror of April's dressing table, he used her hand mirror to check the way the collar looked from the side and to test the effect, in profile, of his tightening jaw muscle.'<sup>103</sup> Frank constantly negotiates his masculine performance against what he sees in the mirror, which is a paradox since the mirror is often linked with feminine vanity. Again this marks Frank as embodying a flawed 'flannel suit' masculinity. However, one of the most powerful effects of this is that the reader is made aware of the fact that there are literally two Franks.

The novel creates a powerful symbolism of the silencing of counter- culture voices when Mr. and Mrs. Givings decide that it is for the best that John is never to be released from the psychiatric hospital. They obviously believe that the truth telling John indirectly killed April without realising that what killed April was a national culture that gave women extremely few alternatives of self- expression. They fail to see that the culture they are part of was what killed April. For that reason, the only character with the ability to see through the national pretence of suburbia and the performative roles the institution generate, is forever censored through his confinement as a psychiatric patient. Mrs. Givings explains that 'It's quite out of the question for us ever to think in terms of bringing him into contact with outside people again.'<sup>104</sup> The hypocrisy of suburban appropriateness is here exposed to the reader since we are made aware of the fact that 'Helen is a woman who can feel pity for

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid (p. 210)

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, (p. 277)

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, (p.334)

herself, but is ready enough to abandon her son to a mental hospital on the convenient pretext that he somehow contributed to April's suicide.<sup>105</sup> The reader is here made aware of the fact that Mrs. Givings is not exactly 'giving', hence the irony of her constructed name, Mrs. Givings.<sup>106</sup> The confinement of John can also however be linked with the way in which the 1950s culture sought to censor the elements they disliked or the people who did not fit in, for various reasons. Halliwell claims that one of the main features of 1950s society was the prevalence of a national consensus that had to be maintained at almost any cost.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Bailey, *A Tragic Honesty* (p. 234)

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid* (p. 138)

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, (p. 2)



## Chapter 2: 'The End of the Road': *Revolutionary Road* and the Abortion of Suburbia

Richard Yates himself described *Revolutionary Road* as a novel about abortion. He argues that 'It's going to be built on a series of abortions, of all kinds- 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.'<sup>108</sup> Surprisingly, what Yates believes is the main theme of his novel has received almost no critical attention and most scholars have not even mentioned the subject. Abortion is not only at the heart of the novel, but in this chapter, abortion will again function as a door opener to critical analysis of the 1950s and social history. What Yates does not mention is that the abortion metaphor is not only an issue concerning the Wheelers, which leads to their demise, but also related to a particular time and context, that is the 1950s. Through the image of a woman aborting a child, April is literally aborting the decade and all the values that it supposedly held. I will first and foremost start the chapter with evoking the scene of the novel through discussing how suburbia and the domestic space are portrayed. In this chapter, I will attempt to link Yates' abortion metaphor with how domestic space and the home are being portrayed. I will argue that Yates' literary depiction of the home anticipates April's abortion and that through the portrayal of a home that is often seen as threatening and decaying, her abortion is in fact anticipated throughout the novel. Afterwards, I will focus on how her relationship with the children and how their fictional treatment leads up to her abortion as well. I will argue that both Frank and April reject the children long before that abortion take place. In addition to this I will examine the scene of April's death itself, through the impact it has on other characters and its implications in relation to the theme of abortion. Finally I will examine the multiple abortion metaphors that Yates draws and how April is metaphorically aborting both a decade and a context through her death.

One of our first encounters with *Revolutionary Road* and the suburban landscape is when Mrs. Givings takes April and Frank with her to view the available properties. The image of the suburban house is important in this scene: 'Mrs. Givings had understood at once that they wanted something out of the ordinary- a small remodelled barn or carriage house, or an old guest cottage- something with a little charm- and she did hate having to tell them that

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<sup>108</sup> DeWitt and Clark, 'An Interview' (p. 67)

those things simply weren't available any more.<sup>109</sup> Already here we encounter what Jurca earlier termed as the suburbanite as the anti- suburbanite. The Wheelers do not want to live in one of the mass- produced properties where the 'others' live. We also clearly understand that suburbia was no longer an institution that necessarily symbolised affluence and privilege when Mrs. Givings talks about a new development called Revolutionary Hill Estates and calls it a 'dreadful new development' with 'the most nauseous pastels.'<sup>110</sup> Jurca argues that 'by the fifties the suburban house was identified with the 'mass middle- class'- no longer reserved for the affluent.'<sup>111</sup> This is clearly evident when looking at the suburban landscape depicted in *Revolutionary Road* that is both cheap and mass- produced.

However, April and Frank are such typical suburbanites that even the conventional Mrs. Givings understands that they are the kind of couple who does not really want to live in suburbia but does so due to the fact that it is 'comfortable'. These 'intellectuals' clearly want something 'authentic' as a justification for moving to suburbia, due to the fact that finding an authentic house could mark them as how they see themselves: Different and superior to the other more conventional suburbanites. However, April and Frank are not so different from the other suburban residents when it comes to their priorities and their dreams: 'They could see their children running barefoot down this hallway free of mildew and splinters and cockroaches and grit.'<sup>112</sup> Frank and April like so many others in the 1950s, moved to suburbia first and foremost because of the children. Deep down they dream about an idyllic child friendly paradise where their children can grow up in a safe, homogenous and protected environment- hardly a revolutionary idea.

Not only do we encounter the image of the suburban landscape as inauthentic and soulless when Mrs. Givings says between the lines that what they have available is inauthentic mass-produced houses, but we also get a sense that suburbia is first and foremost a construct that is not designed for individuality. This architectural uniformity, also points to what I have previously argued in relation to suburbia: That suburbia is in many ways a peculiar American construct, in the sense that it can be seen as Un- American, since the uniformity and similarities of the houses stands as a sharp contrast to the celebrated American ideal of

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<sup>109</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 29)

<sup>110</sup> Ibid (p. 29)

<sup>111</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 134)

<sup>112</sup> Ibid (p. 30)

individualism. Since the suburban homes look identical, it can also be argued that economic differences are wiped out and not easily spotted, something which is hardly intact with the American ideology of individual freedom and capitalism as a means of social mobility. The identical houses and the uniformity of suburbia can in some ways be seen as a construct resembling America's number 1 enemy: The Soviet Union.

We also have to keep in mind that not only was suburbia a construct- it was a white construct, designed for white families, in particular the white middle- class. Kenneth Jackson claims in his landmark study *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* that government officials followed the movements of black families and created maps of the density of black settlement and the very suburban settlements that included a few black families were rated 'hazardous.'<sup>113</sup> This clearly points to how suburbia was an exclusionary institution and that the national goal of family idyll in the suburbs was meant for whites only. We here clearly encounter how whites shaped the national ideology of family life in suburbia and that black families did not take part in shaping American ideals, simply because they were marginalized not only by the federal government, but mainstream society in general. May also points to the fact that 'suburbia was not part of the black experience.'<sup>114</sup> Blacks constantly encountered difficulties when trying to move into suburban neighbourhoods and if they succeeded in moving into a suburb, many of their new neighbours did not want them in the neighbourhood. Most suburbs were exclusively made up of whites with few exceptions and we may even claim that the suburbs were simply a new and more sophisticated form of segregation, rendering segregation more invisible than previously.

One of the main problems of suburbia was what we may call 'constructedness' that led to the image of suburbia as an institution that does not accommodate for real human experiences and real human beings. At the end of the novel where Frank has realized that he has lost April, Yates takes a step back and gives the reader a glimpse of the suburban landscape. 'The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy. 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

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<sup>113</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) pp. vii- 396 (p. 201)

<sup>114</sup> May, *Homeward Bound* (p. 13)

bright, uncurtained windows winked badly through a dappling of green and yellow leaves.’<sup>115</sup> Suburbia seems even more surreal when Frank has recently lost his wife and suburbia is here seen for what it is: A toyland of uniform houses where tragedies seems to be unthinkable. I believe the connection between suburbia and emotional truth is important since suburbia is constructed as the antithesis of the complexities of human experience and human lives in general. The complexities of human experiences turn out to become the Wheeler’s demise in the toyland of suburbia and are directly linked to April’s abortion in the sense that she could not handle living in an environment where she could not be a full human being with all that it embodies.

Another problem arising when discussing suburbia is its status as a so- called liminal space and borderland. Beuka claims that suburbia blurs the boundaries of urban and rural with the product of creating an awkward in- between space that exists on the border between urban and rural.<sup>116</sup> Since many of the suburban estates were located on previous farm land, we get a sense of April and Frank wanting some of this original authenticity by purchasing a converted barn. However we learn that the barns of the old days have been dismantled and that all there is left are mass produced houses without any authentic flare to them. Beuka also points to the fact that not only is suburbia seen as a borderland but it is a borderland of confusing contrasts: ‘The suburban debate in both the popular media and sociological circles has centred around certain diametrically opposed visions of the suburbs- as both a self-sufficient space of the ‘good life’ and an alienating ‘nonplace’: both an inclusive model of old- fashioned ‘community’ and a paranoid, exclusionary space, and both a matriarchal realm of female power and the worst sort of suffocating, male- dominated enclosure for women.’<sup>117</sup> This claim reinforces suburbia’s status as borderland with an ambiguous reputation. Suburbia is constantly negotiating its own identity as an in- between space often seen as consisting of polar opposites. One of Beuka’s most interesting claims is that suburbia is both seen as representing the good life and at the same time being viewed as a nonplace. This view of suburbia as both an institution leading to happiness and representing the ‘American way’ and at the same time a place where the individual feels alienated is a contradiction that suburbia is constantly positioned in between.

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<sup>115</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 324)

<sup>116</sup> Beuka, *SuburbaNation* (p. 1)

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid* (p. 27)

## The Depiction of the Suburban Home

Having been concerned with the exterior landscape of suburbia, it is of crucial importance to view how domestic space is portrayed in the novel, due to the fact that it plays an important role in the novel as both a foreshadowing of the events to happen and as an institution nestling socio- historical issues into the domestic realm. The depiction of domestic space in *Revolutionary Road* is often that of a threatening space that constantly threatens to undermine the characters perceptions of themselves. We often get a sense of April and Frank's identities as unstable and transitory when portrayed in the home. The home often reveals their inner insecurities and their split selves as they are negotiating who they are in a threatening environment. In contrast to the suburban home serving as a haven for men where they can relax after a hard- day's work, the domestic is often depicted as a threatening space in *Revolutionary Road*. Elaine May argues that the containment politics of the 1950s served a philosophy of the home as an institution that would 'diffuse the potential for social unrest.'<sup>118</sup> The home might have tamed the potential of social and political unrest, but the home in *Revolutionary Road* is a place that unsuccessfully tries to contain *domestic* unrest. This can again be linked with how Yates in fact aborts the domestic environment and that the seeming domestic peace that should at least surround suburbia is non- existent in *Revolutionary Road*. Through portraying the home as unsuccessfully trying to contain domestic unrest, Yates aborts not only the domestic, but ironically he aborts the so- called Revolutionary Road. Revolutionary Road did not manage to produce any revolution- therefore Yates aborts everything that might have been progressive or revolutionary in his novel.

The suburban home is not only at the heart of the Wheelers everyday conflicts, it is also at the heart of their marital problems when Frank reveals to the reader that the domestic secretly works against him, like the living room. 'He had learned early in the courtship, or the campaign, that this room was the worst possible place for getting his points across. All the objects revealed in the merciless stare of its hundred- watt light bulbs seemed to support her argument; and more than once, on hot nights like this, their cumulative effect had threatened to topple the whole intricate structure of his advantage.'<sup>119</sup> We get a vision of

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<sup>118</sup> May, *Homeward Bound* (p. 164)

<sup>119</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 223)

the suburban home as a claustrophobic, cramped space that works against the main character. The home as containing negative emotions is also something May explores when she claims that discontent was contained in the home, due to the fact that it had nowhere else to go.<sup>120</sup> The nuclear family was so contained in their family unit that frustration, anger and conflict was constantly acted out in the home rather than in the public sphere.

Frank's narration is interesting because it reveals the home as the antithesis of the haven that it is supposed to be. Frank does not get any peace from retreating to the home because the home seems to contaminate him. At the same time, he is uncomfortable in the space of his work place as well, so we might say that Frank does not feel a sense of belonging in any space that is offered in the novel. We are here reminded of the conflicts surrounding the suburban male and the alienation in relation to both the space of the work place and the home. Frank feels alienated from the space of the domestic because it reveals something that Frank dislikes when he refers to 'the merciless stare of its hundred- watt light bulbs.'<sup>121</sup> Frank obviously feels that he is literally 'seen in a different light' in this room that reveals more than he appreciates and we get a sense of what we see is the real Frank, since Frank cannot control 'the merciless stare of its hundred- watt light bulbs.'<sup>122</sup> In contrast to when Frank is posing in front of mirrors, here in this case he is not the one in control. The domestic is often portrayed as a space where the characters are exposed as flawed, but also as deceptive, since the home is portrayed as controlling them and not the opposite. In a way we may be tempted to see the suburban home as a threatening space, but it is also a space that functions as a literary device and perhaps justly exposes the characters for what they really are.

