

## **Introduction**

### **Perilous Landscapes: An Introduction**

More Americans live in the suburbs than in either cities or rural areas combined, and many of those who don't live in "suburbs" live in housing defined by the suburban aesthetic—go to any small town and more often than not you'll find miniature subdivisions freshly erected on its outskirts (Jackson 283). All-pervasive, perhaps the chief definer of twentieth-century American society, the suburbs affect our daily habits and the structure of our communities. For the scholar of American fiction, this prominence leads to the question: how are they treated in our literature?

This project examines novels and stories of the suburb from the five decades following World War II, a period that witnessed significant flux in make-up of suburbs and suburban identity. The suburb is often associated with homogeneity, but postwar expansion strained its cultural definition. As a result, "suburb" may inspire for some people images of a neighborhood with large houses, curving streets, and shady, manicured lawns while others might think of blandly identical tract homes stretching off to infinity: Westchester or Levittown. These differences are far from trivial, especially in fiction, as middle-class homeowners often attempt to identify themselves either with or against their neighbors. In John Cheever's stories, when characters fall from grace they often land in lower-middle-class suburbs as punishment, while residents of his urbane, high-income, garden suburbs bemoan the encroachment of these mass-produced

developments on their communities. Meanwhile, in John Updike's *Rabbit Redux*, Rabbit, who lives in a lower-middle-class, mass-produced suburb, resents the doctors and lawyers who live in Penn Park, the analogue to Cheever's upper-middle-class Bullet Park and Shady Hill.

The suburb's haphazard growth over the last centuries has produced this variety—for between the poles of Cheever's suburbs and Rabbit's are countless gradations. In Roman times through the Middle Ages, and up to the earliest decades of the Industrial Revolution, the suburb was the least desirable part of the city, a place of tanneries and prostitution. The upper and middle classes lived in the city center, near the seats of commerce and power. European and Latin American cities have continued this tradition, pushing their lower classes outward: witness the *favelas* of Brazil, or the high-rise ridden Parisian *banlieus*, where France's Muslim minority rioted in 2005. The suburb as we know it has its roots in eighteenth-century London, where wealthier members of the bourgeoisie, spurred by an Evangelical movement that declared the city an enemy to the family and prized the separation of the domestic and spiritual from the profane and the commercial, moved out of the city to villas on London's edge (Fishman 38). Dickens gives us two examples of such Londoners: *David Copperfield's* Mr. Spenlow, who commutes from his law office in the city to his idyllic home in Norwood, and *Great Expectations'* Wemmick, who maintains the separation of the domestic and the commercial, telling Pip that when he comes home to his cottage, "I leave the office behind me" (208).

The early American middle class imitated their British models, expanding the suburb as quickly as transportation technology would allow. As historian Kenneth

Jackson has shown in *Crabgrass Frontier*, the growth of the suburb was limited by residents' ability to commute between the center city and the city's margins. Each advance in transportation—from steamboat (which allowed Brooklyn to begin its turn from an independent city to a suburb of New York as early as 1820) to horse railway to train to electric trolley to automobile—made the suburb accessible to more people by lengthening the distance one could reasonably travel for a daily commute. Each progression also lowered the cost-threshold for the commute, which affected the make-up of the communities they led to: trains were expensive, so suburbs built along train lines, “mainline” suburbs like Bryn Mawr and Villanova, housed the upper-middle-class, but trolleys, a later development, were much cheaper, so suburbs reachable by trolley were available to the lower orders of the middle class. At the same time, farther reaching transportation opened up more land for suburban expansion, which, in combination with developments in construction—such as the balloon-frame, developed in Chicago in the nineteenth century, or the Levitts' application of the assembly line to home building in the 1940s and 1950s—drove down the base cost of suburban real estate. By the end of World War II, with the automobile ubiquitous, vast tracts of land available, and help from the government through mortgage guarantees, buying a suburban home became cheaper for the lower-middle class than renting.

The suburbs have gradually evolved—though evolved is not quite the right word, as the older suburbs have remained in place alongside the newer ones—since the eighteenth century. In this evolution, the postwar years represent the moment of greatest change. Generally, suburbs before the war were the home of the wealthier classes, while after the war, as prosperity lifted basic living standards, more classes of Americans

moved to the suburbs. This shift in class—from exclusive to broadly available (except, of course, to minorities)—had been coming for some time. As early as the 1930s, the government, in an effort to make houses more affordable, funded experiments to determine the smallest suburban house that could be built and lived in: “After placing essential equipment and furniture in each room,” historian Greg Hise writes, describing the experiments, “researchers adjusted the walls’ position to determine spatial minimums for fixtures and families. When evaluating kitchen design, technicians cranked in the walls incrementally as demonstration homemakers baked, cooked, and cleaned” (63). But only after the war, with a strong economy and veteran benefit programs, did families begin flooding into the suburb to create a new mass-middle class.

The anxiety caused by this moment of change—an enormous shift in the identity of the suburbs—forms the subject of my first chapter. The bulldozing of huge swaths of land and the building of large-scale housing developments made for a stark alteration to the American landscape. Latching onto this change to define their fears, postwar social critics fretted over what the new, unprecedented suburban expansion would mean for the country, worrying that suburbanites would be transformed by their neighborhoods into soulless, “neuter drones” (Keats 193). Their fear became the dominant understanding of the new suburbs—with us still today—but at the same time fiction writers like Richard Yates and John McPartland challenged its usefulness and offered, I argue, an important though long ignored counternarrative—one in which the real danger lay in believing in the suburb’s power over the individual.

The second chapter shifts to the 1960s and early 1970s to illuminate the suburb’s engagement with the Cold War in fiction—an engagement truly about endangered

masculinity. In Updike's *Rabbit Redux*, James Dickey's *Deliverance*, and Cheever's "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow," a suburban man feels challenged, hemmed in by forces seemingly beyond his control—mounting debts, joblessness, and, in the case of *Deliverance*, property ownership. Cheever and Dickey's upper-middle-class characters react to this challenge with hubris, daring nuclear war, while Updike's lower-middle-class Rabbit responds with humility, using the Space Race not to fantasize about escape, but to figure his feelings of desperation. In the end, I argue, while they are motivated by threatened masculinity, their differing class positions are responsible for their differing reactions and their differing results.

The third chapter focuses on novels that treat the national upheaval of the late 60s and early 70s—the urban riots and the underworld created by the antiwar, anti-establishment counterculture. In each novel, a daughter flees an upper-middle-class suburb for a sacked city. Writers repeat this trope whether they're writing concurrently with this historical moment, as Joyce Carol Oates does in *Wonderland* (1971), or thirty years later, as Philip Roth does in *American Pastoral* (1997). The recurrent fugitive daughter, I argue, acts as a figure for the draining of power from city to suburb—in rejecting her parents' world, she travels against the flow—and reveals the American upper-middle class's role in shaping cities and the wider world. They have tried to hide this power behind suburban innocuousness, but, in claiming their daughters, the city calls them out.

The suburb offers the illusion of innocence, but it also promises improvement. Technology—in transportation and home building—enabled the suburbs, but the guiding force in their creation, according to Kenneth Jackson, was an ideology that privileged

home ownership and the isolation of family. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century, writers like Catherine Beecher (sister to Harriet Beecher Stowe) and Andrew Jackson Downing popularized the semi-rural landscape, romanticizing nature as therapeutic and the picturesque cottage as the seat of a healthy family life. “The love of country is inseparably connected with love of home,” Downing wrote,

Whatever, therefore, leads men to assemble the comforts and elegancies of life around his habitations, tends to increase local attachments, and render domestic life more delightful; thus not only augmenting his own enjoyment but strengthening his patriotism, and making him a better citizen. (Jackson 65)

Uniting Wordsworthian Romanticism with the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer, Downing promoted the proto-suburban notion of a man (for both Downing and Beecher, it is men who reap these rewards) nurtured and made a better citizen by his home.

Throughout the suburb’s expansion, boosters would return to the idea that the suburb would improve and protect its residents. One advertisement from 1905 read, “Get your children into the country. The cities murder children. The hot pavements, the dust, the noise, are fatal in many cases, and harmful always. The history of successful men is nearly always the history of country boys” (Jackson 138). Invariably, the suburb is the site of health and success, the city the site of filth and despair.

This suburban promise—that home ownership and living close to the land will make you a better person—hovers behind all the books discussed in this dissertation, but I focus on it especially in the fourth chapter, which examines suburban fiction of the 1970s and after. Only at this point had America become a truly suburban nation—it was the 1970 census that first declared the suburbs more populous than either urban or rural areas (Jackson 283)—and so only then could the question be asked, what world has the

suburb created? A healthier world? One filled with better citizens? Where before suburban fiction maintained a separation between what could happen inside the suburb and what could happen outside (the fugitive daughters have to leave to find danger), now all barriers are dropped and the suburb grows dangerous and bleak. I argue this change in tone and subject reflects a change in American society—the shifting from postwar prosperity and idealism to a period of recessions and disillusionment—and acts as a judgment of the suburban promise, declaring it false. The suburbs are, after all, no more beneficial to their residents than anywhere else.

Each of these four chapters revolves around its own central argument, but as they progress broader understandings of gender, class, and the genealogy of suburban fiction emerge. Perhaps the most surprising discovery among these is that despite the suburb's ties to domesticity it is written as a decidedly masculine space. Yates's Frank Wheeler thinks of his home as "a man's home" and wants to stay there, and in *The Ice Storm*, written thirty years later, Benjamin Hood tries to save his suburban home—and thus his family—while his wife shows little attachment to it. The fugitive daughters resent the suburb because it is the site of their father's control, and for Charlie Pastern in "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow" and Lewis Medlock in *Deliverance* the path to regained masculinity runs through reclaiming their figurative hold on the suburb. In *Jesus Saves* the suburb may be the province of single mothers, but danger comes from a male predator living in their midst, skewing the space from isolated femininity to ramped up masculine terror.

The suburb is a masculine space, and so it is men who love it more. Despite the dominant cultural image of the stifled suburban husband (think of Kevin Spacey's

character in *American Beauty*, or Jim Carey's allegorical Truman in *The Truman Show*), it's women who most often flee the suburb while their husbands remain behind, bound to the suburban world. In *Rabbit Redux* Janice Angstrom leaves Rabbit in Penn Villas, and in the novels and stories featuring fugitive daughters it's the daughters, of course, who leave the suburb. In *Revolutionary Road* April Wheeler wants to leave for France while Frank wants to stay. In *No Down Payment* Jane Martin is unhappy in Sunrise Hills while her husband remains content, and she spends much of the book convincing him to rise in the corporate world so they can leave. But in suburban fiction women's desire to escape leads inevitably to failure—either death or return. Judith Jernigan in *Jernigan* dies in a car accident while fleeing her home. April dies of despair, inducing a late abortion after all hopes of escape have been dashed. The fugitive daughters are physically and sexually assaulted in the city. The Lisbon girls, isolated in their suburban home in *The Virgin Suicides* while fantasizing about escape, commit suicide.

These deaths lead to another surprising aspect of suburban fiction's treatment of gender: throughout these books, the suburb endangers women. From April Wheeler to Jean Martin (who is raped in her home) to the hippy Jill in *Rabbit Redux* (who burns alive in Rabbit's house) to the dying women in the books of Chapter Four (nine, compared to only two teenage boys), women came to harm at a far higher rate than men in suburban fiction. Even as suburbs might at first appear feminine—the place, at least in the first postwar decades, given over to women's control while men worked in downtown offices—women's vulnerability in these novels reminds us this isn't so. From its beginning the suburb was built for male delight—a place of semi-rural repose from the city, and a place to protect his progeny (“The city murders children. [. . .] The history of



successful men is nearly always the history of country boys”). In the construction of the suburbs, women are simply part of the nurturing atmosphere, deprived of agency and power. Now wonder they seek to flee; no wonder they perish from desperation.

While the condition of women remains constant across postwar suburban fiction, the treatment of class shifts depending on the decade. In the novels and stories of the 1950s and early 1960s, we find worries about a growing mass-middle class. Characters see the large-scale developments as the melting pot of this new class, the creator of an identity category powerful enough to override any other, be it race, region, or gender. In *No Down Payment* Jim Kemp, a black salesman who briefly angles for a stake in Sunrise Hills, gives up because he believes living there will make him “imitation white,” and Jean Martin thinks one threat of suburban abundance is the loss of gender difference. Meanwhile, in *Revolutionary Road* the Wheelers’s resist being sucked into this class (becoming like the “million others”) through intellectual posturing and dreams of escape, and in Cheever’s stories the new suburbs are written as the domain of faceless hordes threatening the happiness of his upper-middle-class characters (Yates 60). The mass-middle class is an object of fear and must be avoided at all costs—by retreating from it, as Jim Kemp does, by staving it off, as Cheever’s suburbanites do, or by rising above it, as Jean Martin and the Wheelers hope to do.

But in the novels of 1960s and 1970s suburbs, class concerns turn from identity to responsibility. The class striations—between upper-middle class and mass-middle class—in suburban fiction remain, but the focus shifts to the guilt of the upper-middle class for national and world suffering, something Elliot Nailles in Cheever’s *Bullet Park* understands when he admits to his son:

Charlie Simpson is really a great fellow but he and Phelps Marsden and a half a dozen other prominent and wealthy men around here make their money in deals with Salazar, Franco, Union Miniere and all those military juntas. They talk about freedom and independence more than anybody else but they furnish the money and the armaments and the technicians to crush freedom and independence whenever it appears. (67)

Because of their guilt, in the novels of the 1960s and 1970s the upper-middle class—especially upper-middle-class men—are made to suffer. Charlie Pastern and Lewis Medlock experience financial and physical pain, and the fathers of the fugitive daughters must wait, powerless, while their daughters are taken by the city—in most of these novels it's the father's tortured anxiety the writers focus on, not the daughter's various punishments. In the books, the upper-middle-class male's suffering becomes a reprisal for his class's role in the larger world. They have tried, like Charlie Simpson and Phelps Marsden, to hide behind the suburb's veil of pastoral innocence, but in suffering they are outed.

Despite the shift in focus—and despite the travails of the upper-middle class in the novels of the 1960s and 1970s suburbs—one constant regarding class emerges: the upper-middle class thrives while the lower-middle class loses. This might seem a strange statement after a paragraph detailing upper-middle-class suffering, but that suffering is ephemeral. The fathers of the fugitive daughters have their daughters returned to them or, in the case of the Swede in *American Pastoral*, receive a new license on the suburb through a new family. Meanwhile characters on the lowest rungs of suburban class remain at risk of losing their homes, as Troy Noon, a gas station manager, does in *No Down Payment*, and Rabbit Angstrom, a typesetter, does in *Rabbit Redux*. The division between the classes becomes more evident in the novels of the final chapter. Aside from *The Ice Storm*, all the deaths in the novels come to characters on the suburb's class

margins. The Lisbon girls, as the daughters of a high school teacher, aren't the class peers of their neighbors, the Jernigans are barely holding on to their place in a middle-class New Jersey suburb (Jernigan loses his job as a real estate agent, and they live in a non-descript "shitbox" that lacks a back door), the girls being taken in *Jesus Saves* are the daughters of single mothers living on the cheaply built suburban frontier, and in *Independence Day* Claire Devane, who has been murdered at the novel's start, is an African-American real estate agent—on the suburban fringe both through her race and her class (Gates 29). Despite the new suburb's promise to help its residents rise, to offer an inclusive community and a stake in a larger middle class, suburban ownership remains tenuous for the lower-middle class throughout these books, a subtle challenge to the social critics' narrative of transformation (no one is being transformed) and a reminder that not all are made welcome after all.

The third thru-line of these chapters is that of genealogy—of suburban writers and of the fictional suburban space. In the roughly 40 years spanned by this dissertation, two generations of writers emerge. The first generation, which includes Yates, Updike, Roth, McPartland and others, typically focuses its narratives on the experience of a young professional male recently moved to the suburbs (there is variety: Roth focuses more on newcomers to the upper-middle class, and Updike looks at the full array of suburban classes in his work). The second generation, that of Moody, Eugenides, and Steinke—the generation that has grown up with suburban expansion—most often casts their novels from the point of view of a child growing up in the suburbs in the 1970s or later. The explanation for the change is simple: the two generations' foci are pegged to their broader experience—to the experience of moving and adapting to the suburb for the first

generation, and growing up there for the second. But there are, of course, anomalies. Cheever doesn't fit neatly into the first generation; his characters are at home to the suburb's codes and comforts. Oates falls between the two categories, writing at times from the point of view of the freshly arrived adult male, and at other times from the child raised in the suburbs. And Richard Ford and David Gates belong to the second generation but write from the point of view used most often by the first generation—that of the adult male.

One reason for these differing approaches, besides that of authors' varying personal experiences, is that both generations have had to face the primary challenge of suburban fiction: the suburban space's homogeneity. Its residents, its concerns, and its aesthetics remain static—or, at least, appear to—making it increasingly difficult to write a fresh take on the suburbs, a sentiment I found alive and well when discussing my project recently with several novelists at a writing residency. The suburban novel's history can be read as a series of attempts to answer this challenge, to bring freshness to a genre of writing widely viewed as stale—already a problem in 1956, the year Richard Yates had an early version of *Revolutionary Road* rejected on the ground that editors read it as a mere imitation of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. To combat this burden, writers shifted quickly from novels about life in the suburbs themselves to using the suburb as a vantage point from which to see the wider world—as in the novels of the 1960s and 1970s, in which suburban visions of the outside (global politics, urban riots) become as important, if not more, than their views of their own neighborhoods. Read this way, the point of view shift that marks the second generation of suburban fiction is simply another attempt to refresh the genre, this time by offering a new vision of

suburban life while also ramping up the violence. Suburban novels, then, must be examined through the lens of inheritance, taking into account how each writer addresses the history of suburban writing. This, of course, is true of any strain of fiction, but it is all the more important in suburban fiction, I argue, because of its burden of perceived mundanity—of the sense, expressed already in 1956, that there’s nothing new to say about the suburbs.

In writing about suburban fiction, I’m joining a small club. The suburban novel has merited just two critical studies in the last decade. In *White Diaspora: the Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel*, Catherine Jurca examines suburban fiction from the beginning of the twentieth century to the first decade of the postwar era, and reveals how the white middle class has continually taken up victimhood in suburban novels—painting life in the suburbs as a hardship to be endured or abandoned instead of the greatest of luxuries. And Robert Beuka has opened up the canon of postwar suburban fiction in *Suburbanation*, arguing against stale readings of the fiction—and the suburbs themselves—while showing how a selection of novels, stories, and films go beyond the simplistic utopian/dystopian binary of typical suburban commentary (conformist suburb as haven, conformist suburb as nightmare) to take on issues of class, race, and gender. Both books make important arguments—Jurca’s especially—but the work is incomplete. Jurca ends *White Diaspora* with Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) and then appends a discussion of the following forty years of suburban fiction titled “Same as it Ever Was” in which she implies a vegetative stasis, claiming “writers since the 1960s have not invented a tradition so much as carried on and reworked the legacy of suburban homelessness that emerged so insistently in *Babbitt*” (161). And Beuka’s

readings only go so far. In discussing class in Cheever's stories, he simply observes that class differences exist. And in looking at gender in *Rabbit Redux*, he simply notes that Rabbit has his masculinity challenged. He's right to remind us that these issues occupy suburban fiction, but if we are to treat suburban fiction seriously, we must do more than say it takes on relevant topics. We must make arguments about them. That is what I do in this dissertation.

Postwar suburban fiction is a vibrant, key strain of twentieth-century American writing. It tells an important part of the story of the changes the country underwent in the century's latter decades, and understanding this fiction, I argue, is critical to understanding American culture and literature.

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## **Chapter One**

### **The Two Suburbs: The New Postwar Development's Challenge to American Identity**

At the close of World War II the US found itself in a housing shortage. With millions of soldiers returning home, many reunited families had no place to live. Some shared apartments, while others turned to surplus grain bins and trolley cars (Jackson 232). The consequent demand for new housing, aided by government incentives for home loans and a wartime industrial capacity in search of new projects, led to the unprecedented expansion of the suburbs. Following the Second World War, single-family housing starts jumped from 114,000 in 1944 to 1,692,000 in 1950, and from 1950 to 1960 3,000 acres of greenland were bulldozed per day to make room for these new homes (Jackson 233, Miller 136). The face of this new suburban expansion was the large-scale development—a place like Levittown, built in 1947 by former army contractors, where 17,400 houses arose on a former potato farm on Long Island (Jackson 235). The Levittowns (after New York, a Levittown would be built in New Jersey and Pennsylvania) and their imitators accounted for only a third of construction, but they swiftly became the image of postwar expansion—gracing magazine covers and fueling book-length studies—due to their size and to the many smaller builders who mimicked their ranch homes and cape cods (Clark 218).



Along with changing the landscape, this new wave of building altered the imagery associated with the suburbs. Before the emergence of the mass-produced development, the suburb was considered the enclave of the upper-middle-class. Garden suburbs, communities of solidly built Tudors and Dutch Colonials surrounded by spacious lawns, had defined the term “suburban” since the mid-nineteenth century. But with the new postwar developments, the image of the suburbs shifted. Rather than bastions of the conservative rich—think *Babbitt* or *The Philadelphia Story*—“suburb” came to be identified also with the swarming masses of the new middle-class and defined by cheap construction, cramped yards, and cookie-cutter homes. Both the garden suburbs and the postwar mass developments stood for conformity in the eyes of critics, but where writers like Sinclair Lewis would describe the upper-middle-class suburbs as the sites of peer-pressure conservatism, the conformity envisioned in the mass-produced suburbs by social critics and novelists in the 1950s was more sinister, a soulless, malleable conformity for conformity’s sake bred from the starkness of the landscape.

It’s the massness of the new developments—the rows upon rows of identical houses on treeless plains—that ushered in a new wave of anxiety about the suburbs. Critics worried over the effects of sameness on a broad, new class of Americans, fearing their built environment would break their spirits, spoil their happiness, erase their individuality, and drive them into blind submission to authority. This anxiety, I argue, was at its heart an anxiety about the loss of class status in a purportedly classless landscape. Identical houses and streets posed a threat to the micro-distinctions within the middle class—professional distinctions (executive versus salesman), lifestyle distinctions (conservative versus bohemian), hyper-class distinctions (lower-middle-class, middle-

middle-class)—as all ranges of the middle class found themselves lumped together in developments. The new developments also threatened the status of those in the upper-middle class living in prewar Babbitt suburbs as tract homes hemmed in these older, more established communities and altered the meaning of “suburban.” It’s these class worries that energize descriptions of mass-produced suburbs in fiction of the postwar period, that give them potency and stoke fears about identity-loss and the transformative power of the suburban environment. The upper-middle class of John Cheever’s *Shady Hill* recoils at the nearness of the mass development Maple Dells. Newcomers to the mass-produced suburbs jockey for status in Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road* and John McPartland’s *No Down Payment*. Characters in J. D. Salinger and Jack Kerouac’s fiction echo social critics’ fears that the environment of the new suburb will transform its citizens. In the suburb described in each of these works, the varied orders of the middle class mix together in newly built suburbs where the particularities of one house become indistinguishable from another, and the neighborhoods that once granted status now grant sameness.

But in treating the suburbs, fiction writers engaged the *image* of the new suburbs rather than the suburbs themselves. This is an important distinction. It’s the image of the suburb the writers (or their characters) found so threatening, not the physical suburb. What I mean by the image of the suburb is the dominant popular understanding of the mass-produced suburb, a stereotype easily picked out in writers’ work when they view the developments from afar as a collective while fixing on only a few details, like barbecues and picture windows, to underscore a similarity of manner, a sense of enforced communal fun and surveillance. Fiction writers either adopted this understanding of the

suburb whole-heartedly, like Cheever and Kerouac, or responded to it and took it apart, like Yates, McPartland, and Salinger. But in each of these works, the image of the suburb usurped the particular suburb itself, and by the end of the fifties the image had grown so menacing that in Yates's *Revolutionary Road* characters were doing battle with it.

The use of this image served a purpose. In depicting landscapes of mass-produced, suburban sameness, and having their characters react to them (either with disgust or measured appreciation), writers figured the uncertainty over the shift in American society from a rigid class society (in which garden suburbs were the houses of the ruling class) to a more equitable society, in which mass-produced developments would grant affluence to all. The mass-produced development represented the American promise of this new society, the free capitalist world's answer to communism. The suburban image may have been rooted in the physical sameness of actual mass-produced developments, but in employing it, and in crafting it as mystically transformative, fiction writers as well as social critics voiced a worry about what the new, post-war America would be. The suburbs represented a modern hope of equality, of redefining the middle class so that it would trump background, identity, or race, and recreate the country. The image of the mass-produced suburb became the writers' means of focusing their anxiety about this promised future.

#### 1. The Two Suburbs: Old Order vs. New Order

In his stories from the 1950s, collected in *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill*, John Cheever alternately provides full, sympathetic portraits of upper-middle-class suburbs while maligning mass-produced suburbs. In Cheever's favorite suburb, Shady Hill, the men are executives, the women are housewives with maids and intellectual pursuits, the children go to private schools and ivy-league colleges, and the houses are prewar palaces on spreading lawns. Throughout the stories Cheever establishes a protective ownership of this world: in one, "The Worm in the Apple," he mimics a suburban critic by searching for the hidden tragedy underlying a family's seeming happiness. The story concludes that the family truly is happy and suggests the problem lies not with them but with the would-be critic, whose view of the family is marred by "timidity or moral cowardice" (288). Cheever is often thought of as skewering the suburbs in his work, but in his stories of suburban travails it's not the place that's at fault but the people who live there. They are allowed agency and individuality. But in another story from *Housebreaker*, "The Trouble of Marcie Flint," Cheever puts a mass-produced suburb, Maple Dell, in conflict with his preferred, upper-middle-class Shady Hill. He relies on descriptions of Maple Dell's massness, denying it individuality, and reveals the stark division of status between the two suburbs and the anxiety posed by the image of the new developments.

"Trouble" opens with Charles Flint fleeing Shady Hill for Italy. Aboard ship he fills his diary with bitter rages against middle-class complacency:

I am a fugitive from the suburbs of all large cities. [. . .] God preserve me [. . .] from women who dress like toreros to go to the supermarket, and from cowhide dispatch cases, and from flannels and gabardines. Preserve me from word games and adulterers, from basset hounds and swimming pools and frozen canapés and Bloody Mary's and smugness and syringa bushes and P.T.A meetings. (289)

Flint's complaints denote his class—syringa bushes, P.T.A. meetings, and adultery might be found in all suburbs, but swimming pools, frozen canapés, and the cloth of executives' suits ("flannels and gabardines") reflect upper-middle-class society. While Flint loathes his home—"What holes! The suburbs, I mean," he declares—Cheever's narrator does not allow Flint's attacks to stand unchallenged (289). Early in Flint's rant the narrator interrupts with the claim "There was absolutely nothing wrong with the suburb (Shady Hill) from which Charles Flint was fleeing" (289). According to the narrator, Flint's anger toward Shady Hill and its manners is only a cover for his own despair. We find out later Flint has been cuckolded, and that his children nearly died through an accident. The narrator claims Flint is a "bitter man [. . .] more interested in unloading his own peppery feelings than in learning the truth" (289). In fact, we later find out Flint is a self-proclaimed lover of suburban life: working on his house brings him bliss, and sitting in his yard sends him into reverie (293, 295). At the end of the story, realizing his errors in placing blame on his neighborhood, Flint declares, "I know that I will go back" (301). In Cheever's fiction criticism of Shady Hill isn't allowed, and the narrator must step in to defend the neighborhood. Distaste for the suburb is described as a personal matter, rooted in individual setbacks, and in the end mistaken—even Flint secretly loves his suburb.

But in the other narrative of the story—the Village Council's debate whether to build a public library—Cheever endorses his characters' distaste for mass-produced Maple Dell, by aligning his depiction of the neighborhood with that of its chief critic, Mrs. Selfredge. Building the library is a contentious issue because most of Shady Hill's wealthy suburbanites fear it will attract mass-produced development (291). Mrs.

Selfredge, one of these wealthy suburbanites, believes that the mere proximity of tract homes would harm her lifestyle: “their flocks of children, and their monthly interest payments, and their picture windows, and their view of identical houses and treeless, muddy, unpaved streets, seemed to threaten her most cherished concepts—her lawns, her pleasures, her property rights, even her self-esteem” (296). Mrs. Selfredge’s fear stems from the monolithic image of the new development (its “identical houses” and “flocks of children”) and the class it represents (she fixates on “their monthly interest payments” and “muddy, unpaved streets”). Here happiness is tied directly to the physical space of the suburb as Mrs. Selfredge focuses her fears through land-use—her “lawns” are threatened, leading to her “pleasures” and “self-esteem,” and that threat comes not from the people, but from the houses and streets of the mass-produced development. We soon find out Mrs. Selfredge has a reason to be jealous of her landscape; her own class status is fragile. She passes for solidly upper-middle-class, but the narrator confides to us that she is the daughter of a Brooklyn patrolman, a fact she has hidden from her neighbors (296). She has risen to Shady Hill, her climb through the classes represented in her lawns and property rights, her physical move from a childhood in the city to adulthood in the suburb, and now sees the value of that climb threatened by the physical changing of the surrounding landscape. Her class identity is tied to the landscape, and if the landscape is altered and encroached upon, her “self-esteem” is threatened.

While Mrs. Selfredge may be one of Cheever’s fussy suburban matrons—whose overconcern with manners and propriety are rarely to be taken in full seriousness—the narrator backs her up. Cheever describes Maple Dell, the one mass-produced

development already in Shady Hill<sup>1</sup>, in much the same manner as David Riesman or any other archcritic of the suburbs:

It was the kind of place where the houses stand cheek by jowl, all of them white frame, all of them built twenty years ago, and parked beside each was a car that seemed more substantial than the house itself, as if this were a fragment of some nomadic culture. And it was a kind of spawning ground, a place for bearing and raising the young and for nothing else—for who would ever come back to Maple Dell? Who, in the darkest night, would ever think with longing of the three upstairs bedrooms and the leaky toilet and the sour-smelling halls? (291-2)

The houses are flimsy and unremarkable and so, we are to infer, incapable of harboring any sort of life worth living or remembering. Cheever, who often eludes suburban stereotypes by focusing on individual characters, portrays Maple Dell only en masse, revealing his sensitivity to its uniformity. From Mrs. Selfredge's worry over "picture windows" and "treeless, unpaved streets" to the evocation of the houses "cheek by jowl," almost none of the details are in the singular (296). These are masses at the gates, threatening to overwhelm the privileged peace of Shady Hill. And in referring to these new suburbs as a "spawning ground" with "flocks of children," he turns their residents into subhumans, a move that suggests, along with their rootlessness ("they are nomadic"), these hordes have less of a right to the land. Elsewhere in the story we are told other reasons for Shady Hill's animosity toward development:

Carsen Park, the next village, had let a development inside its boundaries, with disastrous results to the people already living there. Their taxes had been doubled, their schools had been ruined. [. . .] A horrible murder—three murders, in fact—took place in one of the cheese-box houses in the Carsen Park development. (291)

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<sup>1</sup> Maple Dell may be technically prewar ("built twenty years ago") but it stands in for the flood of mass-produced imitators that the people of Shady Hill fear the library will attract.

The residents of Shady Hill associate the new developments with increased tax burdens and violence, but the central concern, repeated by the narrator and Mrs. Selfredge, is aesthetic. Even in the passage about the murders, the size and plainness of the house (“cheese-box”) is central, taking the place of any other detail about the murders, even the victims or motive.

Just as he describes Maple Dell en masse, Cheever refuses it the particular story that gives Shady Hill meaning and redemption. Noel Mackham, the sole character in “Trouble” who lives in Maple Dell, comes close to giving a sympathetic face to the development, but ends up silenced by the other characters (he is shouted down at the Village Council meeting, and his letters to the editor are kept out of the paper) and the narrator (he appears in only two scenes, and in both is outmatched in narrative presence by Mark Barrett, one of the opponents to the library). For Cheever, the only legitimate suburb is Shady Hill. Those beneath it (literally, as a dell is a valley) are signs of a frightening mass society threatening to overtake the charmed world of his characters. Individual life isn’t possible in Maple Dell, and he sees no possibility for happiness or distinction in the shift to a more classless society—the raising of the masses helps them little and only threatens those of the upper-middle class. The trouble between Maple Dell and Shady Hill also represents the fight over who has the right to the “suburb,” and what its class status will become. In Cheever’s eyes, the fault of Maple Dell is its false upward mobility. Mrs. Selfredge starts out in the urban working class, but earns her place in Shady Hill because she values the neighborhood as critical to her status. But the developments hope to skip the step of an arduous climb, uniting with Shady Hill by way of a common library and pretending they are equals. They are suburban arrivistes who



don't know their place. This bothers Cheever, but even more worrisome is that the sameness they represent, the classless society sapped of distinction, will swallow the upper-middle class of Shady Hill, robbing them of their status, their lawns, and, therefore, their "self-esteem."

## 2. The Fear of Transformation

Cheever wasn't writing—and worrying—in a vacuum. Throughout the 1950s, the postwar boom in housing inspired a "major growth industry" of articles and book-length studies about the suburbs (Dickstein 89). Famous examples include University of Chicago sociologist David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and *Fortune* journalist William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956). But along with these came a host of others, such as *Crestwood Heights* (1956), *The Split-Level Trap* (1961), *Suburbia* (1958), *Suburban Community* (1958), and articles in magazines like *Harper's* (1953), *Newsweek* (1957), and *Time* (1950). So much was being published on the suburbs that, by the end of the decade, Robert C. Wood began *Suburbia* on the defensive: "This is another book about the American suburb and another criticism of the suburban character" (Wood v). Bemoaning the state of suburbia had market appeal, and large presses published most of these books. Simon and Schuster published *The Organization Man*,<sup>2</sup> Putnam published *Suburban Community*, Houghton Mifflin published *Suburbia*, and Doubleday published a collection of Riesman essays titled *Abundance for What?* (1964). *The Lonely Crowd* is a notable example of the demand for criticism of the middle class. The book went through

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<sup>2</sup> Simon and Schuster also published *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), *No Down Payment* (1957), and, much later, James Howard Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere* (1994).

not only multiple printings but also multiple editions. After its initial publication in 1950, Doubleday issued an abridgement in 1956, and Yale put out the abridged edition with a new forward in 1961.

The writers of these books were specific in their subject: the mass-produced suburb. “I am, of course, not implying that all suburbs are alike, or mean the same things to their residents, or suffer from the same sorts of meaninglessness,” Riesman explains in his 1958 essay “The Suburban Sadness” (375). His focus is the tract home “more typically inhabited by middle- and lower-middle-class people than by the upper class or by unskilled workers” (376). In singling these suburbs out for concern and writing about them, Riesman and his peers solidified the image of the large-scale development in the stereotypes we know today, a stereotype Riesman elsewhere described as

the image we are all familiar with (and to which I myself have contributed): an image of mass-produced houses with picture windows and handkerchief-sized lawns, of endless neighboring across the lawns, of social anxiety and conformity, of transiency and overorganization. (258)

Riesman notes the primacy of the image of the new suburb, constructed from the aesthetic similarity of houses, streets, and lawns, and his (and other critics’) role in its creation. Both fiction writers and social critics alike would return to the sameness of the suburb for their construction of the neighborhoods in their work. But it’s the social critics who would link this aesthetic sameness to a sameness in the developments’ residents while writers like McPartland, Yates, and Salinger would largely challenge or play with this construction.

To understand the social critics’ concern over the new suburb and the swift development of its stereotyped image, we only need to consider the moment. The tract home may have accounted for just a third of new housing, but its lack of variety

combined with the scale of the developments' vast, treeless landscapes—which seemed to many observers, like Cheever in “Trouble,” an unlivable wasteland—put them in stark contrast with their surroundings (bucolic fields or older garden suburbs). And not only did the mass-produced development represent a new landscape; it appeared to be *the* new landscape for the country. In 1953 *Life* hailed these homes as the wave of the future, and in 1957 *Newsweek* referred to suburbanites as “the New Breed” (Clark 221, *Newsweek* 1957).<sup>3</sup> *Time* put William Levitt, the builder of Levittown, on its July 3, 1950 cover, with the caption “For Sale: a new way of life” and behind his head an illustration of rows of identical houses. In the article itself, the magazine stressed that similar housing developments were popping up across the country and included a side panel showing identical ranch homes in Dallas, Seattle, Boston, and Detroit. Over and over builders reiterated this new landscape, bringing about Riesman’s stereotype and stoking social critics’ fears: If the tract home was America’s future, then what would this mean for the country and its citizens?

One answer to this pressing question was that the suburbs would create conformists. The subtitle to child-care expert Sidonie Gruenberg’s 1954 article in *The New York Times Magazine* pithily states the relationship between housing and personality sociologists and journalists articulated throughout the decade: “Mass-produced, standardized housing breeds standardized individuals, too” (14). But the threat of the new landscape did not end with conformity. John Keats’s *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1957) is perhaps the best example of the 1950s social critics’ fear that the suburbs threatened to transform their residents for the worse. In the book—part screed, part novel—the “jerry-built, homogenous, postwar Hell” of Rolling Knoll Estates turns Mary

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<sup>3</sup> *Life* 34, 5 Jan 1953, pp. 8-15.

Drone, a housewife, into a manipulative neurotic who develops physical diseases to gain attention (63). The Drones aren't supposed to be real people—Keats intentionally casts them as caricatures rather than characters so he can manipulate them to succumb to every suburban pitfall—but with them he conveys his worries of what will happen to the new suburbanites. Throughout the novel Keats emphasizes the mass-produced suburb as the source of Mary's problems: "the house she inhabited had helped spoil her day; [. . .] it was harming her marriage and corroding her life" (43). Keats's vision is one of terror. Mary's house, a reward after the straitened years of the Depression and the war, is supposed to be a haven. Instead, bamboozled by greedy, unregulated developers, she and her husband undergo a transformation at the hands of their home, she into a "dull-witted, nagging slob," and he into a "woman-bossed, inadequate, money-terrified neuter" (150, 181).

According to Keats, the house destroys Mary's intellect, her cleanliness, and her pleasantness while taking away her husband's masculinity ("woman-bossed, inadequate," "neuter") and independence (because of their money problems he must work several jobs). But it's not her house alone that affects Mary; it's her neighborhood, too. At one point in the novel Mary runs out her door in horror and looks up and down the block in frustration, finding only "houses exactly like her own, row on row of them, the same, the same, the same..." (138). Keats latches onto this terrifying sameness, calling Rolling Knolls Estates a "female barracks" that destroys the individual, resulting in "communism"—not red capital-C communism, but "1984" (Keats's term) communism—and claiming "the physically monotonous development of mass houses" breeds "swarms of neuter drones" (61, 193). Through the agency of their environment, the Drones

become disturbed, bland, unthinking neuters, losing traditional gender roles—a mad Mary Drone can't be a proper housewife and a “woman-bossed” John can't be master of his home—and any of the peace and enjoyment living on your own plot of land is, according to America's pastoral mythology, supposed to grant.