The reader is also introduced to the image of transitory surfaces as we have previously touched on. When April and Frank are first introduced to the house, Yates narrates their meeting with the home in quite a surprising and ambiguous way: 'Its outside central window staring like a big black mirror.'<sup>123</sup> This is far from a description of the cheerfulness suburbia is supposed to represent. Instead Yates points to how the window is like an eye that stares at

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<sup>120</sup> May, *Homeward Bound* (p. 207)

<sup>121</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 223)

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid* (p. 223)

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid* (p. 30)

his protagonists like a 'big black mirror.'<sup>124</sup> We might view the window as an eye that reveals and sees something in the characters that they do not want to see themselves. The window may also function as a mirror for everything our main characters do not wish to see. Again we understand how the domestic is viewed as an institution that reveals an uncomfortable truth about the main characters, just as the previous image of Frank's reflection in the mirror where the reader sees the 'two Franks'. The home is also portrayed as threatening when April thinks to herself 'Who could be frightened in as wide and bright, as clean and quiet a house as this?'<sup>125</sup> This is a rather odd remark, when we think about the fact that we know that the house is described as both 'bright' and 'clean.'<sup>126</sup> This remark is also self-contradictory, since the previous descriptions of the house has been overtly negative, as with the picture window for example, but just like the novel's characters the narrative point of view suddenly shifts and we are presented with a completely different view. We almost get the sense that what April finds threatening is the fact that the home seems perfect- too perfect. Again we encounter the tension between the neat, clean suburban home and the genuine emotions of the characters. Perhaps what April does is to ask herself if such a dolls house can accommodate for any human emotions at all and if it is possible to live a real life in her new home.

One of the first concerns of the main characters is to redecorate the house to make it look more interesting than it is. 'Their solid wall of books would take the curse off the picture window; a sparse, skilful arrangement of furniture would counteract the prim suburban look of this too- symmetrical living room.'<sup>127</sup> Their plan is to first and foremost cover up the fact that the house is a conventional suburban home. They are desperately trying to make the home look like it is not a suburban home but rather an artistic and intellectual haven inhabited by an interesting and educated young couple. Interestingly, Jurca notes that this clearly negative image of the suburban home is found in a lot of twentieth- century fiction where the novel begins with repudiating the home of the protagonists.<sup>128</sup> Perhaps this is linked with the image of suburbia as an institution contaminating the individual and turning

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid (p. 30)

<sup>125</sup> Ibid (p. 30)

<sup>126</sup> Ibid (p. 30)

<sup>127</sup> Ibid (p. 30)

<sup>128</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p.134)

the individual into someone they do not want to be- someone who belongs there.<sup>129</sup> Yates clearly explores this when he narrates how the Wheelers are desperately trying to change and redecorate a place they dislike from the start. However, the Wheelers do not manage to subvert the claustrophobic and dreaded home, Frank seems to suggest when he describes the home as 'Furniture who had never settled down and never would, the shelves on shelves of unread or half- read or read- and- forgotten books that had always been supposed to make such a difference and never had.'<sup>130</sup> The shelves with all their books, Frank seems to suggest, did not make any difference in their lives and it did not suddenly make them the interesting people they want to be- it perhaps only made them *seem* interesting. The Wheelers are constantly concerned with the exterior, even though they often claim to despise shallowness, and how they appear, but fail to see that the decoration of their home does not turn them into who they want to be: someone who genuinely does not belong there.

### **Anticipating the Abortion in *Revolutionary Road***

Yates' abortion metaphor is enacted before the actual physical abortion and is anticipated from the moment April receives her own autonomous voice. Interestingly, April only receives a voice of her own after she has decided to carry out the abortion. Perhaps this is due to the fact that April is here for the first time making her own individual choices that is not rooted in Frank's or society's expectations towards her. Yates is using her reclaiming of voice as a literary device for saying that April is now voicing her own identity and in some ways the reader meets April for the very first time when she is given her own voice. We clearly understand that 'The end of the road' that Yates points to in his interview has a clear link to abortion in the sense that her abortion is literally the end of Revolutionary Road- a road that was never revolutionary at all. The anticipation of April's abortion is also here heavily tied up with domestic space. Before she carries out the abortion we are told that 'She was back in the kitchen, clearing away breakfast dishes into a steaming sinkful of suds.'<sup>131</sup> The domestic chores are one of the last things April ever does before she dies. The house is also seen as claustrophobic and unappetizing when April tells the reader that 'The hours of her trying to think it through, last night, had left a mess of remnants. The heaped up

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid (p.148)

<sup>130</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 223)

<sup>131</sup> Ibid (p.301- 302)



ash tray was there, and the opened bottle of ink surrounded by spilled ashes, and the coffee cup contained a dried brown ring.<sup>132</sup> The deteriorating state of the domestic here anticipates the abortion she has thought about all night. Her thinking about the abortion has left the house in a terrible and dirty state and the reader gets a sense of April having reached rock bottom, again narrated through using the domestic as a vehicle for portraying her demise.

The home continues to be at the centre of April's anticipated abortion. Yates points to April's forthcoming abortion when he narrates that 'She took the wastebasket across the lawn to the incinerator drum, dumped the papers in it and set a match to them. Then she sat down on the edge of the sun-warmed stone wall to wait for their burning, watching the all but invisible flame crawl slowly and then more rapidly up and around them, sending out little waves of heat that shimmered the landscape.'<sup>133</sup> The burning of the paper here points to April's death and how everything will literally be gone very soon. April is watching how the flames tear up the paper and perhaps April knows deep inside that this will also perhaps happen to her. She has reached a point of no return and she has made her choice.

Silence is also another device that Yates is using to evoke his metaphor of abortion and death. Right before April's abortion we are told that 'She turned off the radio too, and the house became extraordinarily quiet.'<sup>134</sup> The silence here is not only linked with abortion, but also with the silencing of the domestic. We get a sense that there are a lot of conversations going on in the home, but no one is saying anything. Yates is here pointing to the end of not only April's existence, but also the end of language as a way of communicating any sense of coherent meaning. April has given up words and language due to the fact that they did not manage to bring her any closer to any personal truth and they failed as a means of communicating her dissatisfaction with suburbia to Frank. This silencing of the home also points to how April will soon be silenced and how Frank will struggle with finding words for what happened. Frank who has previously been portrayed as a man very fond of hearing his own voice will also become silenced in the sense that his language will fail to communicate his loss. As O'Nan points out, Frank 'Has such stock in this fantasy of himself (and the world)

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid (p. 303)

<sup>133</sup> Ibid (p. 306)

<sup>134</sup> Ibid (p. 311)

that nothing short of April's death will rid him of his illusions.'<sup>135</sup> The only thing that has the power to silence Frank is April's death.

When looking at abortion as a metaphor, perhaps it is important for the reader to understand that April's abortion is far more than only a physical abortion that affects the family unit. April Wheeler is not only aborting the American family through her physical abortion, but her dream of moving to Paris is an attempt of escape and an attempt of aborting the nuclear family unit. The disruption of the nuclear family that is symbolically illustrated by moving to Paris scares Frank and he points to how inconsiderate April is. 'I don't know. It's just that this does seem a pretty inconsiderate thing to be doing, when you think about it, from the kids' point of view. I mean, let's face it: it's going to be pretty rough on them.'<sup>136</sup> However April, who points out that she wants to move to Paris in order for Frank to 'find himself', is unwilling to understand her attempt of moving to Paris for what it actually is: an attempt of aborting the nuclear family.

The abortion of the American family also takes on a socio- historical significance since the nuclear family was an important part of the politics of the 1950s. The family unit should function as a protection against Soviet subversion, May explains. 'Many contemporaries believed that the Russians could destroy the United States not only by atomic attack but through internal subversion.'<sup>137</sup> The Russians, it was believed, could subvert innocent Americans if they did not have a strong American family unit to protect them against Russian influence. We get the impression that April through both her attempt of moving to Paris and her actual physical abortion refuses to be in the service of a national family ideology solely promoted by paranoia. When her first abortive attempt of moving to Paris is blocked through her pregnancy, April sees no other way out of her situation than a real physical abortion. 'Inside the wrapping was a blue cardboard box bearing the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, and inside the box was the dark pink bulb of rubber syringe.'<sup>138</sup> This passage, where we receive the image of April's rubber syringe inside a box with Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, immediately evokes an image of domesticity that stands as a sharp contrast to the action she has decided to carry out and symbolizes a rebellion against

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<sup>135</sup> O'Nan, 'The Lost World' (p. 5)

<sup>136</sup> Ibid (p. 181)

<sup>137</sup> May, *Homeward Bound* (p. 94)

<sup>138</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 210)

the ideology of domesticity. This image of 'the angel in the home' is what she has literally decided to kill. April has thoroughly planned to carry out an abortion and the reader understands that this is her final attempt of escaping the life she hates.

The novel culminates in April's real physical abortion. Through her abortion she aborts a whole decade that has in its aftermath become famous for its conformity. Yates himself claims that 'A young woman dying of a self-inflicted abortion was a good fictional metaphor for the Fifties.'<sup>139</sup> I believe that it is not a coincidence that Yates uses a metaphor that includes women, particularly the image of a woman dying of an abortion. Perhaps what Yates is attempting to say, is that women were in a particularly difficult position in the 1950s and that many women's lives were metaphorically aborted through a culture of domestic confinement that is distinctly imagined as a marker of the 1950s, although we may argue that the decade was somewhat more complex and that many women at the time did not necessarily dislike their lives. However, when examining the novel we clearly understand what Yates means, when he mentions the 1950s as representing 'the end of the road.' Revolutionary Road has come to its end but Yates seems to be suggesting the same when it comes to American society. However, Halliwell reminds us that the 1950s was a decade more complex than what our popular memory of the 1950s seems to suggest. He claims that the 1950s were 'An age of great optimism along with the gnawing fear of doomsday bombs, of great poverty in the midst of unprecedented prosperity, and of flowering rhetoric about equality along the practice of rampant racism and sexism.'<sup>140</sup> Halliwell helps us keep in mind that the 1950s were far more complex than what Yates seems to suggest and that we should remember that the 1950s were a decade of great contrasts. This reminds us that we should be careful not to oversimplify a decade and stereotype it as a product of our collective memory.

Love and romance are elements closely associated with the American Dream. When April inflicts an abortion on herself, she is at the same time aborting the American Dream, but only here the American Dream is portrayed as what it perhaps is: A dream. Jurca mentions that 'American novels typically point to the downfall of that dream.'<sup>141</sup> American twentieth-century fiction is particularly concerned with issues surrounding the American Dream and its

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<sup>139</sup> DeWitt and Clark, 'An Interview' (p. 73)

<sup>140</sup> Halliwell, *American Culture* (p. 4)

<sup>141</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 6)

complexities. April is particularly disillusioned with both love and marriage when she claims that 'In a sentimentally lonely time long ago, she had found it easy and agreeable to believe whatever this one particular boy felt like saying, and to repay him for that pleasure by telling easy, agreeable lies off her own, until each was saying what the other most wanted to hear- until he was saying 'I love you' and she was saying 'Really, I mean it: you're the most interesting person I've ever met.'<sup>142</sup> The dream of love, marriage and romance is here portrayed as an illusion, but not only that, the dream is portrayed as a lie that cheats you and leads you to lose who you are. The loss of individuality and autonomous identity is also here a central topic in relation to April's abortion.

The link between the American Dream and individual autonomy is interesting because it seems like the American Dream breaks down the individual instead of building it up- a sharp contrast to the post- war ideology of the American Dream as protecting and building the individual. We have previously discussed how the Russians were seen as subverting innocent Americans. However here it seems like the American Dream is what subverts Americans into something they are not, and weakens the individual. Here we encounter the view that the American Dream robs the individual of their autonomy and make them mass- produced citizens instead of making them unique individuals. As May points out, the 1950s family typically had a lot of modern commodities, when she claims that the 1950s family had 'an expressive life style'<sup>143</sup>, but it did not give people a sense of an individual self, as we are made aware of when April aborts the alluring Dream of material possessions and affluence. We might also claim that the American Dream and the illusions it brings represent the real threat- not the Soviet Union.

The American Dream has always been tied up with consumerism and corporate capitalism where both of them are seen as 'the American way'. Friedan remembers vividly that 'suddenly we were interested in houses and things: chairs, tables, silverware.'<sup>144</sup> Betty Friedan, who had previously been a radical in the 1940s, suddenly found herself wanting all these modern commodities that the national ideology of consumerism promoted. This tells us how strong and expansive the culture of conformity was and how even progressives were

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<sup>142</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 305)

<sup>143</sup> May, *Homeward Bound* (p. 11)

<sup>144</sup> Betty Friedan, *It Changed my Life: Writings on the Women's Movement* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976) pp. xi- 504 (p. 13)

affected by the national culture of domestic bliss and good housekeeping. Excessive materialism became a marker of the decade. 1950s consumerism was particularly carried out by housewives in the suburbs who were led to believe that this was supposed to represent 'the good life.' The ideology of consumption was part of the national politics and Nixon's vision was that 'Women...would reap rewards for domesticity by surrounding themselves with commodities.'<sup>145</sup> This vision clearly did not lead to happiness for April. As Friedan points out, with the consumer goods of the decade, women were told that they gained power. 'She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets...'<sup>146</sup> Women were led to believe that consumption meant freedom and that it represented a form of liberation. However, these appliances that big business earned money on, all link women to the domestic world and they do not make women gain power or influence in the public sphere. April understands that domestic consumerism does not lead to the 'good life.' As a proof of this, one of the last images of April is that of a suburban housewife dying in the midst of a home filled with commodities

When exploring Yates' abortion metaphors, we have to keep in mind that the suburban home plays a large part of this. From the beginning of the novel the reader is being told how the main characters despise suburbia and everything it stands for. 'Intelligent thinking people could take things like this in their stride, just as they took the larger absurdities of deadly dull jobs in the city and deadly dull homes in the suburbs. Economic circumstances might force you to live in this environment, but the important thing was to keep from being contaminated. The important thing, always, was to remember who you were.'<sup>147</sup> Again we encounter the view of suburbia as a space that has the ability to convert you into something you are not. This struggle to avoid 'being contaminated', is a fight Frank continues to fight throughout the novel, where we constantly see how suburbia and the domestic space is in fact not turning him into something he is not, but rather exposing him for what he really is.