This focus on the power of environment represented an enormous shift in suburban criticism. Consider the differences between two of the suburbs' representatives: Lewis's Babbitt and Keats's John Drone. Babbitt runs a real estate and builder's office with his father-in-law; he is solidly upper-middle-class, taking vacations in Maine and striving for acceptance by Zenith's aristocracy. John Drone is a veteran and low-level government bureaucrat; he is solidly lower-middle-class, at times taking a second job to make ends meet. Babbitt lives in a roomy Dutch Colonial in an upscale neighborhood. John Drone moves from a converted barracks—an example of the temporary shelter commonly used by veterans and their families during the postwar housing crisis—to a confining Levittown-like tract home in a development of indistinguishable houses (1). Babbitt's problem is who he is: He has abandoned what few liberal ideas he had in college (and for a brief spell during the novel) to take and maintain his place among the upper-middle class of Floral Heights and greater Zenith. Drone's problem is where he is: Were he and his wife to move to an older, more spacious home, Keats suggests, they would not be troubled. While Babbitt's Dutch Colonial is merely a symbol of his conformity, not the source of it, Drone's tract home causes his and his wife's unhappiness. Before the Second World War, the suburb functioned most often as the dwelling place of the bourgeoisie and was criticized for that reason—it was a way to attack upper-middle-class values. But in postwar antisuburban

sentiment, the suburb was now the cradle of the nation, the home of the new masses, and anxiety about the still-forming identity of these new masses was pushed onto their most visible aspect—the suburb’s built environment.

For Whyte, Keats, Gruenberg and Riesman, the suburban image fostered a wholly pessimistic view of the future: the landscape posed a threat to its residents, eroding their individuality, their moral fiber, and their will to live.<sup>4</sup> They often pushed their arguments beyond landscape—Whyte and Riesman especially—but at the root of their fears was the image of the undifferentiated suburb. This new landscape appeared to represent the future of the nation and the harbinger (and creator) of a new class in which all distinction and individuality would be subsumed into a bland mass identity. The social critics feared this new suburban identity would prove dangerous to the self (as in the example of Keats and Whyte, who blames the suburb for drug abuse and suicide) and to the country (Riesman warned that the suburbs could prime the middle class for fascism). The image didn’t allow for individual happiness, or the notion that, amidst uniformity, particular lives could be nurtured.

To be sure, not everyone found the new suburbs dangerous. In the July 1958 issue of *Good Housekeeping* William Levitt rejected the idea that “living in these new suburbs [will] rob people of their individuality and bounce” (47). Later in the article he says the uniformity of the houses and their residents should be gloried in, as a product of the mass-production culture that made America great (176). The houses might look the same, but for most families, Levitt said, it was either a mass-produced house or no house. Levitt, of course, had a vested interest, but others who stood no profit from selling houses defended the new suburbs. *Time* quotes one Levittowner, who before moving into his

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<sup>4</sup> Shaped by a general intellectual pessimism about 1950s American culture.

house had lived in a one-room apartment with his wife and a relative, as saying, “Getting into this house was like being emancipated” (69). And in 1952 Mary McCarthy invoked suburbia’s “serried ranch houses” to defend the fluidity of American society against Simone de Beauvoir’s charge that the nation’s class structure was too rigid (Brinkley 61).

Meanwhile, rather than decry its conformity or claim it was weakening America’s position in the Cold War, boosters saw the suburb as a bulwark against communism. Levitt claimed, “No man who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do” (Jackson 231). Levitt’s comment proved prescient: as homeownership rose over the decades, American politics drifted to the right, and the people who lived in Levitt’s homes (and others like them) formed a subgroup that would later be known as Reagan Democrats.<sup>5</sup> And during the 1959 American Exhibit in Moscow, the suburb was given its most prominent anticommunist role when Vice President Richard Nixon guided Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev around a model suburban home. The house was nicknamed “Splitnik,” a play on “split-level” and “Sputnik” that reveals both American anxiety about Russia’s lead in the technological race between the two Cold War powers and the national agenda of basing US superiority on consumer goods (Hayden 148). The Soviets may have better rockets, Nixon boasted, but Americans were leading the way in color television. In what became known as the Kitchen Debate, Nixon used the suburban ranch home itself to impress upon Khrushchev capitalism’s success at providing for all. “Let me give you an example you can appreciate,” Nixon said. “Any steelworker could buy this house.”<sup>6</sup> For Nixon, the suburb became the site of resisting communism—both

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<sup>5</sup> Though this rightward turn has perhaps less to do with their being too busy than with their steady increase in wealth and their lack of mobility—a homeowner, who can’t move as easily as a renter and has money sunk into his or her house, has more of a motive for maintaining the status quo.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/14/documents/debate/>

in the individual home stocked with consumer goods that rewarded the American worker and executive alike while supporting the nation's production economy, and in the model home, where while fumbling with dishwashers he and Krushchev could assure each other that war between the two nations was unnecessary.

Central to supporters and detractors of the suburb during the postwar era was the causal power of place. The suburbs would prevent communism or the suburbs would bring about conformity. Either way, the idea was that the suburb itself effected the change, as journalists' use of "breeding" suggests ("The New Breed," "standardized housing breeds standardized individuals"). The notion that the suburb could transform its residents alternately encouraged some, like Nixon or Mary McCarthy, and caused anxiety for others, like Whyte, Riesman, and the characters in the novels *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Revolutionary Road*. The varied working classes ("any steelworker could buy this house") and the middle classes were being turned into a new mass-middle class, a transformation that delighted Nixon, as it fueled capitalism, and worried social critics, as it threatened distinctions and therefore identity. It's the fear of transformation, embedded in the image of the mass-produced suburbs, that drove this new wave of social critiques and suburban novels alike. In defending Shady Hill, Cheever responded to an earlier tradition of suburban criticism—that found in *Babbitt*—while in his bleak portrayal of Maple Dell he tapped into the current debates over mass-produced neighborhoods.

The image of the transformative suburb became so central to the postwar image of the new developments that it informed the few glimpses of the suburb offered by some of American fiction's most unsuburban writers. On his first trip west in *On the Road*



(1955), Sal Paradise, Kerouac's alter-ego and narrator, is disappointed by Council Bluffs: "All winter I'd been reading of the great wagon parties that held council there before hitting the Oregon and Santa Fe trails; and of course now it was only cute suburban cottages of one damn kind and another, all laid out in the dismal gray dawn" (19). The west of the mythic frontier past—the west Sal had been seeking—has been replaced by the suburbs. Sal's disappointment comes from his belief that whatever frontier spirit may have been in Council Bluffs cannot survive the houses—they have transformed the old frontier into an undistinctive, "dismal" landscape sapped of any of the glory and energy of its past. In J. D. Salinger's "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" (1955) Buddy Glass remembers hearing his brother Zooey discuss suburban housing on "It's a Wise Child." "Zooey was in dreamy top form," Buddy says,

The announcer had them off on the subject of housing developments, and the little Burke girl said she hated houses that all look alike—meaning a long row of identical "development" houses. Zooey said they were "nice." He said it would be very nice to come home and be in the wrong house. To eat dinner with the wrong people by mistake, sleep in the wrong bed by mistake, and kiss everybody goodbye in the morning thinking they were your own family. He said he even wished everybody in the world looked exactly alike. He said you'd keep thinking everybody you met was your wife or your mother or father, and people would always be throwing their arms around each other wherever they went, and it would look "very nice." (68)

Where Sal is disappointed by suburbia's transformation of the mythic west, Zooey takes the hallmark of ant suburbia sentiment, the fear of conformity, and turns it into something wonderful, not worrying. He reworks this fear to imagine a community in which the loss of individuality brings people together. Sameness, Zooey suggests, is not only "very nice" but also a way to create a new society in which everyone can become everything to everybody. In his vision, sex and family are constantly rewritten—"you'd

keep thinking everybody you met was your wife or your mother or father, and people would always be throwing their arms around each other wherever they went”—creating a constant, communal affection. At its heart, his estimation of the effect of the new mass-produced suburb is the same as that of Gruenberg and Keats—houses that look alike create an indistinguishable populace in which you come home to the wrong house and eat with the wrong people without realizing it. But he takes the vision of uniformity and uses it to spark the imagination of a topsy-turvy world where relationships can be reinvented and everyone is loved.

Kerouac and Salinger plucked the suburban image from the social critics and put it to use, allowing their characters to think through the ramifications of sameness. The sameness of Council Bluff’s suburban cottages to suburban housing elsewhere negates the city’s particular history and aura, and the sameness of the development house in Zooey’s fantasy creates a society of people joyously unable to distinguish one person from another. In both Sal and Zooey’s visions, the change comes from the built environment itself—the physical reality of the suburbs causes the change, not the people in them. For Zooey, the sameness of the houses causes his hypothetical self to enter the wrong house and eat dinner with the wrong people without knowing it, and for Sal the sameness of the “cute suburban cottages,” not the people who live there, alters his impression of Council Bluffs. Were he to instead find sod houses or farmsteads, he might not feel cheated of history. In both works characters take up the image of the transformative mass-produced suburbs promulgated by the social critics and use it to consider the implications and possible future of this new class and the country.

Kerouac and Salinger speculate on mass developments through outsiders—Sal Paradise passing through Council Bluffs, Zooey Glass imagining a development on a radio show—and Cheever frets over mass-produced suburbs from the point of view of the old mainline suburbs of the upper-middle class. In each of these cases, whether it's fear of encroachment or the memory of the past, the concern is secondary. But McPartland's *No Down Payment* and Yates's *Revolutionary Road* portray from the inside the ongoing strife the struggle for status in the mass developments causes. The characters in these novels deal directly with the popular, monolithic image of the new suburbs, and the fear of the new landscape's power to transform its residents into an undifferentiated mass class, as they are the ones who live there. The novelists who created them treat the image of mass-produced suburbs with more complexity, using their characters to question the transformational power ascribed to the landscape and, by extension, postwar America's ability to create a new mass class.

### 3. The transformative house and the triumphs and failures of class-shifting in the mass-produced postwar suburb

John McPartland's *No Down Payment* (1957) may be forgotten now, but it was popular enough to be made into a movie starring Tony Randall the year of its publication, and to catch the attention of William Levitt, who referred to it in *Good Housekeeping* as a "vulgar" and "cheap novel" (47). The book follows three main plots: David Martin's business trip to Los Angeles, where he must sell a power company vice president on computerization; his wife Jean Martin's rape by her neighbor Troy Noon while David is

away; and Herman Kreitzer's eventual decision to help Jim Kemp, a black salesman who works at the appliance store Kreitzer manages, move into Sunrise Hills, the San Francisco suburb where the characters live. McPartland intends *No Down Payment* as a portrayal of the new mass-middle class as a whole. The narrator bills the characters—each of whom is an astute armchair critic, pausing often to reflect on how the suburbs have changed his or her life and discuss issues of gender and class—as stand-ins for suburbanites everywhere: “There were the people of Sunrise Hills, and there were ten million more like them from Levittown to Lakewood Village. New, new, new.” (5).<sup>7</sup> With his references to Levittown and Lakewood Village, McPartland invokes the image of the new suburbs, and places his suburbanites firmly within the phenomenon of the mass development, employing it as an identity category—they are “the people of Sunrise Hills” and that’s all we need to know to picture them. Using the same rhetoric as the social critics, he invokes the notion of an unprecedented mass population: “ten million more like them” who are all “new, new, new.” And what makes these people “Like no other people who had ever lived”? The same thing that makes them uniform, their home. But unlike the social critics, McPartland stops there. He doesn’t subscribe wholly to the suburb’s power to transform its residents’ identity and create a new class. Instead, he adopts the image of the transformative suburb in order to examine its fractures.

In the novel, David Martin is an advocate for the new mass-produced suburbs, believing their ability to improve living standards is undeniably beneficial. While in Los Angeles, he meets (fictional) Nobel Laureate physicist Paul Lesser, who stands in for the

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<sup>7</sup> Other writers made this claim for their characters, too. In the disclaimer at the beginning of *Leave Me Alone*, Karp says that many have claimed to know the true location of Oaklawn, a sideways hint at his setting’s universality. And this carries over to social critics as well. *The Split-Level Trap* declares the “typical American” with “his shiny mass-produced house [. . .] the great sad joke of our time” (28).

concerned and sour social critic of the 1950s. During their conversation in a hotel bar, David, who reveres Lesser's work, responds to his attack on suburban life by expressing his distaste for those who would argue that "we're all going to hell these days" (130). He tells Lesser that life in his "big GI development" is much better than life twenty years ago, and that those who paint nostalgic pictures of the past forget disease, religious intolerance, and that many of the people living in the suburbs now are the descendents of peasants: "Our people didn't live in neat little cottages, they lived in filthy hovels, half-starved all their lives" (131).<sup>8</sup> For David, the mass-produced suburb has raised his status. He doesn't fear massification or sameness because he has experienced the suburb's material benefit and is content with his position—his wife, Jean, may want him to rise further in his company, a rise that would lift them out of the mass-middle class and Sunrise Hills, but initially he has no interest. Happy in Sunrise Hills, he trusts in the suburbs to continue raising living standards: when Lesser asks him what he thinks the world will be like in 2000, David says cities will be "made obsolete by vast suburban belts" where automation takes care of most of the work and the major crisis will be how everyone will use their free time (136).

David's optimism about the suburbs stems from his faith in technology to improve people's lives. He is a methods engineer (what we now call a computer engineer) and believes in the saving effects of automation. Earlier in the novel, he considers it the key aspect of the suburbs that improves women's lives. "Take Betty Kreitzer and her two youngsters," he says to Jean. "Even only a few years ago, why

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<sup>8</sup> In his *Good Housekeeping* defense of mass-produced housing, Levitt says much the same thing—that people living in his houses would have had no other decent place to live if he hadn't built them. Though Levitt attacked this book, its main character, David Martin, espouses mostly the same beliefs about the good qualities of the new suburbs.

she'd be starting to show what it was taking out of her. Here she's got an automatic washer, a dryer, a dishwasher, this disposal gadget to handle garbage, and not only that, she can buy most of her food all fixed up for her. The cake is in a box, the gravy is in another box, the coffee is in a jar ready to go" (50). Technology and affluence will save a housewife's youthful appearance—a benefit couched in a sexist viewpoint—but it will also liberate her: with access to television, magazines, and movies, she can become a "citizen of the world" (50). In David's vision, the new suburbs and their modern conveniences have lifted their residents into a life of ease.

Like David, his wife Jean believes in the benefits of the mass-produced suburbs. She considers Sunrise Hills "A kind of Islands of the Blest where nobody was old and everybody had as much pleasure and ease as the rich people" (82). And, like her husband, Jean believes the suburb represents a rise for its residents, allowing them to enjoy life as much as "the rich people." She recalls Betty Kreitzer's testimony: While living in the city, Betty wasted much of her time, she tells Jean,

But since we've come to Sunrise Hills—my! I've found out I can speak in public, you know about the school program and everything; there's the evening art class once a week at the junior high, and Herman and I go to the meetings of the Improvement Club—I feel like I'm really doing some worthwhile things. (83)

As David has claimed, living in Sunrise Hills allows Betty to become a citizen of the world—or, at least, a citizen of the neighborhood. In her own telling, the suburb becomes an engine of self-realization, offering "art class" and providing a club for unspecified "Improvement." Like David's argument that the suburb houses (and lifts) former peasants, central to Betty's testimony of the benefits of the suburb is the notion

that it raises her. Art class gives her a toe in bohemia, and even if we don't learn the Improvement Club's activities, we know its goal.

While Jean agrees that the suburb has lifted Betty and other suburbanites, she dislikes Sunrise Hills. For her the trappings of the middle class—club meetings and volunteer work in the schools—aren't enough. She isn't, and doesn't want to be, like the other women of her neighborhood. She reflects,

There were women like Betty who fitted in so well but who were really no more than honest, cheerful peasants in fieldstone-and-glass ranch-style houses; there were women like Leola Noon, who belonged in a dirty furnished room in San Francisco; and there were women with the strong, unsatisfied pride, like herself. (83-4)

It's this focus on difference, rooted itself in class (Betty is a "peasant" and Leola belongs "in a dirty furnished room") that leads to her dissatisfaction with the suburb. The neighborhood implies equality, and this jars her "strong, unsatisfied pride."

Identifying herself as an outsider, she disdains the automation David praises as pivotal to the rise of this new class. Early in the book she wants to get a job because her life "doesn't require anything of [her] but shopping for those boxes, jars, and frozen packages, turning on a few switches, and sitting on the patio" (50). But Jean doesn't worry about her obsolescence alone; she also believes the conveniences of suburban life have dangerously collapsed the differences between the sexes:

About the only real difference between how a man and his wife live now is that she has children. They do pretty much the same kind of work—she pushes buttons and runs machinery at home, he does it at work or he's being pleasant to somebody as a salesman. (89)

Jean's vision doesn't stray far from Keats's—of suburbanites as neuter drones—though her concern stems less from the physical house than the ease and meaninglessness of men and women's work and the concomitant loss in identity. Jean may be a snob—her

unhappiness with Sunrise Hills comes from her hyperawareness of her neighbors' former class and her belief that despite her being above them their homes make them appear equals. But her worry over sameness goes beyond status. She equates the terrifying sameness of the suburb with the sameness of a modernity that in its ease saps the spirit, especially the spirit of women, by confining them to a landscape with no outlet. The way to resist this meaninglessness—the modern future defined by the suburb—is to retreat to premodern ideals. When Jean finally convinces David to reignite his ambition and make a play for an executive position, he thinks, “A man in the jungle had to make his decisions at the time for decisions, not before. That was the way to the kind of success his wife wanted. That he wanted, too, having tasted it” (308). For Jean and, eventually, David, the new America being created in the mass-produced suburbs is a bland, indistinct communal society. The only escape is to privilege the individual; a man or woman “in the jungle” is a man or woman alone, depending on themselves for survival, not their homes.

David, in his conversation with Lesser, claims the suburb lifts its residents from a peasantry to an affluent middle class, and Jean fears identification with her neighbors. Both believe the suburb is capable of creating a new class of Americans. But in the novel's second narrative strand Troy Noon finds his ascension thwarted. A man from the Tennessee hills who manages a gas station, Troy represents the stresses in fashioning a new “classless” middle-class America. He is ill at ease with his neighbors, and he suffers slights from people he views as his superiors: midway through the novel he gets in a wreck with an upper-middle-class couple who threaten to have him fired from his job at the gas station, and on the same day the city of Sunrise Hills rejects his application for



police chief because he doesn't have a college degree. Enraged by these setbacks, and angry because he suspects David Martin has seen his wife Leola in her skimpy clothes, when he discovers Jean Martin is home alone he rapes her. More than lust, and more than anger at Leola and David for their supposed shared indecency, Troy rapes Jean out of retaliation. He believes she and David are part of the class holding him down, keeping him from the position owning his house entitles him to—his turmoil and his fury stem from the class confusion wrought by the suburbs. Standing on Jean's doorstep, Troy reflects, "She was standing there [. . .] waiting for the hillbilly, the stupid ignorant son-of-a-bitch to leave her fine house. Well, he had one just as fine" (166). It's the suburbs' promise that proves so dangerous, the vision of a new, accommodating middle class, where owning a house "just as fine" as your neighbors gives you a stake in the new mass society. According to the image of the new suburbs he should be the Martins' equal. But he can't escape feeling like an inferior—a "hillbilly," a "stupid ignorant son-of-a-bitch." Nor can he avoid the various challenges to his rise—the owners of the Cadillac who threaten to have him fired, the city that refuses him a job because he has no college degree. Later he tells his wife, who admires and mimics Jean, "That's what I did to your fancy Jean Martin. I gave her a damned good screw," framing the rape as an act of class rage—Jean is "fancy" and earlier he declares her "like the one in the Cadillac" (179, 166). Her supposed superiority and his embarrassment at his failure to become her equal lead him to rape her, and the blame, McPartland implies, lies with the false promise of the suburb.

With Troy Noon, the new suburb's experiment in building a mass-middle class fails. When Herman Kreitzer visits Troy after the rape to insist he move, Troy agrees, telling him,

I don't belong with these people, not in this kind of a house. Nothing solid or real—not the people, not the houses. Nothing. [. . .] Soft, rotten. Raising soft, rotten kids. They just live for more pleasure all the time. They don't know how to work hard, they just want to live fancy. One of these days they're going to find out—[. . .] Sure I hate them. You know who else hates them? Hates these soft, rotten, fancy Americans? A couple of billion people in the rest of the world who goddamn well have to work hard for a crust of bread. The Communists are just getting ready, planning and building up, and then they'll hit us hard. Somebody hits us hard and these soft, rotten people are going to fold up. Their spoiled kids won't fight, they'll expect somebody else to do their fighting. Automatic rockets, maybe. (296-7)

Troy lashes out at the perceived softness of the new mass-middle-class, seeing, with Whyte and Riesman, the people and the houses of Sunrise Hills as the potential ruination of the country. Like David and Jean, he focuses on automation, but instead of considering it freeing or endangering, he sees it as the defense the “spoiled kids” of suburbia will turn to because they know nothing of hard work. But this isn't why he comes to hate his neighbors.<sup>9</sup> He hates them because he's jealous. He wants to belong, to be transformed into the middle class: “All he'd asked was to fit in. Have a decent wife and a decent home. A job where people would respect him. That was all he'd asked in the whole goddamned world. [. . .] But all the smart sons-of-bitches had got together against men like himself” (176). Troy has failed to benefit from postwar affluence (he has a job, but not the one he wants) and stake a claim to a solid place in the suburbs. The suburban development of the mass-middle class, threatening others, has held out a promise to him that it couldn't keep: his class and background differences are too great

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<sup>9</sup> An he does hate them: “He'd killed people he didn't hate as much as he hated these people around him” (174).

to be smoothed over, to be taken up into the mass-middle class's image of sameness. In the end, he does have one thing in common with Jean. Troy's distaste for his neighborhood is rooted in feelings of class difference. He feels inferior to the suburban class while Jean feels superior, and both of them tie their unhappiness with Sunrise Hills—and so with mass-produced suburbia—to exclusion from the new mass-middle class, a desired exclusion in the case of Jean, and a feared exclusion in the case of Troy.

*No Down Payment's* third storyline explores the suburb's power to absorb race into its broad new class. Despite its brutality, Troy's rape of Jean produces one positive outcome: it makes integration possible in Sunrise Hills. Herman Kreitzer has assisted Jim Kemp, a black man, in breaking the color line to become a salesman at his appliance store, and in the book Jim asks him for help buying a house in Sunrise Hills. At first Herman hesitates. Allowing a black family to move into the neighborhood would lower housing prices and damage the suburb's status. The new suburbs may encroach on the old garden suburb's exclusivity, as Cheever's Mrs. Selfredge fears, but they are jealous of their own: the suburbs are supposed to raise their residents into a new class, and mixing races risks, in the climate of the 1950s, foiling that goal. But after his hesitation, Herman decides he has a moral obligation to help Jim and uses the impending flight of the Noons as his opportunity to get Jim a house in Sunrise Hills—since the Noons will have to sell fast and in disgrace, Troy won't be able to argue about who he sells his house to. But the integration of Sunrise Hills goes no farther. Jim decides he wants to stay in his own neighborhood rather than try being "imitation white," as his wife terms their proposed move. Jim tells Herman, "my wife and I want our children to be proud of being Negro, too. We might get to feeling too white in Sunrise Hills. My people aren't out of trouble

yet—and I'm not deserting them" (300). For Jim an attempt to join the monolithic mass-middle class is a betrayal of his race, and in his turning down the offer to buy the Noons' house, cautious middle-class liberalism wins out. Herman shows himself to be a decent man when it comes to race relations, but he also gets to keep his all-white community.<sup>10</sup>

In each of *No Down Payment's* three narratives, the characters assume the new suburb has the power to transform its residents into the new mass class. Jim resists this transformation, believing it would be a betrayal of his race—the supreme sameness offered by Sunrise Hills would override race identity. Troy is furious at his failure to be brought into the new class, which he assumed would result from buying his house. And Jean rejects the lowering transformation she believes Sunrise Hills represents; she convinces David to rise in his company. But they all believe in Sunrise Hills's power to create a monolithic new class, a belief rooted in the notion that sameness of environment means sameness of people. *No Down Payment* considers the supposed power of the development's homogeneity, a power each of the novel's characters assumes threatens (or enhances, in the case of Troy) their identity by subsuming race and class and gender into a new mass category. Testing the soundness of the image of the new suburb, the novel's verdict is mixed—Jim and the Martins' narratives suggest the suburb is transformative, while Troy's suggests it isn't. Even so, McPartland's rigorous experimenting with the image, testing its limits and challenging its veracity rather than simply attacking it, represent a novel approach in a critical environment defined more by the closed point of view of Cheever's Mrs. Selfredge.

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<sup>10</sup> The same year *No Down Payment* was published, *Newsweek* featured a short article on a black family moving into the Levittown outside Philadelphia (26 August 1957, p. 27).

#### 4. Mass-suburbia's deadly threat to status: Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*

Like McPartland, Richard Yates also uses a novel to test the power of the suburb's image, but he focuses on the image's danger, not the question of whether it holds true. In *Revolutionary Road*, Frank and April Wheeler, a suburban couple, struggle with their identity, fearing the mass-produced suburb will come to define them and absorb them into the new middle class. Yates's novel had a rocky development, which contributed to the Wheelers' predicament. In 1956, when Atlantic-Little, Brown rejected an early version of the book, they gave as their reason that it was "one of the many imitators of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*" (Bailey 178). At first glance it appears Yates ignored Atlantic-Little, Brown's criticism. Sloan Wilson's bestseller *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) follows a young married couple hoping to escape their fraught and disappointing lives in a bleak Connecticut suburb. *Revolutionary Road*, which would eventually be published after much reworking in 1961, is set in 1955 and also follows a young married couple hoping to escape their fraught and disappointing lives in a bleak Connecticut suburb. But beyond these similarities the novels part ways, and this early rejection by his eventual publisher may have been key in Yates's shaping this difference. Aside from their endings—*Gray Flannel* ends in hope, *Revolutionary Road* ends in despair—the treatment of their characters' relationship with the suburb sets the novels apart. When *Gray Flannel*'s Rathes indict suburbia, the reader is meant to take their statements at face value. A sophisticated critical reading may find that the Rathes' suffer from other problems, but the book aligns itself with its characters in their belief that escaping the suburbs will solve their problems. In *Revolutionary Road*, when the

Wheelers talk about the suburbs, the novel insists we read against their statements and suspect their motives. Their disgust with the suburb is less about the suburb than their desire to claim an elite intellectual status superior to the middle-class masses their home implies they've joined. It's this implication, rather than suburban life, that so disturbs them. While the Rath's complaints about suburban life help them recognize their dissatisfaction and achieve their escape, the Wheelers' diatribes against the suburb become an end, a way of establishing an identity separate from and superior to their neighbors.

Their fear of a neighborhood-induced sameness infects their life in the suburb from the beginning. Having moved from New York to Connecticut, the Wheelers take the position that "Economic circumstance might force you to live in [the suburbs], but the important thing was to keep from being contaminated" (20). Rather than a privilege—the kind described by David Martin or William Levitt—the suburb is a punishment, an acknowledgement of economic failure. Worse, living there can "contaminate" them—can, without their control or awareness, alter their identity. This is the same kind of transformation that always accompanies the suburban image: if not kept in check, the contamination will force them into settling for the "God damn mediocrity" of lawns and barbecues and narrow-mindedness, and through much of the novel they fight becoming consumed by their surroundings (60). To give in to full-fledged suburban life, they believe, would mean giving up on their younger, bohemian dreams of success as an actress and intellectual.<sup>11</sup> More terrifying for the Wheelers, it would mean accepting a

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<sup>11</sup> April gives up her dreams of professional acting early, in fact, to avoid confronting mediocrity: "It freed her from the gritty round of disappointment she would otherwise have faced as an only mildly talented, mildly enthusiastic graduate of a dramatic school" (48).

common instead of an exceptional fate. Their only remedy, they believe, is to maintain a precarious position of living in the new suburbs while trying not to be of them.

The Wheelers begin their marriage in Greenwich Village. Frank, graduating from Columbia after returning from fighting in Europe, marries April after meeting her at a party. They quickly have a child (an accident) and Frank, who has been working a series of part-time jobs while trying to settle on an intellectual pursuit (which remains purposefully vague throughout the novel), takes a position in the sales promotion department at Knox Business Machines, a large computer corporation (22).<sup>12</sup> After having a second child, the Wheelers decide to move to Connecticut and immediately worry about how to place themselves in relation to the suburb: when shopping for their house, they worry about how suburban it will appear. They'd be perfectly happy in a pastoral, upper-middle-class, Cheeveresque landscape—the “suburb” they are resisting is the new mass-produced suburb. Mrs. Givings, their realtor, dislikes tract homes herself and “understood at once that they wanted something out of the ordinary—a small remodeled barn or carriage house, or an old guest cottage—something with a little charm” (29). Unfortunately, as Mrs. Givings informs them, such places are no longer available in the Wheelers’ price range. As a compromise she directs them to a house put up by a local builder “before all the really awful building began.” But the house, built “right after the war,” resembles a newer tract home more than a prewar upper-middle-class Dutch Colonial. It sits dangerously close to a mass-produced development—Revolutionary Hill Estates, “great hulking split levels, all in the most nauseous pastels

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<sup>12</sup> Yates himself worked as a copywriter for Remington Rand, the company that built and sold the UNIVAC, and much of *Revolutionary Road* was composed on the back of submission cover sheets for *Rem Rand News*.

and dreadfully expensive too”—and has a picture window to match the “friendly picture windows” of the development’s homes (29, 26).

This likeness will plague the Wheelers’ throughout the book. They find the picture window especially worrying, and with reason. Throughout the postwar era, the picture window was a defining feature of the tract home, hence the title of John Keats’s novel, *The Crack in the Picture Window*, and Cheever’s latching onto the picture window in his description of Maple Dell in “Trouble.” It’s the most visible detail of the tract home—placed squarely in the front of the house—and suggests a conformity-inducing surveillance in which everyone can watch everyone else from the comfort of their own living room. A life on display is seemingly a life without mystery or depth. The Wheelers, astute critics of the suburb, recognize what the picture window symbolizes: the cheapness and mediocrity that are hallmarks of the new masses. April complains, “Of course it does have the picture window; I guess there’s no escaping that,” to which Frank replies, “I don’t suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities” (29). Frank’s rebuttal is hesitant, and in claiming the picture window won’t “necessarily” destroy their personalities, he signals his belief that it can.

With the picture window called to importance by their sensitivity and its intrinsic symbolism, the novel continually returns to it. Feeling suffocated in his domestic life (he’s reading the newspaper comics to his children), Frank wants to throw a chair through the picture window (57); when he returns home after his affair with Maureen, a secretary at his office, the first thing he sees is that the picture window blinds are shut (102); he looks at his reflection in picture window and sees he hasn’t yet become as sophisticated as April—hasn’t sloughed off his suburban self (127); he doesn’t look at the window, but



if he had “he would have seen the picture of a frightened liar” (his reflection) (131); Mrs. Givings addresses the picture window when she cracks her cheery façade to beg her son to stop hectoring her and the Wheelers (188); Frank watches the sunset through the picture window as he considers his and April’s sanity (192); Frank sits in the darkness by the picture window after hiding from Shep in his own house and mourning April (325). The most salient characteristic of the new suburban home, the window serves here, as in other works, as a synecdoche for the mass-produced suburb and all the fears and anxieties it ushers in. Each look to the window is a look to the suburb (Mrs. Givings looks to it with hopes for normalcy, and when Frank returns from his affair, the shut blinds foreshadow the impending loss of his claim on suburban life) and a reminder of the compromise the Wheelers have made in moving to Connecticut. In other works, the constant presence of the picture window might stand in simply for the menace of suburban life, but here it stands in too for the Wheelers’ *worry* about suburban life. It’s the first thing they pick out about the house, and they constantly, self-consciously look at it. For Yates, the problem of their compromise isn’t that they’ve moved to the suburbs. The problem is that they’ve moved to the suburbs while actively resisting suburban identity, a decision that forces them to negotiate the unstable position of ant suburbanites. It’s no accident Yates places their house in a middle ground, a tract home cut off from the other tract homes of the nearby Revolutionary Hills Estates, separate but the same, nor that they continue to measure themselves against the picture window, whose threat, as they understand, is more symbolic than real.

The Wheelers’ living room forms the front line of their resistance to being absorbed into the mass-middle class: the Wheelers stand on one side, and the picture

window and all the fear accompanying the suburban image stand on the other. They arrange their furniture to “counteract the prim suburban look of this too-symmetrical living room” and keep books to “compet[e] for dominance with the picture window” and take “the curse off the picture window” (30, 31, 30). They believe that by fighting the aesthetic of the suburb—the picture window and the “suburban look” of their living room—with their furniture and totems of intellectual status (books), they will keep its power at bay. And it’s in the living room they hold heated conversations with their friends the Campbells, conversations in which they claim their difference and identify themselves by what they are not. Abhorring “all these damn little suburban types,” the Wheelers and the Campbells construct their neighbors as others—people who surround them but whom they don’t understand, whom they find reprehensible, and with whom they cannot be identified (24). April is awestruck by reports of suburban behavior: “Do they really talk that way?” she asks Shep Campbell after he narrates “an anecdote of extreme suburban smugness that left them weak with laughter” (60). And Frank takes the position of social critic, analyzing his neighbors and society at large:

The point is it wouldn’t be so bad if it weren’t so typical. It isn’t only the Donaldsons—it’s the Cramers too, and the whaddyacallits, the Wingates, and a million others. It’s all the idiots I ride with on the train every day. It’s a disease. Nobody thinks or feels or cares any more; nobody gets excited or believes in anything except their own comfortable little God damn mediocrity. (60)

In his diatribe, Frank describes what he thinks it means to be suburban—unfeeling, unthinking, mediocre, comfortable, a “disease” that has corrupted a “million others” (again, the invocation of a monolithic mass-middle class). Armed with their critiques and forced misunderstandings, the Wheelers and Campbells view themselves as “an embattled, dwindling intellectual underground” and end their conversation with “the

happy implication [. . .] that they alone, the four of them, were painfully alive in a drugged and dying culture” (59-60).<sup>13</sup> Fearing assimilation, they adopt critical poses that expose their anxiety about being absorbed into the mass-middle class their houses putatively assign them to. But more than guarding their identity, their pose places them in an elite class. They become members of an “intellectual underground,” the last alive in a “dying culture.” Here the suburb actually enhances their sense of themselves. In the city they remain low-level figures in bohemia—a lazy, half-assed intellectual and a failed actress. But in moving to the suburbs and comparing themselves to their neighbors, they become members of the intelligentsia.

The problem, of course, is that the Wheelers are fooling themselves. They’ve done nothing to earn their claims to membership in an “intellectual underground,” a failure Yates makes clear when he describes their conversations. The Wheelers’ and Campbells’ discuss the “endlessly absorbing subject of Conformity, or The Suburbs, or Madison Avenue, or American Society Today,” the capitalization of these subjects suggesting their canned, foreclosed nature (59). These aren’t honest explorations, but recitals of preconceived positions based on their adoptions of social critics’ accounts of mass-middle-class culture. Their use of “glib clichés” and “familiar staples of fifties social criticism,” to use literary critic Morris Dickstein’s description, works as a giveaway to the shaky argumentative ground on which they build their identity as

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<sup>13</sup> In examining the critique of suburbia, it’s important to remember intellectuals weren’t only talking to each other. Their arguments and criticism seeped down into the culture (as we will see with the Wheelers), and suburbanites became aware of what was being said about them. As Donald Katz, in *Home Fires*, says of his subject Sam Gordon, “He didn’t want to emigrate to one of the vast tracts of prefabricated housing out of some desire to assimilate or to lose his ethnic roots, or even to ‘conform’—a word that had lately filtered down to mahjonnig tables and coffee breaks from complex sociological analyses of changing national character like David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*” (56).

suburban outsiders (137). In staking their bid for authentic individuality on borrowed ideas, they unwittingly fall into a mediocrity as egregious as their neighbors.

Along with their conversation, the inside of the Wheelers' home—the site of their ground war against “suburbanism”—reveals their failure to stave off identification with the mass-middle class. The books that are supposed to counteract the picture window “might as well have been a lending library,” and television has taken over as they succumb to the mass culture of the suburbs: “Only one corner of the room showed signs of pleasant human congress—carpet worn, cushions dented, ash trays full—and this was the alcove they had established with reluctance less than six months ago: the province of the television set” (31). Suburban space remains all-important for the Wheelers, for it's the space—“carpet worn, cushions dented, ash trays full”—that proves they're not so different from their neighbors after all. Later, when Frank argues with April, he recognizes the living room's judgment. He's trying to convince her to keep their third child and stay in the suburbs and knows the living room “was the worst possible place for getting his points across” because of the shelves of unread books and “the loathsome, gloating maw of the television set” (221). They have campaigned against becoming suburban, but the television, mocking in triumph, has defeated their books as the entertainment of the masses has overtaken their intellectual pretensions.

The Wheelers' living room and their conversations with the Campbells signals to the reader the precariousness of their position as unsuburban suburbanites, but only when April's community theatre production of *The Petrified Forest* flops do they understand their failure to maintain this position. April had ridiculed the community theatre, seeing in it another example of suburban mediocrity—“Oh, God, I know these damn little artsy-

craftsy things,” she initially claims (60). But after seeing ads for the troupe in the paper and learning more about it, she joins, and she and Frank and the Campbells shift their critical gaze. The community theater can now be considered serious, and so against the suburban norm. But the neighbors who will form the audience remain dull and shortsighted: “God knew they would probably never inspire the Donaldsons—and who cared?—but at least they might give the Donaldsons pause; they might show the Donaldsons a way of life beyond the commuting train and the Republican Party and the barbecue pit” (61). This estimation not only allows April (and the others) to accept the community theater while still looking down on their neighbors—from whose ranks the theater was formed—and ensure their separateness from them, but also places them as knowing, broadminded harbingers of other “way[s] of life” unconfined by the cul-de-sac. They are, as ever in their construction of themselves, superior outsiders, hovering above the mass-middle class.

Because they have invested the theatre with their notions of their own difference—which before they had only shared, safely, among themselves—when the play fails both the Wheelers and the Campbells must reevaluate their claim on superiority:

Whatever it was, they had lost it now. Blame for the failure of the Laurel Players could hardly be fobbed off on Conformity or The Suburbs or American Society Today. How could new jokes be told about their neighbors when these very neighbors had sat and sweated in their audience? Donaldsons, Cramers, Wingates and all, they had come to *The Petrified Forest* with a surprisingly generous openness of mind, and had been let down. (61)

The people to whom they would show a new way of life have been open to their message and “been let down,” removing them from possible ridicule—the vital ridicule that feeds

the Wheelers and Campbells' notion of superiority—and disarming the empty arguments against “Conformity or The Suburbs or American Society Today.” Two days after the show, when Frank fears the evening he and April are spending with the Campbells is heading toward “the dreariest kind of suburban time filler,” Frank tries another diatribe against “cute little winding roads and cute little houses painted white and pink and baby blue.” But though Frank’s attacks once won “clamorous approval,” now the others are silent (65-6). They are no longer able to indulge in the view of themselves as superior to “God damn mediocrity.” They are part of the mass-middle class and they know it.