April, however is able to see that Frank and her are no different from the rest of the suburbanites when she tells that 'Everything you said was 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

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<sup>145</sup> May, *Homeward Bound* (p. 164)

<sup>146</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (p. 16)

<sup>147</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 20)

people you're talking about.'<sup>148</sup> April is here revealing that they are not unique in any way and that the only way of living out their true selves is by moving to Paris. April sees only one solution, and that is to move away from the country that has created all these myths and illusions. However, April's only way of escaping the American Dream is through her physical abortion that eventually leads to her death. Ironically, what is supposed to be the great American Dream becomes death in this context and Yates is perhaps trying to say that the American Dream in many ways meant the death of American individuality- and metaphorically the death of several individuals. April's death is in some ways the main symbol of the death of the American spirit.

Suburbia is also closely linked with death when Beuka claims that Yates 'Depicted the move to the New York suburbs as representing the figurative- and in one case literal- death of his would- be urban- sophisticated protagonist.'<sup>149</sup> Here again we encounter the view of suburbia as a contaminating space that leads to death. One of the suburban housewives who wrote to Friedan articulated the same view when she wrote that if she did not get away from suburbia and start to take on paid employment 'Death pangs grip at my very being and depression sets in that nearly drowns me.'<sup>150</sup> Just as April, this woman sees no other escape than death if she does not manage to get out of what we may label 'the suburban trap.' However, as May notes the prime symbol of the American Dream that everyone, women in particular, should strive for, was the home.<sup>151</sup> This philosophy was part of the Cold War politics of containment that promised people the reward of the American Dream if they lived the kind of life in the kind of family units the government encouraged.

### **The Wheeler Children and Yates' Abortion Metaphor**

1950s suburbia was often viewed as a particularly child centred institution. Although we rarely see the Wheelers parenting their children, children are important in Yates' image of multiple abortions. Frank is highly critical towards April's attitudes to pregnancies and motherhood when he accuses her 'You've had three pregnancies and you've wanted to abort two of them.'<sup>152</sup> The fact that April is so reluctant to bear children is at the heart of the

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid (p. 110)

<sup>149</sup> Beuka, *SuburbaNation* (p. 69)

<sup>150</sup> Friedan, *It Changed my Life* (p. 23)

<sup>151</sup> May, *Homeward Bound* (p. 162)

<sup>152</sup> Ibid (p. 227)

Wheeler's conflict. Frank is constantly trying to figure out why it is that April has wanted to abort two of her pregnancies. 'Wasn't it likely, after all, that a girl who'd known nothing but parental rejection from the time of her birth might develop an abiding reluctance to bear children?'<sup>153</sup> Frank is here engaging in an activity that has been carried out through the whole twentieth century: That is to psychoanalyze the unnatural female who does not want to carry children or become a mother. April is here a victim of the worst kind of pseudo-Freudian psychology that does not take into account under which circumstances women lived under, and in what ways national ideologies of domesticity shaped women's lives during the mid twentieth-century. April however decides, despite the fact that she loves her children, that the only way to escape is through risking death. Although April does not know whether she will live or die, she is willing to take the risk, due to the fact that her life has become as bad as it can be. She is willing to risk everything in order to escape the national ideologies contributing to her misery- she gambles with life and loses.

When it was still possible, April wanted to escape *with* her family<sup>154</sup>, but as we have previously encountered, she ends up escaping *from* her family. April's escape from her family and children is narrated at the very end of the novel where everything is silenced. 'The children's voices faintly followed her as she carried the wastebasket back across the lawn; only by going inside and closing the door was she able to shut them out.'<sup>155</sup> The children are here silenced both literally and metaphorically both through April shutting the door and her carrying out the abortion. Interestingly, this is not the only incidence where the children are being silenced. However, April is not the only person who rejects the children. Throughout the novel, the children are usually featured when they are being rejected or told off by their parents, and they rarely have a voice of their own. They are perceived through their parents eyes throughout the novel and do not seem to have their own agency in the story. Frank tells us how April also wanted to abort her first child and that she obviously has been willing to gamble with life before as well. April tells Frank how easy it is to carry out an abortion when she says that 'It was simplicity itself: you waited until just the right time, the end of the third month; then you took a sterilized rubber syringe and a little bit of sterilized

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid (p. 227)

<sup>154</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p.166)

<sup>155</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 311)

water, and you very carefully...'<sup>156</sup> Straight after this story of how she wishes to abort the children, Frank says that 'And I didn't even want a baby...Isn't that the damndest thing? I didn't want a baby any more than she did.'<sup>157</sup> The children are in fact rejected by both of their parents who are equally reluctant parents who dream about a different life.

Two parallel stories, both with the main theme of rejecting the children, are overlapping when the reader is taken back to the present where Frank gets angry at his son for standing in the way when he is working on the stone path. 'He had grabbed him by the belt and spun him around and hit him hard on the buttocks with the flat of his hand, twice, surprised at the stunning vigor of the blows and the roar of his own voice: 'Get *outa* here now! Get *outa* here!'<sup>158</sup> After having told the story of how he never wanted to become a father, he tells his children to 'get outa here'<sup>159</sup> for simply standing in his way. Obviously, April is not the only one metaphorically aborting her family in the novel. I believe that Frank's rejection of the children can be tied in with how he has disappointed himself by letting go of the idealism of frontier masculinity. Moreno mentions that Frank engages in an act of frontier masculinity when he is 'taming the land' of the old frontier in this scene<sup>160</sup> where he is laying a stone path, something that 'at least...was a man's work.'<sup>161</sup> Frank is here engaging in an act of desperately trying to reclaim a frontier masculinity that is already lost. However he ends up rejecting his children instead.

The abortion of the children is complete, when we hear that after April's death, they do not even live with Frank. Milly Campbell tells us that 'Right after the funeral they took the kids back to Pittsfield with them, and Frank went along for a few days, to help them make the adjustment; then he moved to the city and started going up there for weekends, and that's the way things are now.'<sup>162</sup> The children are first indirectly aborted through the implications of their mother's death- that is, that she was a loving, but somehow reluctant mother all along. But they are also aborted in the sense that Frank leaves them with his brother and his wife. Also here, we do not really get the chance to hear what the children

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid (p. 46)

<sup>157</sup> Ibid (p. 51)

<sup>158</sup> Ibid (p. 52)

<sup>159</sup> Ibid (p. 52)

<sup>160</sup> Moreno, 'Consuming the Frontier' (p. 90)

<sup>161</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 45)

<sup>162</sup> Ibid (p. 331)



feel about this, because they are constantly talked about, referred to, spoken to, but without ever having a voice of their own. Again, we see how Frank contributes to Yates' abortion metaphor, in the sense that he also metaphorically aborts his family. Frank is rarely understood as partaking in Yates' abortion metaphor, since April is the one physically carrying out the abortion, but Frank participates in Yates' gloomy vision through physically removing himself from his children, not wishing to become their primary care giver after their mother's death.

Another problem we encounter in relation to the theme of abortion is Frank's treatment of April when she refuses to carry children. The sanctity of motherhood is evident when Frank claims that April would 'Be committing a crime against your own substance. And mine.'<sup>163</sup> What is interesting is that the reader learns that the last thing Frank wants is another child, but Frank and April differ when it comes to the issue of being duty bound. April claims that 'I've had two children...Doesn't that count in my favour.'<sup>164</sup> Frank then replies by claiming that April sees having children as a kind of punishment.<sup>165</sup> However, from April's point of view Frank is finally right. She sees carrying another child as not only a punishment, but what cheated her out of fulfilling her plans of moving to Paris and lead a different life. When she rejects carrying children she reclaims herself as the definer and as the one who knows what is best for herself instead of succumbing to what Friedan frequently points to as the child- like image of the suburban housewife who believes that her husband knows what is best for her.<sup>166</sup>

Frank's criticism of April as a mother obviously belongs within a socio- historical context. Charlton- Jones points out that 'In numerous popular and scholarly books and articles, mothers were blamed for inadequate children. In fact, the discussion was about sons, not children, because it was sons about whom commentators, influenced by Freud and certainly by sexism, worried...Thus ironically, the most idealized figure of the period, the mother, became a scapegoat.'<sup>167</sup> Here we witness a classic 1950s attitude towards women and motherhood, where women were seen as having the sole responsibility of their children's

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid (p. 220)

<sup>164</sup> Ibid (p. 227)

<sup>165</sup> Ibid (p. 227)

<sup>166</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*

<sup>167</sup> Wini Breines as cited in Charlton- Jones, 'Richard Yates's Fictional' (p. 504)

well-being. It is also interesting to note how motherhood was filled with ambiguity in the mid twentieth-century. The mother was both seen as a scapegoat and someone the containment culture could blame for everything that went wrong in their children's life. At the same time the mother was, as we have previously encountered, exalted by the Cold War culture, due to her carrying out her distinct national duty as a mother and housewife. April is definitely trapped in this ideology of motherhood, and contemporary expectations towards this role when Frank claims that due to her wanting an abortion 'We ought to have you see a psychoanalyst.'<sup>168</sup> Frank is again inspired by populist Freudian psychoanalysis when he automatically connects her rejection of motherhood to madness and the female diagnosis of hysteria. This again shows how few alternative roles there were for women and the kind of prejudice women who did not want to have children had to endure.

Interestingly, Mrs. Givings also becomes a character who ends up violating the sanctity of motherhood when she abandons John at a mental hospital, so we can see how both of the female main characters of the novel are in some way rejecting motherhood and that it does not only concern April. We witness throughout the novel how Mrs. Givings is desperately trying to be a good and responsible mother, but she ends up rejecting her child in the end, just like April. Mrs. Givings first attempts to try and bring John into contact with the Wheelers since she is concerned with her son's wellbeing, but rejects him quite easily after April's death. Mrs. Givings' rejection of John can also be tied in with Yates' abortion metaphor, because though Mrs. Givings' rejection of the only authentic character not embodying a split self, she is aborting the possibility of an alternative to suburban dullness. John was the only one who dared to point out that people should actually like the life they desire rather than conforming to stereotypes, when he says that 'Anybody comes along and says 'Whaddaya do it for? You can be pretty sure he's on a four-hour pass from the State funny-farm.'<sup>169</sup> John in many ways represented the alternative to cowardice and conformity, but his efforts of pointing to the possibilities of a different life is aborted when his mother abandons him to a mental hospital.

We have previously touched on issues of frontier masculinity in relation to Frank, but the frontier is also at the heart of Yates' abortion metaphor. The plan to move to Paris is

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<sup>168</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 228)

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, (p. 188)

April's way of pushing the frontier and expanding her space and territory. We may say that the frontier dream is not only present in Frank, but in April as well. Through pushing the frontier, April is trying to abort suburbia and the suburban space she is confined in. Interestingly, April sees it as her only chance of escape to move away from not only suburbia, but to move away from America. Jurca is concerned with the psychology behind suburbia and the suburban landscape. Perhaps we can use Jurca's term of 'suburban homelessness',<sup>170</sup> as a way of interpreting April's desperate need to escape. Jurca explains suburban homelessness as the feeling of alienation from your own environment- an environment that should make you feel at ease, not as a suffocating space you are psychologically exiled from. Pushing the frontier to Paris seems to be the only way of escaping this homelessness. April's escape is narrated at the beginning of the novel where she longs to be 'Out where the black sky went up and up forever and there were hundreds of thousands of stars.'<sup>171</sup> This is the reader's first encounter with April's 'abortive attempts.'

### **April Wheeler Dies and the Closure of the Abortion Metaphor**

When April dies we witness several changes in different character's behaviour, at the same time as the stereotypical suburban pretence is kept intact. We do not receive April's account of her dying moment, but her death is filtered through other characters' experiences, primarily Frank and Shep's. Perhaps one of the reasons we do not receive April's account of her own death is the theme of the silence metaphor having come full circle and that April is again voiceless, as she was from the beginning of the novel. April's death first and foremost has an impact on Frank- and that is the end of his constant performance. April's death does not only rid him of his illusions, as O'Nan claims, but it is the only way for Frank to break away from pretence, posing and constant performance. When April dies he is for the first time described as 'silent and expressionless, breathing rapidly, his head wobbling a little with each breath as he stared at nothing.'<sup>172</sup> This stands as a sharp contrast to his previous artificial posing and his extreme self- awareness. Ironically, this is one of the first incidents where Frank does not 'suggest wholly different personalities with each flickering change of expression.'<sup>173</sup> Frank is here consistent and constant in his behaviour. April's

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<sup>170</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 161)

<sup>171</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 11)

<sup>172</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 320)

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid* (p. 12)

abortion and death seems to suggest the arrival of truth and honesty and this is symbolized through Yates' descriptions of the death of Frank's repeated performance.

April's death represents the end of Frank's performance, however, performance and the suburban facade is kept intact through Shep and ironically, by April herself. Shep thus ironically has the insight to see how he is keeping up a certain facade when he claims that 'He would always remember that this was what he was doing- mincing down hallways carrying two containers of coffee, wearing a silly, inquiring smile- this was what he was doing when April Wheeler died.'<sup>174</sup> Yates seems to be saying that social performance in many ways is never ending in suburbia, even when someone has died. However, we might also claim that interestingly, Shep's performance might be an attempt of carrying both himself and the now non- performing Frank through something that might be considered an unbearable situation. Her death thus functions as a metaphorical abortion of both suburbia and the performance and pretence that comes with it, however, her death does not manage to end suburban performance in itself. April, interestingly also engages in the culture she despise when we are told that when she was dying 'She had been very careful about the blood. Except for a tidy trail of drops leading out to the telephone and back it had all been flushed away.'<sup>175</sup> Yates might be trying to say that April has tried to erase the very realness of her act- perhaps, because as we have previously encountered- Revolutionary Road does not really accommodate for a tragedy. Although Yates seems to be painting an abortion metaphor here both through her death and her abortion, the suburban facade does not break, but is rather reinforced when she dies.