To reverse their perceived suburban transformation, several nights after the community theatre’s flop April proposes that she and Frank and the kids move to Paris. The Wheelers have discussed emigrating before. Earlier, Yates tells us that the Wheelers and the Campbells would, in discussion, fall into “a quick general lust for expatriation” (59). But this is the first time they have taken it seriously (108). In Paris, April says, she will work while Frank can take up his intellectual pursuits and find himself (109). Her goal is to fully extract them from mediocrity and mass identity, and her plan originates directly from her recognition of their crisis:

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 people you’re talking about” (110).

April understands they have become the same as their neighbors and the “million others” and she believes that only by changing places—by fleeing the transformative space of the suburb—can they undo all the conformity and mediocrity their home has imposed. When Frank hesitates, April claims that for Frank to continue “coming home to a house he can’t stand in a place he can’t stand either, to a wife who’s equally unable to stand the same

things” is more unrealistic than moving to Paris. Again, the Wheelers’ relationship to place is central: it’s the house and neighborhood they want to leave behind to remedy their disappointing lives.

Swayed by April’s argument, Frank agrees to the plan, and the Wheelers immediately regain their separateness from the suburbs. In stark contrast to the Levittowner quoted in *Life* who likened moving *into* the suburb to emancipation, Frank now declares, “And my God, when you think how close *we* came to settling into that kind of an existence [. . .]. It’s like coming out of a Cellophane bag” (129). Freed from the perceived suffocation of the suburb, the Wheelers now have the authority to turn their critical eye on the Campbells, whom April declares a “colossal waste of time” (111).

Spending an evening at the Campbells’ house, Frank looks around the living room,

examining each piece of furniture and each picture as if he’d never found himself in quite such an amusingly typical suburban living room as this before—as if, for Christ’s sake, he hadn’t spent the last two years spilling his ashes and slopping his booze all over every available surface *in* this room. [. . .] Once, while Milly was talking, he leaned slightly forward and squinted past her like a man peering between the bars of a darkened rat cage, and it took Shep a minute to figure out what he was doing: he was reading the book titles on the shelves across the room. (147)

With the promise of Paris, Frank changes his relationship with a space he has known—and in which he has been comfortable enough to spill his cigarette ashes and his drinks—for two years. He looks at the Campbells with pity (squinting “like a man peering between the bars of a darkened rat cage”) and questions their intellectual status (“reading the book titles”). But this new relationship to the Campbells and their living room—a renegotiated relationship with mass-produced suburbia—depends on the Wheelers actually making it to Paris. Yates described their situation in a note while drafting the novel: “Confident of escape they damn everything in their present life so thoroughly that

any question of adjustment is outruled” (Box 3, Folder 1, 73). In reacting to and “damning” the suburbs as the stand-in for mass-middle class sameness, in crafting their identity solely on being *not* suburban, the Wheelers make no method of life possible except escape.

The danger is not their suburban home, but their relationship with it. They have built up their home and neighborhood as anathema, believing that growing comfortable in it means being subsumed into the mass-middle class. Worrying about being transformed by their picture window and contaminated by their neighborhood, they base their fear on the image of the suburb rather than its reality—a fear abetted by their home’s position beneath the development of Revolutionary Estates, ensuring they constantly view the houses en masse. In a 1971 interview with the literary journal *Ploughshares*, Yates claims, “The Wheelers may have thought the suburbs were to blame for all their problems, but I meant it to be implicit in the text that that was *their* delusion, *their* problem, not mine.” Yates’s novel isn’t an attack on the suburbs but an examination of the fear of living in the suburbs, a fear stoked by the image of physical sameness. And this fear, as I’ve argued, is part of a broader anxiety about the new class of Americans being ushered into existence by postwar prosperity. The Wheelers, buying into the belief that the new suburbs are creating this new class, are harmed more by their faulty perception of the suburb than by the suburb itself. They don’t suffer like John and Mary Drone, characters whose house and neighborhood destroys their lives, but like people who’ve read about John and Mary Drone and, despite agreeing with Keats’s novel, have moved to the suburbs anyway.



This mistaken understanding of the suburb—letting the image determine their experience—might not cause them any problems if they were able to stay in agreement. Tragedy unfolds in *Revolutionary Road* because the Wheelers diverge in their plans. When April discovers she is pregnant, she wants to have an abortion and continue with their move to Paris, and Frank wants to keep the child and stay in Connecticut. It's a contradiction that cannot hold. April wants to escape, but Frank wants to compromise.

Frank's desire to stay in the suburb suggests that all along his critique has been hollow—that, along with the faults in his arguments, he has never been in earnest. Antisuburbanism has offered him an easy path to nonconformity, a solution to his professional and intellectual aimlessness. While in an early version of *Revolutionary Road* Yates portrayed Frank as a dedicated painter with real ability, in revising the novel he rid Frank of specific talents and desires—in one of his notes he writes, “show clearly that he is *not* a real artist” and “Make Frank Garvey a *fool*” (Box 3, Folder 1, pp. 5, 8)<sup>14</sup>—and replaced them instead with hazy ideas of being an intellectual: Frank never settles on the field he'd like to go into. Without recourse to specific interests, Frank uses antisuburban rhetoric to align himself with the prevailing intellectual climate, and clothe himself as an intellectual peer to social critics like Riesman and Whyte. When he seduces Maureen Grube, a secretary at his office, he runs through his conversation “a bright and skillfully woven thread that was just for Maureen: a portrait of himself as a decent but disillusioned young family man, sadly and bravely at war with his environment” (97). At his most mercenary, taking on the role of suburb-hating nonconformist becomes a way for Frank to pick up women.

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<sup>14</sup> The Wheelers were originally the Garveys.

Yet elsewhere Frank seems not so much duplicitous as conflicted. While he has publicly reviled the suburbs, he enjoys being a homeowner: “squatting to rest on the wooded slope, he could look down and see his house the way a house ought to look on a fine spring day, safe on its carpet of green, the frail white sanctuary of a man’s love, a man’s wife and children” (45). Instead of a substandard, identity-swallowing dwelling whose “prim suburban look” must be battled, he sees his house as an ideal, “the way a house ought to look,” and as a haven (“safe,” a “sanctuary”). Toward the end of the novel he has fully reconciled his ant suburban feelings to his appreciation of his home. “It wasn’t such a bad house after all.” It is

a place where the difficult, intricate process of living could sometimes give rise to incredible harmonies of happiness and sometimes to near-tragic disorder, as well as to ludicrous minor interludes (‘That’s All, Folks!’); a place where it was possible for whole summers to be kind of crazy, where it was possible to feel lonely and confused in many ways and for things to look pretty bleak from time to time, but where everything, in the final analysis, was going to be all right. (274)

The house ceases to be the shallow stereotyped image flogged by the social critics of the time and becomes a place that can harbor real, individual life, “the frail white sanctuary of a man’s love” and “a place where the difficult, intricate process of living could sometimes give rise to incredible harmonies of happiness.”<sup>15</sup> David Castronovo identifies Frank as “an unconventional man who is too cool to be involved with American life and too sheepish to live against the grain” (43). This may be true at the novel’s beginning, when Frank delivers his diatribes against the suburb and conformity, but by the novel’s end he finds the suburbs a place where everything “was going to be all right.” He may have been transformed by the suburb after all.

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<sup>15</sup> Because it is a sanctuary for “a man’s love,” April is still shut out, unable to live any life beyond the sanctuary guarding her for Frank (a subtle, feminist point to be made).

But Frank is a poor reader of his home life—everything is not “all right,” and while his house may be a “sanctuary,” it is a “frail” one. He has argued that “intelligent, thinking people” can only suffer in the suburbs, and though he has waffled, his wife has continued to agree with him (20). He at last accepts suburban life and his place in the mass-middle class, but April has taken their antisuburbanism much closer to heart. Unable to escape and unable to make her peace with Connecticut, April falls again into a crisis. She believes that she and Frank will never become like the “golden people” of her imagination but merely remain normal suburbanites, and that to pretend otherwise is “a subtle, treacherous thing.” Fed up with “working at life [. . .] earnest and sloppy and full of pretension and all wrong” (304), she commits suicide by forcing a home abortion well past the safe period. But the suburb has not caused April’s despair. Rather, putting so much weight on *not* being suburban, she and Frank made staying in their home lethal.

In *White Diaspora*, Catherine Jurca claims, “*Revolutionary Road* brilliantly defines the postwar suburbanite as the antisuburbanite, whose existence is a protest against everyone else’s putative conformity” (Jurca 148). She deploys this reading to argue that in suburban fiction of the 1950s suffering in suburbia became the method of claiming middle class status: “being middle class means *denying* that they [the Rathes in *Gray Flannel*] are middle class, and shame gives way to a pleasant conviction of how exceptional they are” (138-9). But in *Revolutionary Road* the Wheelers’ sense of exceptionality does not hold. Instead, they embody a new anxiety over what middle class means. The Wheelers have construed mass-produced houses as a threat to individual identity. Reacting to the perception of monolithic massness peddled by social critics and picked up by other writers of the period, and placing its source in the home itself, they

have defined themselves against their neighborhood and their neighbors. And rather than affirm their claim to middle-class status, as Jurca argues, their resistance causes them to fail: April commits suicide, and Frank is left a broken widower. For Yates, this is the natural, outsized end gained by putting too much faith in the image of the transformational suburb. The Wheelers, ardent consumers of suburban criticism, never give themselves a chance to construct an honest life in their home. This, then, is the danger Yates warns against: the danger of letting stereotype replace experience.

Born of the 1950s social critics response to the new environment, the image of the mass-produced suburb was taken up without circumspection by the writers like Kerouac and Cheever, was played with by writers like Salinger, tested by writers like McPartland, and, finally, debunked by Yates, who emphasized the power of the image itself over the power of the suburb. With a title hearkening to our country's roots, *Revolutionary Road*, like the other works here, asked a question about the future of the nation, but the answer, it decided, lay not in the built environment, nor in a new mass class, but in the haphazard of individual choices made in the fog of received perceptions.

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## Chapter Two

### The Nuclear Bomb and the Moon Shot: Masculinity, the Cold War, and Class in the Suburbs

My project in Chapter One—and the dissertation as a whole—is to draw out the importance of class in suburban fiction. Too often critics talk of “the suburb” or “suburban” as if it were a single category, lumping all suburbs together and forgetting the stark differences that divide them. Even the two chief critics of suburban fiction are guilty of this: both Catherine Jurca and Robert Beuka link the upper-middle-class suburbs of Sinclair Lewis and John Cheever to those of Richard Yates (distinctly mass-middle-class) and John Updike (lower-middle-class in *Rabbit Redux*), as if they were each in the same tradition and class.<sup>16</sup> Restoring the importance of class to the discussion of suburban fiction is one step to reopening the variety this literature contains. Suburban fiction forms a major strain of twentieth-century American fiction that has been under examined. In passing over or ignoring its complexity, we ignore not just great works, but novels key to our understanding of the postwar era and the trajectories of American fiction.

I’ve focused on class because of its ability to unlock this complexity. In three texts from the 1960s and early 1970s suburban class affects not just the portrayal of the suburb but the way its residents interact with the greater world. The three texts—

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<sup>16</sup> For Jurca, mass-produced developments are simply another stage of suburban expansion, the next step from Babbit’s suburb and another example of middle class victimization.



Cheever's short story "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow," James Dickey's novel *Deliverance*, and John Updike's *Rabbit Redux*—all respond to the Cold War.

Specifically, they respond to the threat of nuclear war or, in the case of *Rabbit Redux*, its analog, the space race. In all three, the characters' responses conflict with the larger public reaction. In the two works featuring upper-middle-class suburbanites, "Brigadier" and *Deliverance*, Cheever's Charlie Pastern and Dickey's Lewis Medlock hope for rather than fear nuclear war, looking to it for an escape from the predicaments of their lives (Charlie is in debt and Lewis is bored). In the lower-middle-class narrative, Updike's Rabbit Angstrom barely pays attention to the moon landing but he uses space imagery in his despairing meditations on his home; what others find uplifting and fascinating he finds negligible and hollow. Comparing the three reveals the deep striations of suburban class. Upper-middle-class Charlie and Lewis hope others suffer so they can keep everything, and lower-middle-class Rabbit, already beaten down, hopes for nothing.

Despite this difference, these three characters share the position of being at odds with the public in their views of nuclear war and the moon landing. They are at variance with the larger public because they are at variance with the world, a white male middle class steadily ceding its power to others as the 1960s progress. As white men—either upper-middle-class or lower-middle-class—they expect to hold great individual power. The Cold War represents one challenge to this power. They have no control over nuclear war or the Space Program, and their power and agency is thereby diminished.<sup>17</sup> In answer, they turn these challenges on their heads, using the Cold War to buttress their masculinity. Charlie and Lewis depend on nuclear war for the fulfillment of their

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<sup>17</sup> White males may, as a class, be in control of nuclear war and the space race. But as individuals they aren't, and so this loss of specific free will is ultimately a challenge to the white male's assumption of complete freedom.

fantasies, while Rabbit detaches himself from American triumphalism and submits himself to members of the counterculture and the black militant movement. These approaches achieve very different results. Dickey punishes Lewis and Cheever punishes Charlie, but Updike rewards Rabbit, setting him free of his home and giving him the chance to start over. Class, masculinity, the suburb, and the Cold War intersect, and of these class determines their outcomes. Charlie and Lewis, conditioned by privilege, overreach, while Rabbit, used to humility, charts a new, submissive masculinity that ultimately raises him, by the next installment in Updike's tetralogy, to a wealthier, stronger position.

### 1. Upper-Middle-Class Fantasies of Survival

#### “The Brigadier and the Golf Widow”

In fantasizing about nuclear war, Lewis Medlock and Charlie Pastern focus on survival but choose different kinds. Lewis hopes to live off the land while Charlie looks forward to life in his bomb shelter.

Despite the hold it has on our historical imagination, the national craze over bomb shelters was relatively short. Margo Henriksen, chronicling Americans' relationship with the atomic age in *Dr. Strangelove's America*, writes that the public fascination with surviving a nuclear war began in July 1961 when President Kennedy addressed the nation on television and encouraged citizens to build family fallout shelters. (Before then, Henriksen claims, most Americans assumed surviving a nuclear attack was impossible.) The public responded to Kennedy's speech with panic—taking it as an indication that the nation was close to war—and many families did as asked and built shelters (200-1). But

soon Americans began to grapple with the practical aspects of nuclear survival. A Jesuit priest advised shelter owners to shoot neighbors who might try forcing their way in, and local administrators in Las Vegas and Riverside County, California, advocated the formation of militias to fight off the hordes that would flee Los Angeles after a nuclear attack. Meanwhile journalists and religious leaders noted with concern that privately built family shelters would leave the poor and apartment dwellers to die and worried that preparing the country for an attack made nuclear war that much more possible. As a result of this moral wrangling, according to Henriksen, Americans grew distressed and questioned the rightness of building shelters, and by the end of 1961 most of the public had cooled to Kennedy's campaign for civil defense (211-27).

Cheever set "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow" during this time of public wrestling over the ethics of survival. Charlie Pastern repeatedly exclaims "Bomb Cuba! Bomb Berlin!", the two sites of Cold War flare-ups in 1961.<sup>18</sup> When the story opens, Charlie and his wife have recently built a shelter. In its most basic form the shelter, a place of refuge, functions as an extreme version of the suburb, but the Pasterns' shelter goes one step further, emulating the opulence of their home. We're told it

cost thirty-two thousand dollars, and it had two chemical toilets, an oxygen supply, and a library, compiled by a Columbia professor, consisting of books meant to inspire hopefulness, humor, and tranquility. There were stores of survival food to last three months, and several cases of hard liquor. (505)

The shelter has the necessities—oxygen, food—but also extras: "hard liquor," a carefully selected, uplifting library, and separate toilets. The Pasterns hope not just to survive, but to survive comfortably. The tragedy of the shelter, of course, is that only so many can be saved. The Pasterns have gone through a "night of judgment—when they had agreed to

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<sup>18</sup> The Bay of Pigs and Berlin crisis occurred in the spring and summer of 1961 (Henriksen 194, 201).

let Aunt Ida and Uncle Ralph burn, when she had sacrificed her three-year-old niece and he his five-year-old nephew; when they had conspired like murderers and had decided to deny mercy even to his old mother” (508). But in this, too, the shelter mirrors the Pasterns’ upper-middle-class garden suburb, where larger lots and realtors’ pacts have priced out the poor and non-white. Survival, like fleeing the cities for the suburbs, means shutting others out, and the shelter gets much of its value, like the suburb, from its exclusivity—the shelter’s owner will survive a nuclear war while those without a shelter will perish. Life in the suburb might not require deciding “to let Aunt Ida and Uncle Ralph burn,” but it does depend on keeping others at a social and economic disadvantage.

And yet, while the Pasterns’ shelter acts as an extension of the suburb, it also challenges their contentment. A seeming alien among the suburb’s pastoral setting, the shelter threatens the rural, pre-modern ideal by introducing an apocalyptic, postmodern terror into their yard. The Pasterns, fully aware of this collision of the Cold War with the suburban landscape, have tried masking the shelter with ducks, gnomes, and a “veil of thin grass” in order “to give the lump in [the] garden a look of innocence” (498, 505). But the shelter cannot be veiled, nor can the statuary “soften its meaning” (498). For Mrs. Pastern as well as the narrator, the shelter’s meaning, and its incompatibility with the suburbs, is clear: “bulking as it did in so pretty and domestic a scene and signifying as it must the death of at least half the world’s population, she had found it, with its grassy cover, impossible to reconcile with the blue sky and the white clouds” (505). The place of the shelter in Mrs. Pastern’s life—its altering the view outside her window to provide a constant reminder of the possibility of nuclear war—makes it difficult to

“reconcile” the fantasy of pastoral innocence, “the blue sky and white clouds,” with the supreme dangers of the real world beyond her neighborhood.

It’s the shelter’s jarring introduction into the landscape that sets the story’s events into motion. The shelter takes on a fairy-tale-like quality, its presence summoning a line of suitors: the bishop, Mrs. Flannagan, and the Pasterns themselves, who must fend these others off. The first suitor is the bishop, who stops by on the pretext of thanking Mrs. Pastern for her service to the church and asks to see the shelter. He complains that the small basements of the church—“an unfortunate characteristic of ecclesiastical architecture”—leave little room for “the salvation of the faithful” in time of nuclear war (507). Mrs. Pastern takes the hint: “Was it impious of her to suspect that he was traveling around his domain picking and choosing sanctuaries? Was it possible that he meant to exploit his holiness in this way?” (507). Even so, she refuses to acknowledge his implied request, and his desire, along with her refusal, troubles her. “She had believed all her life in the holiness of the priesthood,” Cheever tells us, “and if this belief was genuine, why hadn’t she offered the bishop the safety of her shelter at once? But if he believed in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, why was a shelter anything that he might need?” (507). In not offering the bishop a precious spot in the shelter, Mrs. Pastern must question her commitment to the church. But in witnessing the bishop’s desire for a shelter, she must also question her beliefs, her trust in “the life of the world to come.” She soon makes up her mind, and the shelter becomes the idol that replaces her Christianity. After discovering her husband’s infidelity—his giving his shelter key to Mrs. Flannagan—she refuses to leave him because “Mother didn’t have a shelter,” and doesn’t pray for guidance because “The bishop’s apparent worldliness had

reduced the comforts of heaven” (508). Mrs. Pastern serves as a figure for the moral dangers of the shelter—the shelter has swiftly become the center of her life, replacing her faith and forcing her to remain in a loveless marriage for purely mercenary reasons.