Yates's abortion metaphor reaches its closure through, in my opinion, three events. The first one of these events is tied to John Givings confinement. The counter- culture voice is being silenced through his confinement and this represents 'the end of the road.' John Givings represented not only a powerful and honest voice against conformity and suburban gender roles, but he also represented hope. In spite of his assumed madness, John represented an alternative. John is here portrayed as the unwanted element that is being censored and the confinement of John represents the abortion of both a decade but also pessimistically the future. John already alludes to how 'unwanted elements' are being

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid (p. 319- 320)

<sup>175</sup> Ibid (p. 325)

censored from the dominant culture when he claims that anyone who questions the consensus 'Can be pretty sure he's on a four- hour pass from the State funny- farm.'<sup>176</sup> Already here where he first meets the Wheelers John is aware of how the individual is constantly pitted against the conformity culture of society. Perhaps we might claim that John knows the danger of voicing his views and his refusal to be silent, in the sense that he is aware of confinement as a possible 'punishment' for his individuality. We here understand how individualism is punished by literally being silenced through spatial segregation- the psychiatric hospital being a well- known space for censoring individuals who are not accepted by consensus ideology. Yates attempts to tell us that John's progressive and forward looking ideas are being aborted through this confinement

Another one of these events are being tied to the Wheeler's home and Mrs. Givings. We learn in the aftermath of April's death that Mrs Givings had mixed feelings towards the Wheeler's and calls them 'A bit whimsical, for my taste.'<sup>177</sup> After that, Mrs. Givings describes in detail what I see as a confirmation on how the suburban home has been aborted over a long period of time. 'Actually, the main reason the little house has been so hard to *sell* is that they let it depreciate so dreadfully. Warped window frames, wet cellar, crayon marks on the wall, filthy smudges around all the doorknobs, and fixtures- really careless, destructive things.'<sup>178</sup> Here we get an outsiders point of view and it is obvious that the perfect suburban home has been deteriorating for a long period of time. What we may call 'the fall of the home,' represents a powerful abortion metaphor, where the centre of the family life- the home is being aborted. One of the most powerful metaphors for an aborted home and literally an aborted life is when Mrs. Givings points to the dead sedum plantings in the Wheeler's cellar. 'Do you know what I came across in the cellar? All dead and dried out? I came across an enormous box of sedum plantings that I must have spent an entire day collecting for them last spring. I remember very carefully selecting the best shoots and very tenderly packing them in just the right kind of soil- *that's* the kind of thing I mean, you see.'<sup>179</sup> The dead sedum plantings are a way for Yates' to suggest that the abortion

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid (p. 188)

<sup>177</sup> Ibid (p. 337)

<sup>178</sup> Ibid (p. 337)

<sup>179</sup> Ibid (p. 338)

metaphor has reached a closure with the dead plantings representing all the multiple abortions that has been enacted throughout the novel.

I will argue, however that Yates' most important abortion metaphor is tied up with notions of language and speech. In *Revolutionary Road* we get the sense that there is an excessive amount of talking, but no one is really saying anything. We have previously explored women's voiceless situation in the 1950s, however Yates renders them all voiceless at the end of the novel. When Mrs. Givings continues to ramble on about the Wheeler's and their 'whimsicalness', we learn that her husband cannot hear her. 'From there on Howard Givings heard only a welcome, thunderous sea of silence. He had turned off his hearing aid.' 'The thunderous sea of silence'<sup>180</sup> that Howard Givings experiences might allude to how silence in this context is seen as far more powerful than speech. The reader understands that there is little real communication going on in *Revolutionary Road* and that one might as well be deaf due to the fact that you will not miss out on anything. People do not talk with each other in *Revolutionary Road*, they talk past each other and this lack of communication is everybody's tragedy in the end. O'Nan suggests that 'The final scene, in which a husband turns off his hearing aid so he won't have to listen to his wife prattling on about how she knew the Wheeler's were bad from the very beginning, highlights the lack of communication (let alone communion) between people and how isolated we are from each other.'<sup>181</sup>

This sense of alienation and loneliness is something we encounter when April has made her choice. She claims that 'She needed no more advice and no more instruction. She was calm and quiet now with knowing she had always known, what neither her parents nor Aunt Claire nor Frank nor anyone else had ever had to teach her: that if you wanted to do something absolutely honest, something true, it always turned out to be a thing that had to be done alone.'<sup>182</sup> In the end, we have to make decisions on our own, Yates seems to be saying. April is in the end described as calm and quiet because language and words has now stopped. Yates then highlights the fact that even language has its end and its limitations and this is when the abortion metaphor has come full circle. Even the way we communicate through our language is aborted and we are all reminded of what Yates' believes is at the

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid (p. 338)

<sup>181</sup> O'Nan, 'The Lost World' (p. 5)

<sup>182</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 312)

heart of his authorship. 'If my work has a theme, I suspect it is a simple one: that most human beings are inescapably alone, and therein lies their tragedy.'<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> O'Nan, 'The Lost World' (p. 5)

### **Chapter 3: The 1950's Suburb in Perspective: Gender, Family and Suburbia in Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* and Tom Perrotta's *Little Children***

Having focused solely on Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, I will now attempt to place the novel in perspective. That is, I will attempt to place a novel concerned with 1950s' suburbia in dialogue with two other texts that focus on the 1970s and 2000s suburb. My reasons for this are that I believe that it is necessary and fruitful to gain a diverse perspective on the suburb and its various issues by exploring writing on suburbia throughout different decades. My agenda here will first and foremost be to look at various literary representations seen from a socio- historical perspective. Nevertheless I will focus on the fact that I am exploring literary representations and the complex issues arising from those representations, but not the sociological issues of suburbia in itself. When placing *Revolutionary Road* in dialogue with other texts from different decades, we can see how the literary representations of suburbia articulate change, complexity and development of the institution. The questions I attempt to raise will be: Has suburbia changed in terms of gender roles, or are they only expressed in a different way? Is women's sexuality portrayed differently? How is masculinity articulated differently or similarly throughout the different decades? How is suburban space portrayed and what kind of behaviour does that space generate?

The first part of the chapter will deal with the institution of suburbia, the family and the home, and how it is depicted in the retrospective account of the 1970s, *The Ice Storm* (1994) and *Little Children* (2003). There is no direct criticism on *Little Children* and *The Ice Storm* available, but I will tie the narratives together and explore them through historical and sociological sources. Then I will start exploring how women's sexuality and voice are being narrated. I also focus on the crisis in masculinity that is a major concern in all three of the novels. After that, my main focus will be on issues such as, how children and cross generational conflicts are being portrayed in a very different manner in comparison to *Revolutionary Road*, since those aspects are literally non- existent in Yates' text. Finally I wish to explore the previous theme of communication that was also dealt with in *Revolutionary Road*, and how communication is both reaffirmed and dismantled in the two texts. Throughout the chapter I will have a clear focus on cultural context and socio- historical issues. My main agenda for the chapter will be to explore similarities and differences but also the complexities, between the three narratives. I will look at how themes such as the



crisis in masculinity, gender roles and the American family are all prevalent in the texts, but articulated in different ways due to the fact that they are placed in different decades.

Rick Moody's 1994 novel *The Ice Storm* is set in a Connecticut suburb in the 1970s, and primarily deals with the often traumatic relationship between parents and children. In the novel we meet the Hood family, a wealthy, but dysfunctional family where the parents are experimenting with swinger's lifestyles and their teenage children are experimenting with sex and drugs. We understand early on in the novel that there is little real communication between the family members and that the generation gap between parents and children seems to hinder communication and understanding. The novel explores a wide range of themes, such as sexuality, masculinity and youth culture and I will attempt to interlink those themes with the themes in *Revolutionary Road* that I have previously explored. The theme of sexuality is particularly prevalent in the *Ice Storm*, since both parents and children experiment with different forms of sex, without becoming more 'liberated' or feeling better about a life none of them seem to enjoy. In addition to the concentrated focus on masculinity, sexuality and the family, *The Ice Storm* constantly links the local with the global, and it seems like the problems of suburbia take on a larger dimension and are representative of wider issues in the world at large. As with *Revolutionary Road*, the issues of suburbia are seen as representative of larger and more complex issues than individual fulfilment. *The Ice Storm* and *Revolutionary Road* alike, articulates a narrative of an American society that has lost its idealism and individuality through conformist institutions such as suburbia.

The contemporary suburb is portrayed by Tom Perrotta as a space filled with angst and fear of the other. *Little Children* is similarly to the two other texts, set on the east coast and tells the story of Sarah- a reluctant mother, suburbanite and former campus feminist, and her extramarital affair with the only stay at home father in the suburb- Todd. Throughout the narrative we get to know that there is a paedophile convicted for indecent exposure residing in the neighbourhood, an issue that creates an atmosphere of hysteria in the child centred paradise. Throughout the novel this man, Ronnie, develops into a symbolic figure of the snake in the suburban paradise and alludes to the idea that suburbia is an institution under threat of the other and his threatening sexuality. The novel explores gender issues and perhaps particularly the crisis in masculinity through characters such as Todd, but also through Sarah's breadwinning husband and porn- addict, Richard and the retired ex-

policeman Larry, who spends most of his time harassing Ronnie, as an outlet for masculine frustration. Interestingly the novel explores the issues of suburbia as a child paradise, but also constructs suburbia as a childlike paradise that becomes a dystopia for the parents due to the fact that the space becomes a child- space not accommodating for adults. This can also establish a valuable comparison to *Revolutionary Road* where the child- centred paradise of suburbia leads to the demise of the Wheeler's and the death of April through the abortion of her child. The novel's title, *Little Children*, is also interesting in the sense that it perhaps makes us wonder who the 'Little Children' are. Is it the children or the parents?

### **Suburbia, Family and Home in *The Ice Storm* and *Little Children***

We have previously encountered the view that suburbia, and the uniform suburban landscape in particular, generates a specific kind of behaviour that is often seen as conformist and inauthentic. This is also true when it comes to *The Ice Storm*. Wendy, the daughter of the Hood family is desperate to escape suburbia and the meaning that suburban space takes on for her when the narrator says that, 'Wendy yearned for vulgarity, for all this sloppy stuff. She yearned for some impolite rustling or a torn piece of fabric...For anything that didn't have the feelings bleached out of it. She would have made out with the retriever to learn a little bit about love. Please God, Wendy thought on the stately paths of Silver Meadow, not another winter night of New Canaan conversation...'<sup>184</sup> Interestingly, the narrative form in terms of the third person narrative, resembles that of *Revolutionary Road* and perhaps we might even suggest that *Revolutionary Road* has been an influence on the novel, not only in terms of themes but also in its narrative style. Wendy positions herself as an outsider looking in to a specific institution and critiquing it from that perspective. She is here also engaging in what we have previously encountered in *Revolutionary Road*, the desire to escape the dreadful suburban dullness and meaningless conversations. However, unlike *Revolutionary Road*, Wendy seems to want to change suburbia and make it more authentic, whereas April and Frank perceive suburbia as an institution changing *them*, not the opposite. The suburban space also here seems to carry the meaning of an inauthentic space that cannot accommodate for genuine feelings and real human lives. Interestingly, we recognize April's frustration about the night at the Log Cabin and the phoniness of The Laurel Players. However unlike Wendy, April remains voiceless throughout large parts of the

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<sup>184</sup> Rick Moody, *The Ice Storm* (New York and Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994) pp. 3- 279 (p. 39)

narrative and does not directly narrate her frustration until the end of the novel. What they do have in common is that both Wendy and April found that suburbia could not accommodate for an authentic emotional life.

In *Little Children*, suburban space is portrayed in quite a different manner, since it is a space constantly threatened with contamination. We experience this fear of contamination in *Revolutionary Road* as well, through John Givings, who is seen as an outsider who threatens to disrupt the idyll. When the suburbanites realize that Ronnie has the legal right to live in the neighbourhood, one of the members of The Committee for Concerned Parents proposes that 'Maybe you should put up a sign... 'Entering Bellington. A Pervert- Friendly Town!'<sup>185</sup> Here we clearly encounter the view of suburbia as an institution that must be protected from corruption. Again, the disruption of the child- paradise seems to be what frightens the suburbanites the most. Interestingly, I will argue that the name 'The Committee for Concerned Parents' not only testifies to the claim that suburbia is a space pervaded by bourgeois angst, but the name alludes to the fact that the fear of Ronnie is first and foremost held and created by the parents. This view of suburbia and suburban space filled with middle- class angst of the destruction of their utopia, is an idea that Beuka discusses, when he claims that suburbia in many ways is 'an American dystopia... (Which) Reflects our uneasy relationship to an environment heavily invested with, even defined by, middle- class America's cultural aspirations and anxieties.'<sup>186</sup> The American suburb is seen as arising from a specifically American cultural angst and perhaps we may claim that suburbia as an 'angst space' is already dystopic in its foundation since it is seen as a space where people can act out their deepest bourgeois anxieties. We may argue that a utopia can simply not arise when the institution is built on fear and anxieties. Beuka here claims that the suburban landscape is invested in an angst ridden paranoia culture that we can clearly see in relation to Ronnie.