The bishop’s visit results in Mrs. Pastern’s failure of faith. Mrs. Flannagan, meanwhile, tempts Charlie from his discipline. One of the Pasterns’ neighbors, Mrs. Flannagan seduces Charlie because, like the bishop and Mrs. Pastern, she wants to survive. But unlike the bishop, Mrs. Flannagan’s bid for a spot in the shelter proves successful: the churchman may ply Mrs. Pastern with his holiness and an unspoken appeal to her faith, but Mrs. Flannagan offers Charlie Pastern something much more substantive—her body. She sleeps with Charlie and soon into their affair asks for his key to the bomb shelter, which he wears around his neck. Charlie is shocked and immediately feels used: “The demand struck him like a sledge-hammer blow, and suddenly he felt in all his parts the enormous weight of chagrin. [. . .] This must have been on her mind from the beginning” (505). If he doesn’t give Mrs. Flannagan the key, she’ll end their affair. And so despite his “chagrin,” despite knowing immediately Mrs. Flannagan’s motives, he gives up his spot in the shelter, an act he believes marks his failure in the new nuclear world of Cold War aggression:

in some chamber of his thick head he could see the foolishness and the obsolescence of his hankering skin. But how could he reform his bone and muscle to suit this new world; instruct his meandering and greedy flesh in politics, geography, holocausts, and cataclysms? Her front was round, fragrant, and soft, and he took the key off its ring—a piece of metal one and one-half inches long, warmed by the warmth of his hands, a genuine talisman of salvation, a defense against the end of the world—and dropped it into the neck of her dress. (505)

Flesh and its desires dominate this passage: Charlie’s “bone and muscle” must be reformed, his “hankering skin” is obsolete, Mrs. Flannagan’s “round,” “soft” front

attracts him, and his hands warm the shelter key. The shelter and the new age it represents are opposed to “greedy flesh,” and to survive requires instructing the body to stifle its wants in the face of world politics. The other major characters in the story—Mrs. Pastern, the bishop, Mrs. Flannagan—have maneuvered with this understanding, allowing the shelter to take precedence in their decisions, but Charlie can’t. In so doing he becomes the sole human character of the story, embracing “meandering and greedy” flesh, the warmth of life, over the cold calculation of survival as he drops the key—his most precious possession, “a defense against the end of the world”—into the neck of Mrs. Flannagan’s dress.

And yet, though Charlie may be the last human character in the story, he errs in his initial desire for the shelter, a grave mistake that costs him everything. Mrs. Pastern, the bishop, and Mrs. Flannagan fear a nuclear holocaust, but at the end of the story we learn Charlie has built the shelter, in the face of mounting debts, because he hopes for one. When Charlie returns from trying to get his key back from Mrs. Flannagan, he shouts at the newspaper, “Throw a little nuclear hardware at them! Show them who’s boss!”—his usual tirade—but then asks, “Dear Jesus, when will it ever end?” (509-10). Mrs. Pastern overhears him and seizes on Charlie’s admission:

“I’ve been waiting for you to say that. [. . .] When you signed the contract for the shelter without a penny to pay for it, I began to see your plan. You *want* the world to end, don’t you? Don’t you, Charlie, don’t you? I’ve known it all along, but I couldn’t admit it to myself, it seemed so ruthless—but then one learns something new every day.” (510)

We don’t get Charlie’s answer, but Mrs. Pastern’s accusation stands unchallenged. As she has recognized, Charlie’s hawkish diatribes hide a despair (“Dear Jesus, when will it ever end?”) but also a hope—that it will end and allow him, in the safety of his bomb

shelter, to escape his financial problems. As Mrs. Pastern understands, this hope is “ruthless,” and in answer to his hubris he loses both the shelter and his home, forfeiting his escape from nuclear holocaust and his pastoral escape from the city as, we find out in a coda to the story, he is sent to jail for grand larceny. But Charlie doesn’t suffer alone. In bringing the shelter into the suburb, in piercing the neighborhood’s pastoral façade, he has ensured the downfall of himself and the other characters. The bishop has betrayed his faith, Mrs. Flannagan divorces her husband and becomes an impoverished cast-off of the suburb, returning one day on the train in a shabby coat to look at the shelter, and Mrs. Pastern ends up living in the Bronx with her jobless son.<sup>19</sup> The shelter has meted out a punishment to each of its suitors.

The problem, aside from Charlie’s hubris, is that the shelter both wrecks the suburb’s innocence—these characters wouldn’t be shaken out of their routinized lives were it not for its presence—and promises to extend it. Both the shelter and the suburb promise to hold their owners aloof from the travails of daily life, the suburb by buffering its residents from the perceived dangers and obligations of the city, and the shelter by making its owners immune to the consequences of world politics (or, in Charlie’s case, their own bluster). And both promises come with moral costs. The suburban order rests on economic inequality, and the value of survival rests on the harsh fact that others must

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<sup>19</sup> Taking delight in world destruction is not exclusive to these texts. In Don DeLillo’s *End Zone* (1972) college football running back Gary Harkness, the novel’s narrator, “liked reading about the deaths of tens of millions of people. I liked dwelling on the destruction of great cities. Five to twenty million dead. Fifty to a hundred million dead. Ninety percent population loss. Seattle wiped out by mistake. Moscow demolished. Airbursts over every SAC base in Europe. I liked to think of huge buildings toppling, or firestorms, of bridges collapsing, survivors roaming the charred countryside. Carbon 14 and strontium 90. Escalation ladder and subcrisis situation. Titan, Spartan, Poseidon. People burned and unable to breathe” (21, more on 43, 89). But Harkness’s fascination is compulsive, and it depresses him (21). And as much as Gary is turned on by aspects of nuclear war, he does not concentrate on survival, but is simply fascinated by pure destruction.



necessarily die. We can accept characters who have jockeyed their way into the suburb, but this bold striving against others for survival—and, especially, Charlie’s hope that a nuclear holocaust will come—cannot go unchastised. The greed is too distilled, too obvious. Charlie, a man used to privilege, feels no qualms about praying for the destruction of the world to ensure a continuance of his comfortable lifestyle in the shelter. His selfishness is peculiarly suburban, but only in overreaching, in choosing to let others die to maintain his lifestyle, does it become morally untenable and call forth punishment.

### *Deliverance*

“The Brigadier and the Golf Widow” focuses on the bomb shelter while *Deliverance* takes up a different kind of nuclear future. The novel follows four men on a weekend canoe trip in the north Georgia hills that quickly turns dangerous as they’re forced to battle a pair of mountain men and the wilderness for their lives. Most readings of *Deliverance* center on Ed Gentry, the novel’s main character, but it’s Lewis (the character played by Burt Reynolds in the film) who proposes the trip to the others, all amateurs, staging it as a chance to break away from the bland world of corporate jobs and suburban homes. Lewis is a survivalist and, like Charlie Pastern, looks to nuclear war as a means of escape.<sup>20</sup> But where Charlie hopes to avoid the pains of financial reverses, banking on nuclear war to extend his suburban dream, Lewis faces no immediate troubles and only wants to escape the listless malaise of his suburban existence.

I focus on Lewis instead of Ed not only because he is, at the start, the group’s de facto leader and the one who sets its terms (where they’ll go, and how they’ll travel), but

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<sup>20</sup> Actually, he’s never clear on the condition of his fantasy, but the other characters assume its “atomic survival stuff,” and he elsewhere references nuclear war. He may avoid the specific hubris of willing a nuclear war, but he does fantasize about a catastrophic world meltdown.

also because he brings more intellectual force to the trip. For the others, the canoe trip is simply a vacation, but for Lewis the trip serves as another chance to condition himself for the future he dreams of. He brings them there, and it's his fantasy that's at stake. On their drive to the hills, Lewis and Ed discuss at length his thoughts on survival. "I just believe," Lewis says, "that the whole thing is going to be reduced to the human body, once and for all. I want to be ready. [. . .] I think the machines are going to fail, the political systems are going to fail, and a few men are going to take to the hills and start over" (40). "The Brigadier" places nuclear survival in the backyard of the suburban home, but in *Deliverance* survival is divorced completely from the suburb. Lewis looks forward to a chance to "start over" in the woods, to leave his life in the denatured suburbs for a more physical existence where "the whole thing is going to be reduced to the human body." Because of this distance between the fantasy and Lewis's home in suburban Atlanta, at first Ed can't reconcile Lewis's survivalism with his everyday life:

He lived in the suburbs, like the rest of us, [and] I could not really believe that he came in from placating his tenants every evening [Lewis owns rental property] and gave himself solemnly to the business of survival, insofar as it involved his body. What kind of fantasy led to this? I asked myself. Did he have long dreams of atomic holocaust in which he had to raise himself and his family out of the debris of less strong folk and head toward the same blue hills we were approaching? (41)

Because Lewis "lived in the suburbs, like the rest of us," Ed finds his fantasy ridiculous. But it's this divide that drives Lewis. For him survival is not about comfort, but about getting the opportunity to prove himself—to, as Ed understands, "raise himself and his family out of the debris of less strong folk" and struggle in the hills.

Like Charlie Pastern, Lewis has a fallout shelter. "We've got double doors and stocks of bouillon and bully beef for a couple of years at least," Lewis says, describing

the shelter to Ed. “We’ve got games for the kids, and a record player and a whole set of records on how to play the recorder and get up a family recorder group” (41). And like Charlie’s shelter, Lewis’s shelter (though with different features) mimics as closely as possible the comforts of the suburban home: plenty of food, entertainment, and family togetherness in an enclosed space. But for Lewis this method of nuclear survival is too confining. The shelter was initially key to his survival, he tells Ed, but he has since soured on this prospect:

I went down there one day and sat for a while. I decided that survival was not in the rivets and the metal, and not in the double-sealed doors and not in the marbles of Chinese checkers. It was in me. It came down to the man, and what he could do. The body is the one thing you can’t fake; it’s just got to be there. (41)

For Lewis, the shelter is too close to the upper-middle-class, suburban life he’s trying to escape. Later he claims he would rather die from fallout than remain cramped there. Charlie may want to hold onto his place in the suburb, but Lewis wants to free himself from the imagined constraints of his life. Another of Catherine Jurca’s suffering suburbanites, he sees his privilege as punishment. He complains to Ed, “Life is so fucked-up now, and so complicated, that I wouldn’t mind if it came down, right quick, to the bare survival of who was ready to survive” (41). His life is relatively easy—he supports himself and his family with inherited rental property—and despite all his feelings of entanglement, he is the freest character in the novel. Ed tells us, “Lewis was the only man I knew who could do with his life exactly what he wanted to” (9). His only setback, according to Ed, is that he would prefer to live in Uruguay or New Zealand and is tied down by his property. His ease contributes to his malaise, and he wants no survival that would mirror the comfort of his existence. And yet his fantasy, like Charlie

Pastern's, is tied to the original suburban impulse. In Lewis's case the desire for escape to a more rustic life pinned on self-reliance—central to his vision is the importance of individual strength, where surviving is “in me” and comes “down to the man”—replicates the strain of frontier spirit that led Americans to the suburbs in the first place. Like Charlie, he takes a chief aspect of the suburban dream and, using the threat of nuclear war to build his fantasy, carries it to its extreme end. And like Charlie, he is punished.

Charlie Pastern commits the sin of willing the world to end for his own comfort, but Lewis's error is threefold: he misunderstands the wilderness, he has a desperate need for authenticity that leads him to wish, like Charlie, for the world's end, and he is motivated more by pride than fear of an apocalyptic future. This first becomes apparent as Lewis elaborates on his fantasy of leaving the suburb behind:

If everything wasn't dead, you could make a kind of life that wasn't out of touch with everything, with the other forms of life. Where the seasons would mean something, would mean everything. Where you could hunt as you needed to, and maybe do a little light farming, and get along. You'd die early, and you'd suffer, and your children would suffer, but you'd be in touch. (42)

In his new world you can “hunt as you needed to” and get by on “light farming”—a hobbyist's dream—and your life is connected to “other forms of life” and depends on the seasons. Lewis doesn't imagine Eden. There is suffering in his fantasy. But he romanticizes this suffering—it's part of keeping “in touch.” And in his plans the wilderness won't just offer him an opportunity to lead a more difficult, and so more meaningful, life, but also to create a new society based on an idealized primitivism. Lewis tells Ed that his wife “talks about taking her paints along, and making a new kind of art, where things are reduced to essentials—like in cave painting—and there's none of this frou-frou in art anymore” (42). Lewis's elaborate dream of austerity, accounting for

food and the daily conditions of life as well as a new aesthetics, may be a retreat from modernity, which he associates with his suburb and views as softening. But this fetishization of the pre-modern, again, makes Lewis's plans nearly identical to the mythology of the suburban ideal, where a family can live simply, becoming more "in touch," and even do "a little light farming" in their sprawling yard. And his romanticization of nature, in which he prizes danger but underestimates it at the same time, is brutally answered on the river.

Lewis's fantasy would remain innocent, a suburbanite's humorous dream of escape, were it not for his second error, the authenticity he requires. If the allure of survivalism for Lewis is the dream of returning to some lost, pure ("none of this frou-frou") way of life, why not simply move to the woods and voluntarily live off the grid? Ed suggests just this, telling Lewis he could start a commune where he "could suffer just as much now as if they dropped the H-bomb" (42). But Lewis isn't interested. He responds, "It's not the same [. . .] Don't you see? It would just be eccentric. Survival depends—well, it depends on having to survive. The kind of life I'm talking about depends on its being the last chance. The very last of all" (42). Lewis's condition is understandable—his struggles will only have meaning if they're necessary, not voluntary. But this authenticity would be bought at the suffering and death of millions of others, a condition to which Lewis gives little thought. Later Lewis hedges on his conditions, seeming to pull back from this morally dangerous brink. When Ed tells Lewis he's wasting time "playing games," Lewis responds,

A gut survival situation may never happen. Probably it won't. But you know something? I sleep at night. I have no worries. I am becoming myself, as inconsequential as that may be. I am not something somebody shoved off on me. I am what I choose to be, and I am *it*. (46-7)

For Lewis, planning and preparing for survival is enough—it allows him to escape the suburb mentally without physically abandoning it. Assured that he is becoming himself, he can “sleep at night.” But this life still depends on the chance of mass-destruction. Lewis may be resigned to the fact that “a gut survival situation” probably won’t happen, but his feeling of authenticity comes from expecting, planning, and hoping for mass annihilation.

The third and perhaps most damning error he makes is his reason for longing for authenticity and fantasizing about “having to survive”: it makes him feel exceptional. As important as the struggle is surviving where others fail. Early in their conversation, Lewis tells Ed,

You might say I’ve got the survival craze, the real bug. And to tell the truth I don’t think most other people have. They might cry and tear their hair and be ready for some short hysterical violence or other, but I think most of them wouldn’t be too unhappy to give down and get it over with. [. . .] if it comes to a situation where I could operate, [. . .] I’d make out where many another wouldn’t. (41)

Other people “might cry and tear their hair,” be ready to give in, but Lewis believes he could “make out where many another wouldn’t.” He is one of the independent few conditioned for the harsh existence survival requires, and he derives much of his pleasure from imagining himself among this new elite. His waiting for the world to end becomes, then, about status. Lewis asks Ed pointedly, “Where would you go when the radios died? When there was nobody to tell you where to go?”, suggesting that Ed, unlike himself, conforms too easily to authority and would be unable to live without it (42). In casting himself as the rare, self-reliant man and Ed as one of the sheepish populace, Lewis creates a distinction similar to *Revolutionary Road*’s Wheelers, who believe their

neighbors to be blind masses and themselves members of an awakened few. While Lewis doesn't root his claim in rhetoric alone—he spends his days training—they both chase superiority.

This difference in their methods of separating themselves from their neighbors and their surroundings (the Wheelers' rhetoric versus Lewis's survivalism) can be traced to the difference in those surroundings. Mass-middle-class Frank and April fear being transformed into one of the indistinct middle-class masses living behind picture windows. Lewis is wealthier than the Wheelers, as are his friends, who are advertising and Coca-Cola executives. He doesn't chafe against the perceived massness of his suburb, because there is no perceived massness—he lives in a southern version of Cheever's Shady Hill. Rather, he resists the sedentary life of his class, embodied in the out-of-shape friends he brings with him on the river trip, and especially in Ed, who initially distances himself from Lewis's survivalism. Hoping to separate himself from that life, Lewis founds his claim of superiority on preparing his body for and fantasizing about a world in which he alone will be ready for the struggle bare existence will require. In effect, Lewis is an outsized version of the upper-middle-class male. His friends are executives, but Lewis's daily life is even more comfortable and requires even less physical struggle: he lives off inherited real estate. And so his response to upper-middle-class life, and his view of it, are outsized. He puts himself through a training regimen, he crafts elaborate fantasies, he strives to raise himself above those around him—the people he believes would be ready to bow to authority and “give in and get it over with.” Planning for the apocalypse provides the extreme answer to the aimlessness of upper-middle-class life.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> And a method for the exceptional few to separate themselves from the sedentary many, akin to Jean Martin's resistance of automation.

Class may determine Lewis's fantasy, but its allure comes from another, related quarter. Aside from separating himself from his class, his resistance to sedentary life and his construction of an elaborate fantasy of struggle are obvious attempts to define his masculinity. Charlie Pastern may be content with furthering his life of ease (though his attempt to maintain the endangered lifestyle of his family may be construed as an attempt to regain his lost masculine role as provider), but Lewis longs to suffer, to prove himself equal to the wilderness. Lewis has not had to struggle to live—he has been planted firmly in the upper-middle-class—and so he's not had the opportunity to prove his manhood. World destruction will finally give him the chance. And it's here we can understand the full breadth of the punishment Lewis's fantasy brings about. Focusing on Ed rather than Lewis, literary critic Pamela Barnett has claimed that the travails on the river provide the chance for Ed to regain his masculinity: "in a novel that casts Southern, white, suburban life as emasculation, this camping trip from hell is, curiously, the protagonist's [Ed's] dream come true" (145). She's right. Ed strives against the odds to save Lewis—sidelined by an injury—and Bobby and kill the last mountain man waiting for them, and becomes renewed and reinvigorated by his harrowing experience. He shifts from soft suburban amateur to authoritative survivalist, taking this new vitality into his life. "The river underlies in one way or another everything I do," Ed tells us, going on to recount how he has abandoned his former cynical attitude toward advertising and now does collages and discusses art with an illustrator he'd mocked (and fired) at the beginning of the book—an aesthetic awakening similar to the one imagined by Lewis's wife (234). But what gets missed in this reading is that Ed's revitalized masculinity comes at the expense of Lewis, for whom, in the exact same terms, the trip is a failure.



Midway through the novel, after their first encounter with the two mountain men terrorizing them (one of whom they've already killed and buried), Lewis breaks his leg while running the rapids. He has broken a leg in the wilderness before, which he views as the kind of injury that gives his survivalism its charge, and will give his new life meaning:

You know, with all the so-called modern conveniences, a man can still fall down. His leg will break [. . .]. He can lie there in the woods with night coming on, knowing he's got two cars in the garage, one of them an XKE, a wife and three children watching 'Star Trek' as he lies trying to get his breath under a bush. The old human body is the same as it always was. It still feels that old fear, and that old pain. (47)

The romanticized struggle, away from modern comforts, from his “two cars” and “Star Trek,” will prove his masculinity because the frailty of the “old human body” is the greatest challenge, and therefore the truest sign, of his manhood. Lewis believes he failed on this earlier trip because he couldn't make a splint for himself and needed the help of mountain people to get out of the woods, and when he breaks his leg on the river, he again fails, losing his authority to Ed. His injury is more severe than the first time he broke his leg—there's no way he could make it out on his own, no matter how well-prepared he was. But the injury still damns his dreams and his vision of himself as a self-reliant man able “to make out where many another couldn't.” A page before the accident, Ed notes Lewis's voice “had no authority and very little being at all” against the noise of the river—a foreshadowing of Lewis's lost role—and after the accident Lewis, barely able to speak, surrenders his position to Ed, telling him, “It's you. It's got to be you” (121, 129). From this point on he nearly disappears from the novel, becoming a silent presence in the canoe and later in a hospital bed. In one of his last conversations with Ed before falling unconscious, Lewis tells him, “Here we are, at the heart of Lewis

Medlock country” (137). They may be in the heart of “Lewis Medlock country”—“pure survival” as Ed calls it in this same exchange—but Lewis has lost his citizenship. In the novel, Ed becomes the man “who could make out where many another man couldn’t,” while Lewis becomes little more than baggage that must be saved. Lewis has looked forward to a time where survival “depends on having to survive,” but when it occurs, he falls short of the mark.