Ronnie represents and is the manifestation of suburban middle- class angst in the narrative, since he is seen as contaminating the suburban space that, according to Beuka is as much 'an *idea* as a reality.'<sup>187</sup> It is important in this sense that suburbia is depicted as first and foremost an idea, as a contrast to the realness of a material entity, since it is the *idea* of

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<sup>185</sup> Tom Perrotta, *Little Children* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2004) pp. 3- 355 (p. 98)

<sup>186</sup> Beuka, *Suburbanation* (p. 228)

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid* (p. 4)

suburbia that is corrupted by Ronnie. Perhaps the fact that suburbia is seen as an idea, that constantly has to negotiate against an inescapable reality contributes to the paranoid policing of the institution as seen in *Little Children*. We might also claim that Ronnie is simply a convenient scapegoat where the suburbanites gain an excuse to act out middle-class angst. Ronnie is seen as contaminating not only the suburban utopia, but the idea of suburbia as a haven for children with strict policing of inappropriate behaviour. It seems as if the problem with Ronnie is not first and foremost related to the fact that the parents see him as a threat to their children's safety, but the problem is rather what he represents, that is, the eternal suburban middle-class angst of a corruptible force that will turn utopia into dystopia.

Suburbia as a corruptible space is also explored in *Revolutionary Road*, but strangely, this force in *Revolutionary Road*, turns out to be suburbia itself, when Frank claims that 'Economic circumstance might force you to live in this environment, but the important thing was to keep from being contaminated. The important thing, always, was to remember who you were.'<sup>188</sup> In this case, suburbia is already seen as a dystopia that has the power to contaminate its inhabitants and leave them soulless, in comparison to the paranoia of outward threats contaminating the suburban space in *Little Children*. In *Revolutionary Road*, the fear of being contaminated takes on psychological undertones, that is: The paranoid fear of a place and an institution turning you into someone you are not. However, in *Little Children*, suburban space and what Beuka mentions as 'the idea of suburbia'<sup>189</sup> is what is really under threat when Ronnie moves into the neighbourhood.

As we have previously examined in *Revolutionary Road*, we early encounter a fascination and perhaps an obsession with the exterior and how the home looks in order to make the Wheelers appear more interesting than what they really are. In *Little Children*, this fascination with the exterior is projected onto people instead of the home. When Sarah first meets her lover's wife, she immediately concludes with the fact that 'She was one of *those* girls, the ones from high school who made you stick your finger down your throat after lunch, the ones who made you look in the mirror and cry.'<sup>190</sup> The classical suburban fascination with surface and exterior now takes on a different and indeed gendered and

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<sup>188</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 20)

<sup>189</sup> Beuka, *Suburbanation* (p. 4)

<sup>190</sup> Perrotta, *Little Children* (p. 187)

more sexist connotation. The suburban competition does not consist of having the most beautiful home, but being the most beautiful wife. Since most of the suburban mothers in *Little Children* do not work, this seems to be a way of reclaiming their status and self-worth.

The tendency of focusing on the exterior of the women instead of the exterior of the home, is also prevalent in *The Ice Storm*, where Elena, the wife of Benjamin Hood says to her husband that she knows that it is expected that she dresses 'up in some outfit that shows off a lot of cleavage.'<sup>191</sup> We might question why this is the case in the 1970s, since the decade succeeded the radical 1960s where women's liberation was a major cause in the 1960s. However, Winifred D. Wandersee claims that during the 1970s, 'Most Americans were reluctant to accept the radical implications of the feminist challenge no matter how it was presented.'<sup>192</sup> This is clearly evident when success is not measured in terms of having a nice home filled with commodities, but through how the wife looks. She is in fact a commodity herself, which in this case serves to boost the masculine ego. Perhaps we might also argue that suburbia functioned as a haven from the radicalism and new ideas of the feminist movement in the 1970s. Suburbia is, interestingly, in all of the three texts portrayed as a protected space where women stay in their traditional role although the texts spans three decades.

Suburbia is viewed as a space and a construct that particularly accommodates for the fulfilment of the American Dream. In *Revolutionary Road* the American Dream turns out to be the American nightmare and the main project of the Wheelers is therefore to escape the corruptive forces of the American Dream through their fantasy of a life in Paris. The American Dream is closely linked to the fantasy of the dream house and the perfect home, but in *Revolutionary Road*, the home is a dreaded place that threatens the integrity of the characters. Jurca mentions that the suburban novel often contains a narrative pattern that 'Marks the systematic erosion of the suburban house as a privileged site of emotional connection and stability.'<sup>193</sup> I believe that the erosion of the suburban home is linked with the failure of the American Dream and middle-class life, due to the fact that the suburban home and the American Dream represent the same and are mutually dependent. We also

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<sup>191</sup> Moody, *The Ice Storm* (p. 71)

<sup>192</sup> Winifred D. Wandersee, *On the Move: American Women in the 1970s* (Boston: G.K. Hall & co, 1988) pp. xi-259 (p. xiii)

<sup>193</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 4)

encounter incidents where emotional connection is directly disrupted by the home when Frank Wheeler claims that 'This room was the worst possible place for getting his points across.'<sup>194</sup> The Wheeler's only hope is to escape the home and the Dream that tricks them out of who they are.

The American Dream is viewed in a similar way in *The Ice Storm*. The Hood family is materialistically successful, as all of the other fictional characters, but the Dream is based on a constant pressure on men to work hard and to be financially successful. Therefore, we might say that the American Dream is completely dependent on men buying into the idea that the Dream is worth working night and day for. Benjamin Hood, the father of the family experiences a deep frustration and angst in relation to his role as breadwinner and provider. Hood describes sex as his only escape from the obligations of the American Dream: 'At least he didn't have to think. At least he was granted a moment without Benjamin Paul Hood and his fiscal responsibilities, without the lawn, the boat, the dog, the medical bills, credit card and utility bills.'<sup>195</sup> This novel links the American Dream with a stranglehold on men, instead of portraying it as 'a man's world' where a man has the power to achieve through financial success. Again, we understand how the well-known grey flannel suit masculinity seems to limit men and places an extreme responsibility on them.

Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road* desperately wants to escape the grey flannel suit masculinity and it seems like Benjamin Hood is also longing for an escape when he articulates that he wants to stop thinking. The escape metaphor is interesting in terms of the representations of the crisis in masculinity, since Todd, Frank and Benjamin are desperately trying to escape suburbia in some way or another. However, in all of the three narratives it seems like extramarital sex is a compensation for the physical escape from suburbia that never happens. Benjamin Hood also seems to literally drown in his material possessions when he is listing himself with all the things that he owns, in fact, we may claim that the fact that the American Dream is so heavily invested in materialism leads to the things owning Benjamin Hood and not the opposite. This is also seen as what is problematic concerning the American Dream since actual human beings are not in control anymore. The material

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<sup>194</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 223)

<sup>195</sup> Moody, *The Ice Storm* (p. 28)

possessions that follow the American Dream, such as house, boat, dog etc. are portrayed as what Benjamin desperately wants to forget because they seem to suffocate him.

In *Little Children*, the American Dream seems to be something very few of the characters actually want. When Richard decides to leave Sarah he only stresses the point that 'You can keep the house and the car. All I want is a fresh start.'<sup>196</sup> Interestingly, Jurca links this notion of the American Dream as a dystopia for men with the notion of the suburban home as a severely flawed institution, when she argues that, 'If living in a suburb means feeling dispossessed, the white middle- class home is reconfigured in the twentieth- century novel not only as a desirable site of male affect and identification as an institution that delivers far more in the way of self- pity than gratification.'<sup>197</sup> We might then say that the self- pitying suburban home serves as an institution that strips men of their masculinity, which I think is evident in relation to Richard. Richard wants out of the self- pitying institution and in to the real life. It also becomes quite clear that the home, that is, the ethos of the American Dream, is considered a feminine space, where Richard does not feel that he belongs.

As is the case with the suburban home, the American family is a concept that is interlinked with the American Dream, and in fact Americanness itself. The 1950s nuclear family came at a price in *Revolutionary Road* in terms of female voicelessness and a patriarchal family structure with the husband as the sole breadwinner. However, the family and the family unit are never portrayed as dysfunctional, except from in cases of extreme conflicts between April and Frank. April is accused of being a dysfunctional woman when she does not want to have children and Frank calls her 'an *empty, hollow* fucking *shell* of a woman'<sup>198</sup> Apart from during their fights, the family is depicted as disillusioned, but never dysfunctional. That is however, not the case when it comes to *The Ice Storm*. We learn early on in the novel that Benjamin Hood 'loved his wife and children, and hated all evidence of them.'<sup>199</sup>

Later on in the novel, during a so- called key- party, involving wife swaps among the suburbanites, we learn that one of the wives has brought her eighteen year old teenage son to the party. When his mother disappears with one of the men during the key party, 'Neil

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<sup>196</sup> Perrotta, *Little Children* (p. 306)

<sup>197</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 11)

<sup>198</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 292)

<sup>199</sup> Moody, *The Ice Storm* (p. 14)

didn't even seem to notice his mother's grand exit.'<sup>200</sup> Throughout the evening we learn that Janey, Benjamin's mistress has been flirting with Neil the whole evening and when she is to pick a key, 'Janey selected *away* from Benjamin Hood. She found the keys and purposefully shoved them to one side, Elena imagined, because she wound up instead with...Neil Conrad.'<sup>201</sup> The image of the family friendly utopia is already compromised when we know that Benjamin Hood has a mistress, but the destruction of an imagined utopia is further developed here. The American family is here depicted as a dystopia, where teenagers are introduced to their parents' sexual world through attending swinger's parties with their parents.

In general, *The Ice Storm* paints a gloomy picture of the American family in the 1970s and is by far more pessimistic in its treatment of the family than *Little Children*. Benjamin Hood says from the beginning of the novel that 'Family was a bad idea he got because there were no other ideas in those days.'<sup>202</sup> This is an interesting view, since he refers to a choice he probably made in the 1950s. Already here we encounter a retrospective view on the 1950s as the decade of conformity where individuals were forced into a life of traditionalism and where the nuclear family was the only option. We get a sense that Benjamin Hood wishes that he could perhaps reverse his choice since there are other options in the 1970s that are socially acceptable. Beth Bailey argues that the family structure changed more dramatically during the 1970s, than the 1960s, although the 1970s is by many seen as a complex decade where liberal and conservative ideologies were constantly fighting each other. She argues that 'It was during the 1970s that Americans confronted what was arguably a revolution in gender roles.'<sup>203</sup> The institution of the family changed dramatically in the 1970s, there were therefore 'other ideas' that Benjamin Hood could have explored. However, these new possibilities for self exploration and a more fluid family structure were not welcomed by everyone. 'Social critics at the time accused Americans of rejecting the social and familial obligations to embrace a selfish pursuit of individual fulfilment.'<sup>204</sup> However, it seems to be exactly that so-called individual fulfilment all of the characters in *The Ice Storm* are looking

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid (p. 168)

<sup>201</sup> Ibid (p. 169)

<sup>202</sup> Ibid (p. 12)

<sup>203</sup> Beth Bailey, 'She Can Bring Home the Bacon': Negotiating Gender in Seventies America, in *America in the 70s*, eds. Beth Bailey and David Faber (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004) (p. 108)

<sup>204</sup> Beth Bailey and David Faber 'Introduction', in *America in the 70s* eds. Beth Bailey and David Faber (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004) (p. 7)



for, but cannot seem to find through their swingers parties and experimental sex. The failure of individual fulfilment through sex and extramarital affairs can also be seen in *Revolutionary Road* where Frank's relationship with Maureen and April's sexual encounter with Shep fails to deliver a promise of fulfilment.

*Little Children* seems to portray the family as a mistake and a coincidence that accidentally happens to you. This may indicate that when it comes to the family structure of the 2000s, suburbia no longer seems to be a conscious choice, but rather something that unfortunately happens to you, where the subject completely lacks agency. Frank and April in *Revolutionary Road*, seems to have given some thought to the idea of moving to suburbia when starting a family, whereas in *Little Children*, the suburban norm seems to be naturally incorporated into society. Sarah first tells the reader that 'If any of the other mothers had asked how it was that Sarah, of all people, had ended up married, living in the suburbs, and caring full-time for a small child, she would have blamed it all on a moment of weakness.'<sup>205</sup> The suburban family unit that Sarah lives in is first and foremost portrayed as a fatal mistake that has trapped her in a life she does not want, but on the other hand does not have the courage to leave. This is also the case with April Wheeler who is desperate to get out of the nuclear family unit with death as the consequence. Sarah's narration is interesting in this case because it is almost a copy of April's story from the 1950s. 'In a sentimentally lonely time long ago, she had found it easy and agreeable to believe whatever this one particular boy felt like saying, and to repay him for that pleasure by telling easy agreeable lies of her own...Then you discovered you were working at life the way The Laurel Players worked at *The Petrified Forest*, or the way that Steve Kovic worked at his drums- earnest and sloppy and full of pretension and all wrong.'<sup>206</sup> What separates the narratives of the two women's destinies however, is the fact that wanting something else led to death in the 1950s, whereas in the 2000s it seems to be more accepted to be a reluctant suburbanite because we also encounter other unhappy families such as Todd's and Mary Ann's. However, we should also note that breaking out of the suburban norm seems just as hard in the 2000s as in the 1950s.