To make her argument about Ed’s regained masculinity, Barnett turns to the theorist David Savran’s *Taking it Like a Man*. In the book, Savran suggests that masochism became a method of establishing white masculinity in the 1970s. White males, he argues, viewed the 1960s civil rights advances, the loss of the Vietnam War, and the end of the post-World War II economic boom as undermining their position—a vision perhaps shared by Lewis, who at one point pronounces, vaguely, “the world is so fucked up.” Because of these changes in American society, in which they’ve seen their defeat abroad and believe themselves stifled and impotent at home, white males’ only recourse to proving their masculinity is enduring pain (190-1). Savran uses the movie character Rambo as an example. Rambo’s physique is shown to the movie viewer and then punished—displaying Rambo’s prowess and then cleansing male viewers of homoerotic investment and enabling Rambo “to prove his masculinity the only way he can,” through bearing pain (203, 201). Likewise, survival in Lewis’s terms—essentially the desire to suffer and risk death while wresting life from the land—is rooted in a masochist urge. But where masochism works for Ed, his suffering on the river fortifying his masculinity, it does the opposite for Lewis. Instead of cleansing homoerotic investment, Lewis’s injuries heighten it. Earlier in the novel Ed admires Lewis’s

physique, and after the injury, he tells Bobby, “Let’s take his pants down.” Bobby takes the command sexually (this is shortly after his rape), and Ed catches himself: “*Goddamn phraseology*” (127). And as he examines Lewis’s leg, Ed feels Lewis’s “penis stir with pain,” giving the moment a slight homoerotic charge (128). Lewis lies enfeebled, subject still to his friend’s gaze and accidental double entendres. His injuries don’t displace homoeroticism, and rather than proving his masculinity, they return him to the suburb a diminished man. At the end of the novel he “limps” over to Ed’s lake house (not his, as he’s no longer dominant) to shoot arrows (235). Barnett may be right to see the trip as enhancing Ed’s masculinity, but it does the opposite for Lewis, who has fantasized extensively about just this situation offering him an escape from suburban life. Earlier, Lewis says, “So we’re lesser men, Ed. I’m sorry, but we are” (45). He is comparing himself and Ed to the mountain people who are able in the woods, who know what to do in an emergency. Ed, with his heroics, rises above being a “lesser man,” but Lewis, for all his desire and plans, does not.

Lewis’s failure is important to the mechanics of the book—it’s his scheme that gets the men to the wilderness, and his incapacitation that gives Ed the challenge of getting them out alive. If Lewis remained whole, he would stay in charge, and his skillful solving of their dilemma (getting down the river, thwarting the remaining mountain man) would provide much less drama than Ed’s struggle. The book needs Lewis to be shoved aside. But his punishment goes beyond mere narrative clockwork. Like Charlie Pastern, he is guilty of a hubris rooted in his class position: willing the world to end for the fulfillment of his dream. And like Charlie, Lewis’s hubris brings harm not only to himself but to the others around him. Mountain people kill Drew and rape Bobby, and

Ed wounds himself with his own arrow. Each injury serves the development of the novel (Ed's wound heightens his struggle, Drew's death and Bobby's rape establishes the danger they're in), but each one is a result of Lewis's folly—he is the one who has brought the three others, all unprepared, into the wilderness for a practice run of his survivalist dream. Lewis commits the sin of wishing mass destruction on the world so he can escape his aimless life and restore his masculinity, and the selfishness of this wish is profoundly punished in the novel, through the death and suffering of his friends and the severe injury of Lewis's body, the very center of his survivalist fantasy. What he most prizes, his self-reliance in a “gut survival situation,” is taken from him and given to another.

Lewis Medlock and Charlie Pastern are both upper-middle-class suburbanites who seek to gain by nuclear war. But beyond this parallel, their characters part ways. Charlie's dream goes only as far as the bomb shelter—he has no visions of what will come after nuclear war, only that his present trouble will end and he will survive in comfort. Lewis, meanwhile, has given up on his shelter and views nuclear war as giving him the opportunity to fashion a new society in the Georgia hills and reestablish his masculinity. Charlie looks to nuclear survival simply as an escape from the entanglements of his suburban life, but Lewis uses survivalism—not just hunkering down and waiting through fallout, but constructing a new life in the wilderness—to create a new self. And these different foci are reflected in the settings of the narratives: “The Brigadier and the Golf Widow” leaves the suburbs only for a few scenes, while the bulk of *Deliverance* takes place in the wilderness Lewis dreams of decamping to. But they are

both guilty of the same selfishness, a selfishness punished not just because of the cruelty inherent in their plans, but because of the privileged position they already hold.

In 1961 Margaret Mead drew a connection between suburbs and bomb shelters in an article for the *New York Times Magazine* titled “Are Shelters the Answer?” In the article, she suggests that the selfish, individualistic impulses that led people to the suburbs were the same ones that led them to build shelters:

Drawn back in space and in time, hiding from the future and the rest of the world, they [suburbanites] turned to the green suburbs, protected by zoning laws against members of other classes or races or religions, and concentrated on the single, tight little family. They idealized the life of each such family living alone in self-sufficient togetherness, protecting its members against the contamination of different ways or others’ needs. . . . The armed, individual shelter is the logical end of this retreat from trust in and responsibility for others. (Henriksen 217)

For Mead, the same desires—individualism, focusing on family over community, belief in a pre-modern ideal, separation from others—that drove people to the suburbs also spur them to build fallout shelters. Her analysis describes well both Charlie and Lewis.

Charlie’s hope for the end is a retreat from “the rest of the world,” as he looks to avoid his debts. And though Lewis discards the idea of surviving in a shelter, he hopes to hide “from the future,” and his primitive dream of living off the land is little different from the pastoral, yeoman farmer dreams that made early American suburbs popular. To push Mead’s idea further, Charlie and Lewis’s apocalyptic hopes are tied to their positions as upper-middle-class suburbanites, magnifications of the disregard for others suburban living requires. Not everyone can have a large house and sprawling lawn, nor can everyone survive into the apocalyptic age. Space is limited. Hoping to flee their responsibilities, and used to their supreme, exclusive position, Charlie and Lewis are guilty of a uniquely upper-middle-class suburban arrogance, imagining, hoping for, and

*assuming* a future where once again they are the privileged few separated from the suffering others. Their use of nuclear war—viewing it as helpful to them rather than harmful to others—is shocking, but puts in stark relief the assumption they hold about their position as upper-middle-class suburbanites. Their fantasies reflect a belief in their own exceptionality, that they have a greater right than others to survive. This belief in the rightness of their privilege can be looked over when it's restricted to their homes, but in hoping for world destruction, they reach too far.

## 2. The Moon Landing and Lower-Middle-Class Disappointment

### *Rabbit Redux*

A typesetter, not an executive or landlord, Rabbit Angstrom lives in a lower-middle-class suburb of tract homes, Penn Villas, not in an upper-middle-class garden suburb. And while Charlie and Lewis use the threat of nuclear war to plot escape fantasies, Rabbit uses the space race to illuminate his own sense of abandonment and helplessness—an inner exploration rather than an attempt to break out. Again, four broad themes are brought together in a story—the suburbs, threatened masculinity, individual impotence in the face of the Cold War, and class. But the one alteration that proves pivotal, that changes the outcome—for Rabbit succeeds where Charlie and Lewis fail—is class.

Class determines the difference in their suburbs, and class determines the difference in their responses to the Cold War. At first one might argue that they are responding to two wholly separate aspects of the Cold War, and that this determines their actions (or inactions) as much as class. On its surface, the moon landing may appear

unrelated to the threat of a nuclear holocaust, but the space race was intimately tied to the threat of nuclear war during the Cold War. Tom Wolfe, explaining this link, writes in

*The Right Stuff*:

Surveys showed that people throughout the world looked on the competition in launching space vehicles [. . .] as a preliminary contest proving final and irresistible power to destroy. The ability to launch Sputniks dramatized the ability to launch nuclear warheads on ICBMs. But in these neo-superstitious times it came to dramatize much more than that. It dramatized the entire technological and intellectual capability of the two nations and the strength of the national wills and spirits. (125)

Throughout the early years of the space program, the 1950s and early 1960s, the Soviets stayed ahead, leaving Americans worried and insecure. The space program was an embarrassment, with every other rocket malfunctioning, and the public feared the nation was falling behind in math and science. But by the mid-1960s Americans began to match Soviet accomplishments in space and regained their assurance, showering Alan Shepherd and John Glenn and other early astronauts with parades and honors. By the time of the moon landing, the success of the US space program was a source of national pride, and, amidst a decade's end that saw the country bogged down in an unpopular foreign war and its streets filled with unrest at home, the Apollo Project seemed the last bright, hopeful marker of American exceptionalism.

Rabbit's latching onto the moon landing rather than its Cold War analog, nuclear annihilation, is as much a product of his class as the time of the novel's composition (after all, both *Rabbit Redux* and *Deliverance* were published within a year of each other). Rabbit is powerless—more truly one of theorist David Savrans's hemmed-in white males than Lewis Medlock—and this powerlessness determines his use of lunar imagery to make sense of his surroundings. His pathetic life—his endangered job, his

seemingly failed marriage, his undignified home—is matched against arguably the greatest achievement of mankind. Just as Charlie Pastern and Lewis Medlock look forward to rather than fear nuclear war, Rabbit reacts in opposition to the assumed shared view of the nation—the moon landing inspires him with despair. As middle-class white males, all three are at variance with the world, and their reverse readings of Cold War narratives represent their attempt to push back, to regain their former position and their lost masculinity. But while Charlie and Lewis, at the upper end of the middle class pole, can use the greatest threat to the world to craft their escape fantasies, Rabbit, beaten down and mired in lower-middle-class hopelessness (by the end of the book he loses his job, made obsolete by technology), sees no escape, and so turns to the moon landing, a mockery of his grim inertia in the face of America’s promise of progress.

While the place of nuclear war in Cheever’s fiction and Dickey’s *Deliverance* has been unexamined, multiple critics have analyzed the moon’s role in *Rabbit Redux*. Because the moon features prominently in the novel—aside from Rabbit’s watching it on television and the novel’s use of space imagery, the moon is on the book jacket and dialog from lunar missions provides the epigraphs to two of its four sections—the critical response has been extensive and varied. Most critics consider the moon shot as a mirror to Rabbit’s life, though they disagree on the question of whether Rabbit lifts off—moving into outer space with Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins—or gets left behind, abandoned in the new America at the tail end of postwar optimism. Those who argue Rabbit lifts off emphasize his encounter with the hippie Jill and militant Skeeter, who come to live in Rabbit’s house during the middle sections of the novel (Jill arrives in the second section, Skeeter in the third), allying the lunar mission with Rabbit’s own exploration of the



varieties of life beyond his subdivision (Locke 78, Falke 66, Hunt 175). Updike agrees at least in part with this understanding, claiming, “The novel is itself a moon shot: Janice’s affair launches her husband, as he and his father witness the take-off of Apollo 11 in the Phoenix bar, into the extraterrestrial world of Jill and Skeeter” (xv). For him, Rabbit’s actions parallel those of the space capsule, though he doesn’t tell us how the parallel should be read—as the launching into a bright new future or into an empty void. Others read Rabbit as “earthbound,” and argue the lunar mission doesn’t mirror his journey into the unknown (Janice’s affair, the counterculture) but simply reflects his sad state by reinforcing how the rest of the country is moving forward and leaving him behind (Greiner 68, Vargo 151). Rather than focus on whether Rabbit is aloft or not, some critics have tracked the moon imagery and argued for wholly different ways of reading it: as a symbol of the failure and bankruptcy of white middle America (Markle 164), an exploration of blackness (Boswell 99), or Rabbit’s existential emptiness (Uphaus 79). Yet other critics use the presence of the moon landing to center their reading on world politics, either arguing that because of the lunar mission’s place in the book Rabbit embodies the hollowness of the Cold War struggle (Miller 59), or, alternatively, the uncertainties of America’s ability to lead in an idealized, post-conflict world (Slethaug 251). And yet others claim the moon shot reflects the difficulty of the individual to achieve perfection (Campbell 40), underscores Skeeter’s vision of militant revolution (Berryman 123), or illustrates “the insubstantial quality of American life” (Detweiler 155).

I don’t deny the validity of these arguments. The lunar imagery is broad enough to support a number of readings, and because of the nature of the novel’s plotting—

Rabbit is passive throughout the book, first toward the moon landing and then toward the hippy (Jill) and black militant (Skeeter) who fall into his lap and stay in his house—one can argue that he both “takes off” and is left behind. But these arguments don’t account for the connection Rabbit draws between the moon and his suburb. Rabbit’s comparison of his house to a space capsule and his suburb to the moon are key to understanding his feelings about his home and his place in the suburban order. A few critics have made tentative steps in this direction. Richard Locke notes, “The lunar wasteland of contemporary America is everywhere. The tacky houses of the suburban development where Rabbit lives blister the landscape like craters on the moon” while Brian Keener says of Penn Villas, “This environment is as cold and soulless as the moon,” but doesn’t bring up lunar imagery itself (78, 69). Both stop at their own analogies, forgetting Rabbit’s own role in forming the tie. Robert Beuka, in *SuburbiaNation*, also links the moon landing to Rabbit’s alienation in the suburb: “As the moon landings themselves were perhaps most notable as emblems of America’s frantic search for a new frontier, the recurring references to the Apollo mission underscore Harry’s own spatial dilemma” (121). But he fails to see how Rabbit’s place in the suburb and his understanding of his neighborhood (via the moon landing) helps set him free. Dilvo Ristoff connects the moon to the suburban home, but opposite to the way I suggest, claiming, “in Harry’s eyes, a lifeless satellite could not take the place of a well-furnished suburban home” (61). Ristoff believes Rabbit prefers his home to the moon, but Rabbit loathes his home and equates it to both a space capsule and the moon. Both Penn Villas and the moon are blighted landscapes, and both reflect a national promise—of achievement, of happiness—that Rabbit has failed to realize. While the media hype the greatness of the lunar project,

Rabbit believes the astronauts are headed toward a “big round nothing,” and elsewhere Rabbit thinks of Penn Villas, the supposed dreamland of the middle class, as a “nowhere” (285). To him, both represent absences.

To understand Rabbit’s use of lunar imagery, we must first understand the way he views his house. Since *Rabbit, Run* (1960), Rabbit, his wife Janice, and their son Nelson have moved from their apartment to a small ranch home in Penn Villas, an inexpensive, recently built subdivision on the edge of the Brewer metro area, the geographic heart of the novels until Rabbit’s retirement to Florida in *Rabbit at Rest* (4). Our first introduction to Rabbit’s neighborhood comes with a description of a disappointing landscape: a “ranch-house village of muddy lawns and potholed macadam and sub-code sewers” (15). The lawns are muddy, not grassy, the streets are pot-holed, not smooth, and the sewers “sub-code”—each detail an accounting of how the neighborhood falls short of its ideal.

Then we come to Rabbit’s home:

He lives on Vista Crescent, third house from the end. Once there may have been here a vista, a softly sloped valley of red barns and fieldstone farmhouses, but more Penn Villas had been added and now the view from any window is as into a fragmented mirror, of houses like his, telephone wires and television aerials showing where the glass cracked. His house is faced with apple-green aluminum clapboards and is numbered 26. Rabbit steps onto his flagstone porchlet and opens his door with its three baby windows arranged like three steps, echoing the door-chime of three stepped tones. (15)

This passage tells us almost everything we need to know about Rabbit’s home. The irony of his street’s name, a vista-less Vista Crescent—any former vista destroyed by the addition of more houses like his own, full of people seeking the same retreat from urban life—is familiar to anyone who has visited a subdivision. But more than a simple joke,

this irony symbolizes the failed promise of middle-class happiness in the suburbs, as the house cannot live up to the expectation set by the subdivision or street's name.

Second, the images of massness (the "mirror" in which he sees "houses like his") portray a house that is disconnected and anonymous. At first the images appear to place Rabbit firmly in the tradition of resistance to the mass-middle class described in Chapter One, though his tract home is, in quality and class identity, below the Wheelers' and the Martins'. But Rabbit doesn't rage against mass identity, and he doesn't fear his house or the surrounding landscape will transform him. Rather, he simply finds it inhospitable, and views it as the locus of his failure. His reaction, in a sense, is more pure. Updike may be tapping into the stereotyped imagery of massness, but Rabbit is innocent of this—his experience of the suburb is reduced purely to his own immediate impressions of life in this landscape, not preconceived notions of how he should feel about it. Besides, the images of massness don't impart a fear of being swallowed into an indistinguishable whole, but the exact opposite, of being split off from others. The "mirror" is cracked, telephone wires and television aerials separating the houses or cutting them in half, representing an isolation Rabbit feels throughout the novel. The only commonality he holds with his neighbors is the chore of mowing, and unlike the Wheelers or Martins the Angstroms make no friends in their subdivision: their neighbors are "strangers, transients," present only in "passing cars and the shouts of unseen children" (76, 61). Like the vista-less Vista Crescent, the similarity of the houses represents another broken promise of the suburbs: rather than fostering a community of like-minded people, Penn Villas harbors isolated lives. Late in the novel, when Rabbit and Jill "vanish in the

shuffle of picture windows,” menace comes not from the fear of conformity that plagues the Wheelers, but a fall into this disconnected nothingness (304).

Third, and perhaps more harmful than the image of mass isolation—each house a separate, unconnected pod—are the demeaning descriptions of the house itself. “Apple-green” and boasting a “porchlet” and “three baby windows” on the front door, Rabbit’s home, more a playhouse than a real house, infantilizes him. His masculinity is directly challenged, and the babyish house is a sign of things to come as his wife, already working to help support the family (and thus challenging postwar norms of masculinity), cuckolds him and eventually moves in with a salesman from her father’s car dealership. The suburban home, which is supposed to offer community, an opportunity to get in touch with the land and support traditional gender roles within the nuclear family, renegs on every one of its promises and mocks his failure.

Once Rabbit steps inside, we find an interior that, like the exterior, imparts inadequacy. Everything in the house is described by what it isn’t, or how it isn’t used. Nelson, Rabbit’s son, calls to Rabbit from “a room on his right the size of what used to be called a parlor, with a fire place they never use” (15). Later Updike describes the living room furniture: “the fake cobbler’s bench” and “the blank TV screen in its box of metal painted with wood grain” (141). The parlor is not a parlor, the wood is not wood, and the cobbler’s bench is fake. Everything in the house falls short of its referent. But the suburb isn’t just artificial; it’s foreign. Each of these details hints at a disorientation. Nothing here is what it seems, and Rabbit feels alienated in Penn Villas because he has nothing familiar or solid to hold onto.