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<sup>205</sup> Perrotta, *Little Children* (p. 9)

<sup>206</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 305)

Interestingly the story of the reluctant parent and suburbanite, is also the narrative of her lover Todd and his story is also narrated in the same style, portraying it as an accident that happened to him: 'If someone had told him ten years earlier that he would one day be a full- time househusband grooving to children's music while he fixed dinner, Todd wouldn't have been able to recognized himself in the image.'<sup>207</sup> However, what makes the narrative of the family interesting and unique in *Little Children*, is the paranoia of the family structure as constantly under threat by an outside force, that is Ronnie. Roger Silverstone, however, claims that this angst and paranoia is at the heart of the suburban family. This angst is in fact one of its founding pillars when he claims that the suburban landscape is 'a testimony to bourgeois anxieties.'<sup>208</sup> Here we encounter the view of suburbia as a reactionary space that is built up around middle- class angst. Again, this angst is also something we encounter in *Revolutionary Road* through the counter- culture figure of John who releases middle- class hysteria in the suburb. Interestingly, John also comments on suburban space when one of the first things he says is 'Very adequate little house you got here.'<sup>209</sup> John obviously articulates the view that space and ideology is interlinked in the case of suburbia. The uniform houses directly symbolize the angst that Silverstone mentions.

The family unit is also seen as flawed in *Little Children*, in spite of outward idyll. It is perhaps seen as particularly flawed in the case of 'super mom' Mary Ann, Sarah's number one hate object. Early on in the novel we are introduced to an unusually self- content mother who seems to be doing everything right and always being in control, especially in the case of the children. 'Morning snack time was ten- thirty on the dot, a regimen established and maintained by Mary Ann, who believed that rigid adherence to a timetable was the key to effective parenting. She had placed glow- in- the- dark digital clocks in the children's rooms, and had instructed them not to leave their beds in the morning until the first number had changed to seven.'<sup>210</sup> We usually get the impression that her children are content with her rigid regime, however the home is also here as in *Revolutionary Road*, the space of contained discontent when her son rebels against her bedtime regime and shouts that 'I'm

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid (p. 17)

<sup>208</sup> Roger Silverstone, 'Introduction', in *Visions of Suburbia*, eds. Roger Silverstone (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) vii- 328 (p. 6)

<sup>209</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 185)

<sup>210</sup> Perrotta, *Little Children* (p. 6)

not tired!...Get that through your stupid head!’<sup>211</sup> We also learn that Mary Ann and her husband have a day in the week where they have sex- a product of Mary Ann’s stoic belief in planning. However, we find out that her husband that she has bragged about to the women at the playground, being pleased with their arrangement, turns out to be tired of his wife’s timetable sex and suggests that ‘Why don’t we give it a rest?’<sup>212</sup> Mary Ann appears to be the naturally content suburbanite with a well- functioning family unit that she is in total control of, however she is disliked by both her children and her husband. The novel seems to suggest that even conservative, SUV driving super moms feel unhappy and disillusioned with the nuclear family.

The family unit is also strangely linked with fear when Mary Ann claims that she never really loved her husband and that he was never the man she imagined that she would end up with. The narrator relates on behalf of Mary Ann ‘Even when they met, when he was still in his early thirties, she’d wished that he had a little more hair and a flatter stomach, but what was the alternative? *The last train is leaving*, she told herself. *Better get on board.*’<sup>213</sup> This is quite interesting in terms of Benjamin Hood’s comment on family being the only option in the 1950s but that that had changed in the 1970s, however, it again seems to be the only respectable choice in the 2000s as well. Mary Ann felt that she had to modify her expectations in order to get married, since getting married is still the status quo after three waves of feminism. We may perhaps claim that there has been a feminist backlash in contemporary America since the nuclear family still seems to be the only valid choice, or that the feminist movement has had little effect on the average American, since the nuclear family with a male breadwinner seems to be a strong norm in contemporary society, particularly in suburbia. What is also interesting in this context is that we see a clear link between the lives of Sarah and Mary Ann and it reminds us that, ‘As a body of work, the suburban novel asserts... that one unhappy family is a lot like the next, and there is no such thing as a happy family.’<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid (p. 317)

<sup>212</sup> Ibid (p. 327)

<sup>213</sup> Ibid (p. 345)

<sup>214</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 167)

## Female Sexuality and the Crisis in Masculinity

Female sexuality is hardly a topic in *Revolutionary Road*, and is rarely directly encountered except for in the incident of April's brief sexual encounter with Shep Campbell. April is rarely portrayed as an autonomous sexual being with independent sexual desires and she does not manage to reclaim any sense of sexual autonomy by the end of the narrative. One of the few times where sex is a topic is when April is pregnant and she refuses to carry the child. Her sexuality is however pseudo- intellectualized through Frank who claims that April's lack of female role models and emotional stability makes her reluctant to bear children: 'If most little girls do have this thing about wanting to be boys, they probably get over it in time by observing and admiring and wanting to emulate their mothers- I mean *you* know, attract a man, establish a home, have children and so on. And in your case, you see, that whole side of life, that whole dimension of experience was denied you from the start.'<sup>215</sup> According to Frank, April's upbringing has made her an 'unnatural' woman since she lacked female role models she could mimic. Frank seems to suggest that his wife is socially and emotionally underdeveloped as a woman when she does not want another child.

April's sexuality does not only take on pseudo- Freudian connotations, but the narrative of April's sexuality becomes a distinctly gendered one where female sexuality is only seen as a means of reproduction, serving the purpose of the national ideology of the nuclear family. April's body and sexuality might be seen as a government tool and as a means of spreading the ideology of women as baby machines in the national service. However, in the end, we might say that April does reclaim a sense of her sexuality through taking control of the site of reproduction: her body. Through her abortion, she refuses the idea of women as a reproductive machine serving husband and government, and reclaims her body as an autonomous entity. However, it is important to note that April dies in the process of her reclaiming and it seems like death is the consequence of refusing to be a reproductive machine. We may ask if her death symbolizes a feminist resistance where she is willing to die in her rebellion and therefore a final victory, or if she in fact loses in the end.

Issues of the female body and sexuality take on a completely different role in *The Ice Storm*, where women are overtly sexually active arguably without being any more liberated

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<sup>215</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 234)

than April Wheeler in the 1950s. The teenage daughter of the Hood family is described as sexually experimental, but we do get a sense of intense policing when it comes to female sexuality. When her mother suspects that she has had sex with her lover's son she retreats to violence and harassment: 'Her mother's strength was all out of proportion with her tiny retiring body. In the bathroom- by the entrance to the basement- her mother held Wendy's mouth shut, clamped her palm there, and ran the tap with one hand. She immersed a handy little soap ball under the tap, until it had a good head of lather, and then she forced her daughter's mouth open...'<sup>216</sup> This seems like an incidence of violent ritual cleansing as punishment where Wendy must be washed with soap in order to reclaim her purity. We might also argue that it is not only Wendy's body that is seen as dirty when the soap is pushed into her mouth, symbolizing that she has to be internally cleansed first and foremost. The extreme harassment and punishment for what is considered by her mother as sexually inappropriate behaviour for a teenage girl, tells us perhaps that the feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s did not achieve much in middle America. However, Schulman and Zelizer claim that by the 1970s, the political landscape had become increasingly conservative, 'After 1970, the conservative movement completed its organizational infrastructure- the political action committees, the volunteer operations, the radio talk shows, the think tanks, and the direct mail network.'<sup>217</sup> During the 1970s conservative (and often religious) groups became organized and were ideologically competing against a still insistent feminist movement. I would argue that Elena's treatment of Wendy could perhaps be linked to the rise of the New Right and serve as an indicator that the political climate of the 1970s was not purely liberal, at least not in the 1970s suburb.

In *Little Children*, we encounter women as active sexual agents with their own desires. Sarah is early on in the novel described as a sexual being when she describes Todd as 'Tall and well- built, with a shock of blonde hair falling surfer- style across his forehead. There was something generic about his good looks, a pleasantly bland quality that reminded her of those cheerful men who modelled jockey shorts in Sunday supplements, smiling confidently with their arms crossed on their chests, or pointing with fascination into empty space.'<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Moody, *The Ice Storm* (p. 239)

<sup>217</sup> Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2008) pp. ix- 373 (p. 5)

<sup>218</sup> Perrotta, *Little Children* (p. 31)

The problem with this and the problem with Sarah's illicit affair is that she deliberately chose a life of material comfort with a middle-aged husband instead of acting on her desire. Her choice to marry Richard was a solely materialistic one and we get the feeling that there is a contradiction between sexual and financial capital. Richard however, is described as 'a regular...middle-aged man.'<sup>219</sup> He is thus, aware of the fact that Sarah married him, not because she desired him but because 'They were both desperately lonely...She seemed to appreciate his social ease, his liberal politics, and, though she never actually said so, the promise he held out of liberation from Starbucks and long-term financial security.'<sup>220</sup> Acting on desire seems to be impossible in this context when financial dependence is involved and where women must first and foremost think about men as a potential provider and not as a sex partner. We may also claim that it is surprising that Sarah easily chooses financial dependence in the 2000s, when there would have been several career options for her.

The portrayal of masculine angst and a crisis in masculinity is prevalent in all the three texts, but the fears and the ambivalent masculine role is articulated very differently. We have previously encountered how Frank is longing for a mythical lost frontier masculinity and how he wants 'the keys to the frontier, the promise of roaming the idealized geography of freedom and independence.'<sup>221</sup> His feeling of masculine entrapment as a family father in suburbia is a distinctly American fear and deeply grounded in the anonymity of the grey flannel suit. A life as a corporate slave, stands as a contrast to a life in the mythic frontier in the west where a man could fulfil the American Dream through a masculine role of independence and freedom, stands as a contradiction of American masculinity. Frank's fear of emasculation through corporate anonymity was a distinct fear of the 1950s, however the crisis in masculinity seems to be one of the eternal themes of the suburban novel.

Todd often feels trapped as a suburban father who cares full-time for a three year old. Therefore he joins an American football team called the Guardians. I believe the name of the team is interesting in relation to the crisis in masculinity because it makes us think about what a team called 'the Guardians' may represent. It may be that the team functions as Guardians of a lost masculinity, not unlike the frontier masculinity Frank seems to yearn for. We are told that Todd both feels honoured to be asked to play for the Guardians, but he also

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid (p. 13)

<sup>220</sup> Ibid (p. 120)

<sup>221</sup> Moreno, 'Consuming the Frontier' (p. 92)

feels insecure about his own masculinity as a middle- class lawyer, and whether it is adequate: 'Some of the guys- they were cops, men who'd been tested by fire- suspected him of being a pretty boy who'd crumble under pressure, and he was determined to prove them wrong, to show that he belonged.'<sup>222</sup> It seems to be a recurring theme concerning the crisis in masculinity that it is particularly prevalent among middle- class men who feel that they are not in touch with their masculinity, perhaps due to the fact that their lives do not involve any elements of traditional entrepreneurial masculinity, but rather involves upholding the values of corporate America. The Guardians are portrayed as a team representing the traditional manliness of physical strength and the ideal of being able to endure physical pain that Todd longs for.

In *Little Children*, the crisis in masculinity is also heavily linked with the desire of escaping a dull suburban existence. There is a clear escape metaphor being drawn in *Little Children* when Todd is watching the skateboarders, a group of local teenagers, and thinking 'I must have been like this...I must have been one of them.'<sup>223</sup> Todd clearly sees watching the skateboarders as a kind of escapism from a boring suburban life. He is also, like Frank drawn to a masculinity of freedom and physical challenges, when he is watching the skateboarders and admiring them: 'Graceful and fearless, G. was a natural athlete who seemed to possess an almost mystical connection with his board. He jumped stairs and curbs, surfed metal railings, and almost always landed on his feet.'<sup>224</sup> The skateboard is here a quite literal symbol of the vehicle out of suburbia that Todd is dreaming of. He also admires the athletic abilities of G. and seems to connect him with a masculinity that is not very far from Frank's frontier masculinity of boldness and bravery.

In the 1970s white- collar work was in decline and was less paid than what it used to be some decades earlier. Jurca claims that 'Subsequently, literary and non-literary discourses about the middle class converge into their concerns about the fatally deteriorating socioeconomic conditions of late capitalism.'<sup>225</sup> The issues of late capitalism and a more fierce competition for well- paid jobs, affect Benjamin Hood when he admits that he has been 'Overlooked for an important lunch, not copied on an important memo, not tipped off

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<sup>222</sup> Perrotta, *Little Children* (p. 149)

<sup>223</sup> Ibid (p. 23)

<sup>224</sup> Ibid (p. 22)

<sup>225</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 163)

on hot stock...The phone never stirred in his office.'<sup>226</sup> The crisis in masculinity is here connected in a different way, since Benjamin Hood's deepest fear is to fail as the family's breadwinner. In the two other novels the male main characters long to escape the hamster wheel of corporate capitalism and have a boyish image of a frontier world of freedom and entrepreneurial spirit. Hood's angst however, is far more complex since he is both afraid of not being able to confirm to the masculine role he is already in, at the same time as he feels that the role is strangling. We get an image of a man who feels that there is no alternative to the grey flannel suit masculinity and is perhaps more trapped than any of the other male characters.

In *Little Children* and *Revolutionary Road*, there is an on- going theme of male adultery with women who expect considerably less from them than their wives in terms of both financial security and boldness. Women are also adulterers in the three texts, but they do not seem to have the same motives as their male counterparts. Where the men seems to expect self- gratification through adultery, the women seems to expect no more than a short- term escape from an unhappy marriage in *Revolutionary Road* and *The Ice Storm*. In *Little Children*, adultery on Sarah's behalf is simply a product of Sarah falling in love with another man since her marriage is far from happy, whereas Richard's adultery is an escape route from the obligations of the suburban husband and father. Strangely, Richard seems to be the only one of the characters who succeeds in escaping suburbia at last when he tells Sarah I that he intends to move to California. Unlike the other male characters, Richard's adultery also symbolizes a clear geographic escape where he pushes the frontier that Frank was secretly dreaming of and 'goes west.'

Frank's affair with Maureen is interesting because it gives Frank the opportunity of a revival of his manhood. We learn that he is bored of suburban life and that he and April are constantly fighting. Frank is continuously reminded of the limitations of speech and language when his wife tells him in the novel's first fight: 'Could we please sort of stop talking about it now?'<sup>227</sup> We get a feeling of Frank as emasculated when he is told to be quiet and that his words and flamboyant language seem to fail to impress his wife. However, when he is with Maureen we are told that 'Sentences poured from him, paragraphs composed themselves

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<sup>226</sup> Moody, *The Ice Storm* (p. 119)

<sup>227</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 20)



and took wing, appropriate anecdotes sprang to his service and fell back to make way for the stately passage of epigraphs.<sup>228</sup> Maureen listens and is clearly impressed with his life anecdotes and pseudo- wisdom and Frank goes from being a masculine failure to a masculine success with a girl who is described as quite insecure and looks up in awe to her best friend Norma. Frank spots Maureen's insecurity when he observes that 'There were signs of this tutelage in Maureen's too- heavy make- up and too- careful hairdo, as well as in her every studied mannerism and prattling phrase- her overuse of words like 'mad' and 'fabulous' and 'appalling.'<sup>229</sup> This girl obviously has far less self- confidence and self- awareness than April, she is in many ways her antithesis, and we get a sense that that is what Frank desires and make him relax.

Interestingly, the role of the mistress is that of the submissive part in *Revolutionary Road*, as a stark contrast to the popular myth of the mistress possessing and excessive and dangerous sexuality. April is described as the woman who takes on the dominant role in the narrative when she is described as possessing cultural capital few women can match when Shep Campbell says that his wife Milly: 'Could dress very nearly as well as April Wheeler and talk very nearly as well on any subject you wanted to name...And she had managed to give every room ...the spare, stripped- down, intellectual look that April Wheeler called 'interesting.'<sup>230</sup> April is here described as possessing good taste, being self- confident in her style and well- articulated and opinionated, the polar- opposite of the insecure mistress. Milly however, functions in many ways as Maureen's double in the sense that they are both two conventional women trying to be something they are not: a woman like April Wheeler.

In *Little Children*, Richard's mistress embodies most of the traditional characteristics of the mistress in terms of excessive sexuality and sexual allure. We are told from the beginning of the novel that Richard is obsessed with a porn star named Slutty Kay. At the end of the novel he decides to meet her at one of Slutty Kay's annual gatherings for her 'fan club' and we are told that Richard feels like a burden, possibly the burden of provider and family father, has been lifted off his shoulder. 'For most of the day, the Beachfest was just innocent fun, no more scandalous than your average company picnic. Carla and her seven fans wore bathing suits and T- shirts as they whiled away the afternoon drinking beer, playing beach

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid (p. 96)

<sup>229</sup> Ibid (p. 95)

<sup>230</sup> Ibid (p. 143)

volleyball, tossing a Frisbee, and even engaging in a hilarious round of three- legged races.<sup>231</sup> This feeling of freedom and ease stands as a sharp contrast to how Richard has previously claimed that, 'He resented his wife and children for imprisoning him in a suburban cage and forcing him onto the hamster wheel of corporate drudgery.'<sup>232</sup> His illicit affair seems to be an attempt of the on- going theme of escaping suburbia and the financial responsibilities of the suburban husband. It also seems to evoke Jurca's idea of white- collar work as essentially meaningless and that the suburban home is supposed to function as a reward for the meaninglessness, although it fails to deliver its promise.<sup>233</sup> In *Little Children* we not only encounter reluctant mothers, but also reluctant fathers, since Richard admits that he 'accepted the burden of parenthood without a squeak of protest.'<sup>234</sup> Adultery generally seems to be a way for the men to escape parenthood, children and their spouses in all of the three texts. However, none of the fictional characters have the courage to escape suburbia, which is the real problem.

### **The Fictional Treatment of Children**

Jurca argues that 'The family conflicts in the postwar novels are generated exclusively within couples rather than between parent and child. Aside from the occasional case of chicken pox or a growling stomach, for the most part children are neither seen nor heard.'<sup>235</sup> This is evident in *Revolutionary Road*, where the children are voiceless and rarely have any active agency in the text. The conflict in the Wheeler family never involves the children directly, even though ironically, having or not having children is the main issue of the novel. However, as a retrospective account of the 1970s, *The Ice Storm* presents an interesting perspective on family conflicts between parents and children. I will argue that the conflicts between parents and children are the most prevalent conflict in the novel. Early on in the text we get a rare account of how Benjamin Hood dislikes his own son when he admits that, 'He disliked Paul's helmet of long wavy hair, and his loneliness, and his lack of athletic prowess.'<sup>236</sup> *The Ice Storm* is the only one of the three texts where a parent admits to

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<sup>231</sup> Perrotta, *Little Children* (p. 312)

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid* (p. 117)

<sup>233</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 136- 37)

<sup>234</sup> Perrotta, *Little Children* (p. 117)

<sup>235</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 166)

<sup>236</sup> Moody, *The Ice Storm* (p. 84)

disliking their own child. Here we understand that the children fail to live up to their parents' expectations. Paul, in return reflects on the family unit when he says: 'Fucking family. Feeble and forlorn and floundering and foolish and frustrating and functional and sad. Fucking family.'<sup>237</sup> We get a sense that Paul feels that the family members, especially across generations, cannot reach each other, and that the family unit is bound to be flawed.

Cross generational conflicts are also evident in the relationship between Wendy and her mother Elena. What is interesting is that unlike *Revolutionary Road*, Wendy is rarely silent and she voices her objections clearly. When her mother suspects that she has had sex with her lover's son and wants to spank her as a punishment, Wendy says to her mum, 'I'm too old. What are you going to do, Mom, spank me at the prom? Come find me in college so you can spank me?'<sup>238</sup> Wendy goes on saying 'Why, Mom, what are you going to do, *fuck me*?'<sup>239</sup> However, we are told that the Hood family exercise authoritarian and violent parenting in relation to their children which makes them rebellious. Wendy remembers her first spanking when she tells that. 'Her father carried her into the parents' bedroom. Her mother stood by, wordlessly. She refused to take down her pants. Her father humiliated her with language until she did so- called her a slut and a hooker and a princess. It wasn't difficult to degrade her with language- she was four.'<sup>240</sup> Gender is clearly an important aspect of her punishment since she is verbally abused and termed a hooker and a slut. We also get a sense that Wendy expects and does not react to sexually humiliating remarks by the age of fourteen, since she claims that it was easy to degrade her before since she was only four at the time. The policing of female behaviour is a recurring theme in the novel, and surprisingly we understand that Elena does not protest the fact that her daughter is being humiliated and harassed by her own father.

Suburbia as an institution of policing on behalf of the children is an on- going theme in *Little Children*. Policing, protection and paranoia takes on an extreme form when the Committee for Concerned Parents hangs up posters warning people about Ronnie, with the headline '**DECENT PEOPLE BEWARE!!!...THERE IS A PERVERT AMONG US!**' The language of the poster alludes to a constructed stark difference between the 'decent people', that is, the

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid (p. 274)

<sup>238</sup> Ibid (p. 238)

<sup>239</sup> Ibid (p. 238)

<sup>240</sup> Ibid (p. 237)

suburbanites, and 'the pervert' Ronnie. The rhetoric and language of the poster reveals excessive paranoia and an extreme fear of the other, the corruptable force that has the power to turn the suburban utopia into a dystopia. Not only is the language of the poster interesting in terms of Ronnie as a corruptable force, but it is interesting also in terms of what it signifies. The suburbanites are the definers who define themselves as 'the decent' people and Ronnie as 'the pervert.' This says something important about power in suburbia and who has the power to define and who has not. Larry, an ex- policeman sees it as his main job to protect the children of the neighbourhood when he stands outside Ronnie's house and screams in a megaphone: 'DON'T YOU PEOPLE LOVE YOUR CHILDREN! DON'T YOU WANT TO PROTECT THEM FROM EVIL? THEN WHY AREN'T YOU OUT HERE DOING SOMETHING ABOUT IT?'<sup>241</sup> 'Loving your children' here becomes an excuse to act out an aggressive and violent form of masculinity rooted in angst and frustration.

What is interesting is that Larry has retired from his job due to the fact that he accidentally shot a teenage boy that he thought was carrying a gun and Larry seems to be taking out his issues of emasculation on Ronnie. He also says to Todd that 'The fact that he, a physically healthy thirty- three- year- old male, was retired, and collecting a disability pension from the police department. It drove Joan crazy, he explained. She thought he was stagnating, sinking into a swamp of laziness and self- pity.'<sup>242</sup> Larry seems to be using the protection of the children as an excuse to try and reclaim his masculinity, in the role of the avenging father and the protector of suburbia. Ironically we may say that he takes on the role as the Guardian, a name that alludes to his football team. Ronnie is here functioning as a convenient scapegoat for a man who feels he has lost his position as breadwinner and therefore feels emasculated. In addition his wife finds him lazy and self- pitying, characteristics that stands as a sharp contrast to ideal American entrepreneurial masculinity.

The theme of the children and the role they are playing in the narrative takes on a playful role in *Little Children*. The concern for the children and their well- being is evident from the very beginning when Mary Ann suggests that Ronnie who has previously been convicted of indecent exposure should be castrated since, 'If that's what it takes to protect

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<sup>241</sup> Perrotta, *Little Children* (p. 290)

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid* (p. 230)

my children, then so be it.'<sup>243</sup> However, the title is playful in the sense that throughout the narrative it makes the reader wonder who Perrotta thinks about as the 'little children', especially when we learn that Todd fulfils his dream of skateboarding with the local teenagers and he ends up passing out due to a hard fall on the concrete. The ambulance is coming and his friend from the Guardians, DeWayne tells him, 'No more skateboarding tonight.'<sup>244</sup> Todd is now in the role of a naughty child who has had an accident with his skateboard and it makes us wonder if the narrative in many ways is about parents who long to run away from their dull responsibilities and instead be little children again. Children seem to be a source of middle- class paranoia, breakdown in communication and above all: They are the essence of the suburban ethos in all of the texts.

### **The Figure of the Other and the Issues of Communication**

The figure of the other is employed as an important literary device in all of the three suburban narratives, and the figure of the other is strongly linked with the suburban setting and the meaning of that setting. In *Revolutionary Road*, John functions as the visionary outsider representing the antithesis of 1950s suburbia. Not only does he voice his unconventional and counter- culture views, he also questions suburbia as an institution in itself and comments on the destructive forces of the American Dream when he says: 'You want to play house, you got to have a job. You want to play very *nice* house, very *sweet* house, then you got to have a job you don't like.'<sup>245</sup> In *The Ice Storm*, Wendy takes on the role as the scapegoat and other when we hear that she says that 'She wanted her father to crusade for less peer pressure in the high school and to oppose the bombing of faraway neutral countries and to support limits on presidential power and to devise a plan whereby each kid under eighteen in New Canaan had to spend one afternoon a week with Dan Holmes's sister, Sarah Joe, or with that other kid, Will Fuller, whom everybody called *faggot*.'<sup>246</sup> Wendy obviously opposes the values of suburban homogeneity and at the age of fourteen she already understands that certain people are not included in the institution of

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid (p. 28)

<sup>244</sup> Ibid (p. 349)

<sup>245</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 188)

<sup>246</sup> Moody, *The Ice Storm* (p. 50)

suburbia. Wendy herself is also an outsider and automatically becomes the other when she is called a 'slut' and 'a lesbee'<sup>247</sup> by the boys in school.

*Little Children* has a different approach to the question of the figure disrupting the suburban idyll. Ronnie is the ultimate suburban outsider and other and is also consciously treated as a snake invading the paradise when he is trying to take a swim in the town pool on a hot summer's day where there are also children present. 'Then he lowered his mask over his eyes and nose and wiggled it into position. He slid feetfirst into the pool, breaking the surface with only the barest hint of a splash.'<sup>248</sup> This is a very literal way of portraying the other penetrating the suburban surface. Through entering the pool he is also othering the familiar suburban landscape and subverts it into a dystopic landscape. Jurca argues that suburban novelists have the ability to ' estrange readers from the environment they thought they knew so well.'<sup>249</sup> Here, the opposite is happening: A fictional suburban character subverts the landscape of idyll and turns it into a dystopia. Beuka claims that the suburban landscape in itself is marked as a place contributing to 'the perceived homogenization of American life.'<sup>250</sup> This is evident when Ronnie enters the town pool and the landscape is no longer homogenous. When people discover that it is Ronnie, the man they have been warned against, the chaos starts and the suburban residents are calling their children up from the pool. However, what John, Wendy and Ronnie have in common is that they do not play by the suburban rules in terms of conduct. They are seen as threatening individuals because they challenge the status quo in very different ways.

*The Ice Storm* draws attention to the interlinking of the local and the global.<sup>251</sup> The novel portrays suburban issues in a way that mark them as more universal and global than any of the other texts. Will Kaufman claims that the novel deals with 'the break- up of a Connecticut family as a metaphor for a much wider social crisis.'<sup>252</sup> The disruption of the family is here seen in a social context and perhaps alludes to the socially and politically turbulent climate of the 1970s where radicalism and conservatism competed over agency.

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid (p. 207)

<sup>248</sup> Perrotta, *Little Children* (p. 134)

<sup>249</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 161)

<sup>250</sup> Beuka, *Suburbanation* (p. 2)

<sup>251</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 164)

<sup>252</sup> Will Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) pp. 1- 231 (p. 172)

Benjamin Hood's masculine crisis and his fear of losing his role as breadwinner is voiced when he claims that he is unfaithful to his wife as an escape from himself, 'He was granted a moment without...the situation in the Mideast and Indochina, without Kissinger and Ehrlichman or Jaworski or that Harvard asshole, Archibald Coy. Just a little peace.'<sup>253</sup> Jurca claims that 'The equation between man and financial obligations is familiar, but not the interweaving of personal and international crisis, psychical and world peace, expressed as the link between the price of utilities and the Middle East. He asserts himself in the process of forgetting himself, which is to say, he insists that the problem is global rather than local or even national in scope.'<sup>254</sup> Benjamin Hood links his existence and personal problems with global issues, to the effect that he removes the issues of suburban manhood out of the institution of suburbia and into the wider world and society. We get a sense that the crisis in masculinity is not only a suburban problem. He also sees the link between his worries as the family provider and the situation in the Middle East, with the effects that Benjamin Hood's problems become global.

Just as in *Revolutionary Road*, we experience an on- going process of dealing with interpersonal relations through the issues of communication between the characters. In *The Ice Storm* we experience a breakdown in communication through the ice storm that makes people unable to communicate with each other, since the electricity breaks down due to the storm. But communication has been slowly eroding throughout the whole narrative in the sense that the parents and children and husbands and wives find it hard to engage in meaningful communication and language seems to be limiting. When Wendy complains: 'Not another winter of New Canaan conversation,'<sup>255</sup> she alludes to the fact that there are no real conversations going on in New Canaan. The individuals feel so detached and alienated from each other that Wendy claims that 'She would conclude that Elton John's drummer Nigel Olson, meant more to her than her parents' marriage.'<sup>256</sup> Parents and children obviously live in separate worlds and feel like they are living separate lives. The breakdown of communication is heavily linked with the breakdown of the family in the text, as Benjamin Hood says early on in the novel, 'Family, what a flawed system of

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<sup>253</sup> Moody, *The Ice Storm* (p. 28)

<sup>254</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 164)

<sup>255</sup> Moody, *The Ice Storm* (p. 39)

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid* (p. 249)

attachment.<sup>257</sup> The breakdown in communication and the dismantling of the nuclear family walks hand in hand in the novel, when Wendy does not care whether her parents' divorce or not and when Benjamin Hood believes the nuclear family is a flawed institution.

Issues of communication are treated in a very different way in *Little Children*. From early on in the novel there are clear issues of communication and a tension between what I would term the suburbanites and the anti- suburbanites. Sarah and Mary Ann feel hostile towards each other from the beginning, when Sarah thinks about Mary Ann, '*This is what you wanted? This playground? That SUV? Your stupid spandex shorts? Your weekly roll in the hay? Those well- behaved children who cower at the sound of your voice?*'<sup>258</sup> Sarah assumes that Mary Ann is satisfied with a life of suburban bliss and they rarely speak to each other than through conventional phrases or insults.

What is interesting with Perrotta's narrative is that the figure of the other is the one who brings the characters together and in the end we experience a revival of communication instead of a breakdown in communication such as in both *Revolutionary Road* and *The Ice Storm*. At the playground after dark when Sarah has decided to run away with Todd, however she understands that he will not show up and instead she meets Ronnie, Mary Ann and Larry who have met each other at the playground by coincidence. The scene is described as the first peaceful and genuine playground scene, where the usual social competition is removed: 'The four of them stood in a circle on the playground ...Mary Ann looked on with an oddly sympathetic expression.'<sup>259</sup> The playground has usually been portrayed as a site of conflict and aggression between Mary Ann and Sarah, but it seems like they now feel they can be at peace with each other. The only time where Larry, Ronnie, Mary Ann and Sarah have been portrayed as being comfortable with each other is in the presence of the freak figure Ronnie who seems to be the character linking the narrative together. The other turned out to be the opposite of the corruptive force they expected, but rather seems to turn the dystopic site of aggression into a utopic space where communication is revived. We also understand that Sarah and Mary Ann manage to see through each other's constructed facades and understand that their lives and destinies are far more similar than they thought. All the three narratives seem to be linked together by issues of communication, but

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid (p. 11)

<sup>258</sup> Perrotta, *Little Children* (p. 29)

<sup>259</sup> Ibid (354- 355)



resolving the issue in very different ways. In *Revolutionary Road*, the eternal suburban dialogue reaches its end when April dies, the communicative issues in *The Ice Storm* remain unsolved and in *Little Children*, we experience a revival of language- a stark opposite to the other narratives.

As I have previously discussed, writings on suburbia are marked by several core conflicts that we recognise in all the three narratives, that is, issues of gender, sexuality, the family and the ambivalence of the masculine role. However I will suggest that the texts treat these issues differently since they are placed in different decades. The cultural anxieties of the times, such as the fear of emasculation of previous veterans in the 1950s, and the hysteria surrounding a supposed breakdown of the nuclear family due to the feminist movement in the 1970s, are national anxieties of the decade that is heavily reflected in the texts. We also see a difference in how fictional conflicts between parents and children are treated. In *Revolutionary Road*, children have no agency in the text, where as teenage rebellion is an important theme in *The Ice Storm*, which reflects how American society changed from the 1950s to the 1970s. The sexual agency of women is also an issue depicted very differently with April lacking an autonomous sexual identity and is not depicted as having her own sexual desires in *Revolutionary Road* to Sarah in *Little Children* who acts on those same desires and even refuses to feel guilty about it. Interestingly however, we understand that the institution of suburbia is represented in a similar manner in all of the narratives, even though the fictional conflicts are resolved differently. The portrayal of the claustrophobic suburban home, the family conflicts and the desire to escape are all representative of suburbia and what the fictional suburbia supposedly represent. From Richard Yates' depiction of suburbia in the 1950s to Tom Perrotta's 2000s narrative, it is clear that suburbia is an American institution filled with complexities that continue to inspire authors.

## Conclusion

My thesis has attempted to employ a socio- historical perspective on an important text dealing with 1950s suburbia. The institution of suburbia is, as we have previously encountered, are often approached in spatial terms as ‘the environment we love to hate.’<sup>260</sup> Suburbia is constantly represented as just that in all of the three texts I have dealt with, since they all paint an ambivalent and complex picture of the suburban ethos, where the main characters are struggling with or even against their own identities in the midst of the suburban space. The suburban institution seems to take on a spatial- political significance as a space that always seems to allude to middle class angst and fear of otherness. Interestingly, middle- class angst is physically manifested in terms of the figure of the other in all of the narratives, embodied by John, Wendy and Ronnie. Although in very different ways, they seem to be the representation of the psychological anxiety of suburbia, and the fear of so- called subversive behaviour. Bourgeois angst not only seems to manifest itself in those terms, but it also seems that the angst ridden suburbanites desperately need a scapegoat that can function as suburbia’s emotional trash can.

Martin Halliwell argues that it is important to ‘Distinguish the historical resonances of the 1950s from the popular memory of ‘the fifties.’<sup>261</sup> I believe this is an important comment on the power of selective historical memory. This is important to keep in mind since many of our projections and images of the 1950s will be shaped by the historical memory of ‘the mythical fifties’ that never existed. The fifties is often remembered as a decade of innocence and affluence, something we often encounter in nostalgic movies based on popular memory, such as *Back to the Future* (1985), *Grease* (1978) and to a certain degree *Pleasantville* (1999), however I will argue that it is important not to succumb to this nostalgia when approaching the 1950s. As I have argued in my thesis, the 1950s was a decade of great dissatisfaction for many women and men alike who were supposed to ‘live’ the American Dream as we have encountered in *Revolutionary Road*. At the same time the American Dream was an exclusive institution of privilege, since African- Americans were excluded from the ethos of the American Dream: The suburban home. The decade is first and foremost a decade of

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<sup>260</sup> Jurca, *White Diaspora* (p. 161)

<sup>261</sup> Halliwell, *American Culture* (p. 4-5)

contrasts where the middle classes became more affluent, where as few economic rewards was experienced by impoverished African- Americans in city slums.

We have also encountered 'the difficulty of preserving genuine experience in the face of commercial and ideological pressures.'<sup>262</sup> The fifties saw a stark rise in commercialism and American families invested more money in their home environments than ever before. At the same time, we often see the suburban home portrayed as an entity embodying the conformist values of the decade more than being a genuine home for the main characters. April and Frank Wheeler seem to have an ambiguous relationship with the suburban home throughout the narrative and the home is often portrayed as working against them, as a stark contrast to what it should do. The Wheelers also feel that they must escape the American Dream in order to be their authentic selves, which alludes to the conflict Halliwell mentions. The ideology of commercialism, gender conformity and communist paranoia, often distributed by the media, is what seems to lead to the fall of the Wheelers since there seems to be few alternative life style options.

This lack of alternative life styles and the conformity of suburbia, is in many ways un-American since 'Homogeneity violates the American Dream of a 'balanced' community where people of diverse age, class, race, and religion live together.'<sup>263</sup> Ironically, suburbia seems to violate the American Dream, something I have also argued in the first chapter of the thesis, but however, it may be worthwhile to dismantle the myth of the American Dream even further. We may for example ask ourselves if Gans mythic community has ever existed and been a reality in a country where racism and segregation have historically been ingrained in culture, politics and legal institutions and where a capitalist system secures the interests of the already wealthy and incorporates a philosophy of the survival of the fittest for the poor. Perhaps we may argue that the American Dream has never in fact existed in the first place since class mobility was not a reality for large parts of the American population. However, the fictional characters that have accessed the dream want to escape it in the end since their identities disappear in the institution. Suburban narratives further complicate notions of the American Dream, and further question the validity of its existence.

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid (p. 10)

<sup>263</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (London: Penguin, 1967) pp. xxix- 474 (p. 165)

The American family is a recurring theme in all the three texts. The dilemma of the family is portrayed differently in the texts, but nevertheless the conflicts are usually rooted in gender roles, masculinity issues and the ambivalent role of mother. In *Revolutionary Road*, Frank often complains about the conformity of American life, however, he has big problems accepting April's plan about her being the breadwinner of the family in Paris. 'He had a quick disquieting vision of her coming home from a day at the office- wearing a Parisian tailored suit, briskly pulling off her gloves- coming home and finding him in an egg- stained bathrobe, on an unmade bed, picking his nose.'<sup>264</sup> This is the ultimate castration anxiety scene in the novel, where Frank feels that he will lose the position of grey flannel suit breadwinner, a position that he has previously claimed to despise.

This leads us to issues of gender and suburbia and why suburbia is portrayed as such a specifically gendered space. Suburbia is in *Revolutionary Road* accused of everything from emasculating men to functioning as a prison for women. Betty Friedan claims that 'It was only later that some of us discovered that maybe we had walked as willing victims into a comfortable concentration camp.'<sup>265</sup> As a stark contradiction, the suburban space seems to be both a man's world where men make enough money for their family to take part in the American Dream at the same time as the American Dream is what our fictional families want to escape. Women also seem to view, at least in the aftermath, the suburban home as a restrictive environment where they simply served the national ideology of domesticity as a bastion against potential Soviet subversion. As a contrast to this view of suburbia as disempowering women, it is also an institution that takes on matriarchal connotations since women inhabit the suburban space to a greater extent than their working husbands. Women are also arguably the main consumers who buy the consumer goods for the family home, where as men seem to hold less stock in the suburban home than women.

The crisis in masculinity is a recurring theme in *Revolutionary Road*. Not only is the grey flannel suit strangling, but Frank seems to have problems identifying alternative masculinities and an alternative life, just as April struggles with finding an alternative replacing the housewife role. The theme of the frontier is present in the text, not only as a means of escaping to Paris, but as a revival of American masculinity. Interestingly, the

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<sup>264</sup> Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (p. 109)

<sup>265</sup> Friedan, *It Changed my Life* (p. 17)

masculine role is critiqued in all the three suburban narratives I have examined, however, none of the men, perhaps apart from Richard, manage to find an alternative or a way out, since they do not escape suburbia but carry on with the life they hate instead. It seems like the escape metaphor is dismantled in all the three narratives, but especially in *Revolutionary Road* since April is aborting the frontier and the escape. The alternative and the escape seem to die with her.

*Revolutionary Road* experienced a revival in the 1990s and after the movie adaptation in 2009, however for unknown reasons the novel has attracted little critical scholarship, even though the novel is a brilliant way to contextualize gender, suburbia and the 1950s. Yates' abortion metaphor especially has received no critical attention even though this metaphor is what Yates claims to be at the heart of the novel. I believe April's abortion is a powerful statement on the entrapment of the American Dream and the alienation of the 1950s housewife to her own home environment. However, Yates use of the abortion metaphor constitutes only a limited critique of American society when he claims that 'The Wheelers may have thought the suburbs were to blame for all of their problems, but I meant it to be implicit in the text that that was their problem, not mine.'<sup>266</sup> Even though *Revolutionary Road* is often portrayed and widely seen as a counter culture narrative, Yates' critique of American society becomes quite limited when he occupies the traditionally conservative position of blaming individuals for their problems instead of power structures.

My wish is for *Revolutionary Road* to attract more critical attention than what it has received up to this point. The narrative is a brilliant literary representation of 1950s, suburbia and the American Dream and its complicated and complex relationship with gender roles. The text can also be seen as an important historical testimony in terms of the depiction of the socio- political landscape of the 1950s and the ideology of domesticity and the fear of the bomb. When we place the novel in dialogue with different suburban narratives, we see that suburbia and the suburban landscape continues to fascinate authors and inspire their work. We may perhaps ask: What is it about suburbia that American authors find so fascinating? I believe that suburbia represents the heart of America and all that America aspires to be. This heart is both loved and loathed since suburbia is the space that we all love to hate. Fascinatingly, suburban narratives function as both an ode and a

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<sup>266</sup> De Witt and Clark, 'An Interview with Richard Yates' (p. 66)

critique of American everyday life through the characters' crooked and flawed journey to self- realisation.

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