The suburb's alienation alone might not damn it, but Rabbit also finds the landscape barren, antagonistic to the fostering of human life. Standing in his yard, he reflects:

Penn Villas with its vaunted quarter-acre lots and compulsory barbecue chimneys does not tempt its residents outdoors, even the children in summer: in the snug brick neighborhood of Rabbit's childhood you were always outdoors, hiding in hollowed-out bushes, scuffling in the gravel alleys, secure in the closeness of windows from at least one of which an adult was always watching. Here, there is a prairie sadness, a barren sky raked by slender aerals. A sky poisoned by radio waves. A desolate smell from underground. (60)

Despite the forced attempts at hospitality (the “compulsory barbecue chimneys”) and the “vaunted quarter-acre lots” (the promise of new land on which to stretch and build a new, expansive life), the development's outdoor spaces are empty of human activity, in large part because of Penn Villa's pattern of land-use. In Rabbit's old, “snug” neighborhood of row houses in Mt. Judge, children played “secure in the closeness of windows,” under the surveillance of an adult. But the houses in Penn Villas, with their large lots, are too far apart to provide that security. And in this passage the land itself becomes harmful, as Updike suggests by using imagery that would better suit a polluted wasteland to describe his neighborhood: the “barren sky” is “poisoned” and “raked,” and a “desolate smell [comes] from underground.”<sup>22</sup> This is no place to live. Elsewhere Updike describes the tree in the Angstroms' front yard as a “spindly planted maple that cannot grow, as if bewildered by the wide raw light”—the tree becoming an objective correlative for the development's inability to nurture its residents—and notes that “The lawn looks artificial, lifeless, dry, no-color” (61, 298). This is a harsh landscape, and the imagery (“lifeless and dry, no-color,” “desolate smell,” “barren sky”) describes a place incapable of

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<sup>22</sup> Updike especially likes the violent image of the raked sky, repeating it with “television aerals raking the same four o'clock garbage from the sky” (199).

nourishing life. This isn't an identity-stealing suburb of the 1950s' social critics' imagination, despite the few references to its mass similarity. Rather, it's a lonely, disorienting, inhospitable place too bleak to sustain happiness.

It's this bleakness that leads Rabbit to connect Penn Villas to the moon. He draws this connection in two ways. The first is subtle, with the moon acting as a sort of mood metonym for the suburb. When Rabbit mentions or thinks of the moon, he considers it in terms similar to his home: as a cold, bleak, lonesome object. Two days before his wife Janice leaves, Rabbit watches her lying "awake like the moon," and while Jill sleeps, "The electric clock burns beyond her head like a small moon's skeleton" (51, 235). Rabbit sees the moon as "a cold stone above Mt. Judge," and the first night he brings Jill to his house he concentrates on both the moon's coldness and its airless atmosphere, thinking in staccato bursts that mimic someone speaking while fighting for breath, "The cold moon. Scraped wallpaper. Pumice stone under a flash bulb. Footprints stay for a billion years, not a fleck of dust blows" (384, 147). Throughout, Rabbit associates the moon with loneliness. It's either a foreboding presence haunting his bed partner at night (Janice leaves, Jill dies), or it becomes a figure of emptiness, where "footprints stay for a billion years, not a fleck of dust blows with cold." In each of these cases, the moon's coldness and loneliness matches that of the "the dormant houses and cold lawns of Penn Villas" (331). And with the imagery itself he links the moon to a failed domesticity, thinking of the moon's surface as "scraped wallpaper."

The second link between Penn Villas and the moon is more substantial: Rabbit imagines his home in lunar terms. When he returns to his house for the first time after Janice has left, he associates it with the deep emptiness of space, thinking, "The house is

silent, like outer space” (84). Elsewhere he ties Penn Villas directly to the moon landing. During the landing, as Nelson falls asleep, Rabbit tells him, “We better rendezvous with our spacecraft,” referring to his home, and immediately calls up the thought: “But the spacecraft is empty: a long empty box in the blackness of Penn Villas, slowly spinning in the void” (99). Later, he continues to think of his house as a space capsule, Penn Villas as a void. At Jimbo’s Friendly Lounge, where Rabbit meets Jill, his house “remains a strange dry place, dry and cold and emptily spinning in the void of Penn Villas like a cast-off space capsule. He doesn’t want to go there but he must” (132). The image returns: “The booth tilts and he rocks slightly, as if he is already in the slowly turning cold house he is heading toward” (133). Rabbit joins his house to the Apollo project, using the imagery of space exploration to evoke the lonesomeness of his home. His neighborhood is the “void” of space, his house a “space capsule.” Although the space capsule sustains life amidst the harshness of space, this capsule is “cast off”—unwanted—and it’s uninviting: aside from its isolation (“spinning in the void”), it is “strange, “dry,” “cold,” and “empty,” in line with the other portrayals of his neighborhood. Like the earlier depictions of his house and neighborhood, Rabbit also figures his house as disorienting and unstable. Twice he imagines it as “spinning,” and another time “turning.” For Rabbit, the suburban frontier is as unpalatable as the vertigo-inducing void of space, and the Apollo project and his home are both empty pursuits: a pointless trip to the moon, and a futile attempt at domestic happiness in a hollow, dizzying community.

Elsewhere, Updike’s imagery connects Rabbit’s neighborhood to the moon itself. When Rabbit returns home he finds children “are standing across the Crescent, some with



bicycles, watching this odd car unload. This phenomenon on the bleak terrain of Penn Villas alarms him: as if growths were to fester on the surface of the moon” (271). Again, the landscape of Penn Villas is “bleak,” and the phenomenon of human life as surprising as finding life “on the surface of the moon.” Even under the best circumstances, life can only “fester” like these children and the metaphoric lunar growths. The moon landing, and space in general, becomes the means by which Rabbit expresses his disappointment with the suburban dream. Both the Apollo project and the suburb promised to bring glory and happiness to Americans, and Rabbit links the two through their failure to buoy him.

This adoption of lunar imagery marks the extent of Rabbit’s investment in the moon landing. Otherwise, he remains a passive observer. In the novel’s opening scene, Rabbit ignores the lift-off as it’s being replayed on a bar television, with the sound off, and only looks at the screen when a game show comes on (7). When Rabbit thinks about the lunar mission, it’s not him but his father he considers a tiny part of the project, “a piece of grit in the launching pad,” able to share in the joy that “Armstrong is above him, that the U.S. is the crown and stupefaction of human history” (11). Later, Rabbit misses seeing the astronauts land on the moon: he is talking with his sick mother when his father shouts to them that the astronauts have touched down (93). The only part of the moon landing he directly witnesses is the moon walk. But even that experience is distorted: he listens to the unintelligible technological gibberish spoken by the astronauts and Houston—highlighting the disconnect between the average viewer and the technological protocol of the moment—and doesn’t understand what Armstrong says, “something about ‘steps’ that a crackle keeps Rabbit from hearing” (99). Unlike Charlie and Lewis, who have tried to bend one narrative of the Cold War to the fulfillment of

their fantasies, Rabbit remains disengaged from the Apollo 11 project, having none of the investment nor interest in the feat that others feel and the television projects. It is too distanced from his daily experience of failure.

Rabbit's passivity toward the Apollo project has no consequences, other than metaphor, but it sets the pattern for the rest of the book, as he later submits to hippy Jill and black militant Skeeter when he gives them free reign of his house. It's this passivity that brings about his house's destruction. Unhappy with Jill and Skeeter living among them, his neighbors burn down the house—ironically, their sole act of community—and the loss, rather than devastating Rabbit, brings him relief.<sup>23</sup> Standing before his burned house, Rabbit “remembers the storm windows, Windexing their four sides, and it seems a fable that his life was ever centered on such details. His house slips from him. He is free” (332). Instead of looking to the Cold War to solve his problems (while hurting others), Rabbit has remained a distanced observer, and in return the burden of his house has been lifted from him and “he is free.”

This freedom is all-encompassing. He not only loses the disappointing house, but returns to innocence, losing all attachments to the competing narratives of the late 1960s. With his house he has straddled the two opposing points-of-view of the era: it has enlisted him in the Silent Majority (his conservative neighbors, his pro-Vietnam views, the American flag on his bumper) and been the locus of his dalliance with the counterculture (the hippy and black militant he lets stay in his home). The burning of his house itself frees him from the failed landscape, but the hulk of his ruined house frees

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<sup>23</sup> There is a subtheme in these books of coming to appreciate your suburban home just before losing it. Like *Revolutionary Road*'s Frank Wheeler, who finally likes his house before his wife kills himself, Rabbit decides “This isn't a bad neighborhood” (302).

him of any responsibility for the Cold War order, acting as a scapegoat as it takes on all the competing arguments of the time:

Some person has taken the trouble to bring a spray can of yellow paint and has hugely written NIGGER on the side. Also the word KILL. The two words don't go together, so it is hard to tell which side the spray can had been on. Maybe there had been two spray cans. Demanding equal time. On the broad stretch of aluminum clapboards below the windows, where in spring daffodils come up and in summer phlox goes wild, yellow letters spell in half-script, *Pig Power is Clean Power*. Also there is a peace sign and a swastika, apparently from the same can. And other people, borrowing charred sticks from the rubble, have come along and tried to edit and add to these slogans and symbols, making Pig into Black and Clean into Cong. (395)

The confused politics of the 1960s passes from Rabbit's life to his house, where the debates of the era are waged as different, unseen people "edit" and "add" to the language on its aluminum siding, demanding "equal time." And not only is the house written on, but "charred sticks," pieces of the destroyed house, are used to do much of the writing. The house's destruction frees Rabbit from the responsibility to pick a side. He doesn't have to be a member of the Silent Majority or the counterculture, and he doesn't have to stay in Penn Villas. Instead, he's given the chance to start over. Jobless, wifeless, and, of course, homeless, he goes back to his parents' house to live in the room he grew up in. At first glance this may seem a punishment as severe as the ones meted out to Charlie Pastern and Lewis Medlock, but Rabbit's losses and retreat mark the end of a nightmare and his return to innocence. The book ends hopefully, with Rabbit and his wife Janice beginning a new courtship in a motel, the novel's last word a hesitant but upbeat "OK?" (407). And by the next installment in the tetralogy, Rabbit and his wife are back together and wealthy, moved up from their lower-middle-class station and beyond their failed start.

Charlie and Lewis are punished while Rabbit is rewarded. All three live in the suburbs, all three suffer to some extent from a circumscribed masculinity, and all three engage the Cold War. Here, of course, they differ. But their opposite responses to aspects of nuclear war (survival and the Space Race) stand in for the other, more salient difference: class. This separation is far from subtle, and throughout *Rabbit Redux* Rabbit feels keenly the divide between the two extreme ends of suburban class. For much of the book he has no car, and, after taking the bus from work, he must walk through upscale Penn Park (where he ends up living in *Rabbit is Rich*) on his way to his home in Penn Villas, a walk that fosters envy: “Penn Villas echoes the name hopefully though it is not incorporated into this borough [Penn Park] but sits on the border of Furnace Township, looking in” (15). The daily trip makes Rabbit acutely aware of his place in the suburban class scale: no matter how much Penn Villas may “hope” to identify itself with Penn Park, it will remain inferior. And he specifically thinks of class in suburban terms, pitting neighborhoods against each other. When he meets Jill, who comes from a wealthy background, he thinks, “He is Penn Villas, she is Penn Park” (129). Later, provoked by Skeeter, he shouts, “‘I hate those Penn Park motherfuckers [. . .] If I could push the red button to blow them all to kingdom come’—he pushes a button in mid-air—‘I would’” (249). For Rabbit, responsibility inheres in the suburban landscape. The people of upper-middle-class Penn Park should be blamed for his discontent, if for nothing else than living assured, seemingly carefree lives while he scrapes by in hardscrabble Penn Villas. Rabbit understands well that “suburb” is not a uniform category, and that which suburb you live in signifies (and determines) your role in the world and the responsibility you bear.

In each of the narratives, white suburban males, a group used to the myth of personal independence, have been stripped of control of their lives. Charlie is in debt, Lewis is bound to his Atlanta home by his rental property, and Rabbit is jobless. Their sense of powerlessness is distilled into their interaction with the nuclear war and the space race. Charlie and Lewis can do nothing to hasten nuclear war, just as Rabbit can take no more part in the space race than to view it.<sup>24</sup> In the case of Charlie and Lewis, this belief in powerlessness is misguided. They are part of the ruling class that has guided the country, that has brought about the world order—regardless of their own specific roles—and they have enough money and freedom (even with his debt Charlie can build a “thirty-two-thousand dollar” shelter) to chart their own lives. As I’ll explain more thoroughly in Chapter Three, the upper-middle class pretends to innocence while hiding power. Charlie and Lewis, each in their own decline (or, in Lewis’s case, stasis), may have forgotten how much control they wield, but their actions reveal that at some level they remember. Facing lost independence, Charlie and Lewis look to ways to regain control, to craft futures for themselves that not only replicate their suburban lives but put them again in an elite grouping. But Rabbit stands much lower on the class scale. Like his father, he is “a piece of grit in the launching pad,” a miniscule and seemingly insignificant part of the Cold War order. And so he turns to passivity, crafting no narratives of escape and using the space race only to figure his home and his neighborhood. Because of this humility, and his lesser responsibility, he is “set free,” able to chart a new masculinity not through masochism or bombast but through a

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<sup>24</sup> Nor insert himself in the counterculture or black militancy than letting their representatives take over his home

liberating retreat and loss that allows him to start his life from scratch and, less than a decade later, ascend to upper-middle-class Penn Park.

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### Chapter Three

#### Fugitive Daughters and the Suburban Veil

The late 1960s and early 1970s were a time of crisis for many large American cities, especially northern cities whose growth had relied on heavy industry. As whites fled and factories moved to the suburbs, to the south and southwest, or out of the country, northern cities were left crippled and impoverished. At the same time, riots erupted in urban areas across the country, the last violent rattle of their long death. Yet, while the cities suffered, their suburbs continued unfazed, in fact grew. For instance, as Detroit waned, suburban Oakland County, as its website boasts, became the fourth richest county in America.

Writers—in novels contemporary to this moment and novels written later—have repeatedly been drawn to the relationship between city and suburb. This chapter examines an unexpected vessel of exploration many of these writers relied upon to portray the shifting balance of power between suburbs and city: the figure of the fugitive daughter who flees her suburban home in discontent to live on the streets of the sacked city. The daughter is not the only suburban dependent to stray into the city—wives and sons go too, as I'll show—but she carries the most import for the relationship between city and suburb. The daughter's path opposes parents who have left the city to build a home in the suburbs. To the parents' consternation—especially the fathers'—the daughters exchange suburban affluence for the physical and moral desolation of the city.

The path of the fugitive daughter, I argue, traces the imbalanced economic relationship between the two. In Chapter Two, worries about masculinity underlie the suburban man's interaction with the Cold War, even as these interactions are determined by class, but in these novels, economics underlies a story that on its surface appears to be solely about gender relations: daughters fleeing controlling fathers.

Wealth flowed from the cities to the suburbs in the physical flight of residents and in the continued reliance of suburban men on the urban working class to staff their factories (as in *American Pastoral*), eat at their restaurants (as in *Middlesex*), or support the class from which they make their living (as in Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Wonderland* and story "How I Contemplated," where the fathers are doctors and specialists). The specifics differ, but the facts remain: the suburbs generate their wealth and create their communities to the detriment of those who have remained in the city. Urban historian Robert Fishman has noted this continued shift in power from urban areas to suburbs in his description of the new city as a "bourgeois utopia":

The most important feature of postwar American development has been the almost simultaneous decentralization of housing, industry, specialized services, and office jobs; the consequent breakaway of the urban periphery from a central city it no longer needs; and the creation of a decentralized environment that nevertheless possesses all the economic and technological dynamism we associate with the city. This phenomenon, as remarkable as it is unique, is not suburbanization but a *new city*. (Fishman 184)

The late 1960s and early 1970s were the years in which this decentralization reached its fullest extent—the nadir of inner city health across the nation, leading to violent breakdowns of order. In two novels, both later reimaginings of this moment, we witness decentralization: in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* the Swede moves his glove factory to Puerto Rico several years after watching the Newark riots, and in Jeffrey

Eugenides's *Middlesex* Milton Stephanides lets his Detroit diner burn during the 1967 riots and abandons the city. Decentralization, brought about by Milton and the Swede and hundreds of their class peers, has left behind the old city center "it no longer needs" and people who could not escape. The upper and middle classes have taken their wealth from the city to create a "new city," the suburban bourgeois utopia built solely for them. In his introduction to *The Urban Experience*, Marxist geographer David Harvey claims, "it is useful to look upon the geographical landscape of capitalism as the expression of flows of capital. These flows can often switch directions (sectorally and geographically), and can be implicated in the formation and resolution of various crises" (12). He then cites "phenomena like post-war suburbanization [and] deindustrialization" as examples (12). Harvey's notion of geographical landscape as the effect of the flow of capital coupled with Fishman's description of decentralized urban areas provides the counterpoint to the fugitive daughter's path into the city. In Newark and Detroit especially, but in most American cities, including New York and Chicago, capital was flowing out to the suburbs at this historical moment, and had been for so long that cities are beginning to fail. The daughters in these novels travel against this flow.

The fugitive daughter's suburban exodus is often about rebellion. Disgusted with middle-class complacency and affluence, the daughters find the suburbs' opposite in the impoverished city abandoned by their parents. But rebellion doesn't motivate every fugitive daughter, and the narrative of the girl's escape into the city rises above individual characters' agency. In portraying this moment, writers repeatedly return to the heretofore unnoticed trope of the fugitive daughter. The writers make use of the daughter to cross boundaries and offer a fuller picture of America at this moment. On its surface this

seems simple enough. But they have created a trope that carries more meaning than they each individually intend. Why continually rely on the daughter? More than a method to take the reader through the starkly different worlds of late 1960s and early 1970s America, the fugitive daughters, I argue, act as symbolic sacrifices exacted from the suburban fathers during this moment of urban upheaval. And the sacrifice is specifically the fathers': in each novel fathers worry about their lost daughters, while mothers almost disappear from the pages or are distracted by their own brief urban adventures. The fathers have left the city behind, moving their families to suburbs built on wealth extracted from the city. They suffer; the girls care little that their bodies are violated and their consciousness reduced to a wan nothingness. I believe the repeated use of the fugitive daughter's progress is due to a shared view that the daughter is the most vulnerable member of the suburban family. Hurting them is the easiest way to cause suburban fathers pain. But the daughters' role doesn't end here. Ironically, in this sacrifice claimed by injured cities—the sign of the fathers' guilt—the suburban class is renewed, for the sacrifice is only temporary. The daughters return, reconditioned and ready to take their place in the suburban class.

### 1. Fugitive Daughters

“How I Contemplated...”

In Joyce Carol Oates's “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again,” a nameless teenage girl twice runs away from suburban Bloomfield Hills to Detroit, where she lives on the street and hangs out

with junkies and prostitutes. With the trips, she rejects the suburb, but by the end of the story she returns, chastened, to her parents' home.

The story opens with “the girl,” as she is called in the third-person sections of the story, caught in a minor act of suburban rebellion: shoplifting gloves from a department store. Thanks to her parents' connections—her father's colleagues, her mother's bridge partner—the girl escapes punishment, a frustrating release as she laments “the strings drawn together in a cat's cradle making a net to save you when you fall” (171). Safety is a key element to the suburban daughter's flight—guilt over the safety of the suburbs, which rests on the suffering of the world outside, as the wealth to maintain this safety is drawn from the inner cities and the flare-ups of the Cold War. But safety is only part of what “the girl” is rejecting. In a section describing her street in Bloomfield Hills, she lists its houses and notes the neighborhood's abundance and artificiality as well as the father's place in the suburb:

George, Clyde G. 240 Sioux. A manufacturer's representative; children, a dog, a wife. Georgian with the usual columns. You think of the White House, then of Thomas Jefferson, then your mind goes blank on the white pillars and you think of nothing. Norris, Ralph W. 246 Sioux. Public Relations. Colonial. Bay window, brick, stone, concrete, wood, green shutters, sidewalk, lantern, grass, trees, blacktop drive, two children, one of them my classmate Esther (Esther Norris) at Baldwin. Wife, cars. Ramsey, Michael D. 250 Sioux. Colonial. Big living room, thirty by twenty-five, fireplaces in the living room, library, recreation room, paneled walls wet bar five bathrooms five bedrooms two lavatories central air conditioning automatic sprinkler automatic garage door three children one wife two cars and breakfast room a patio a large fenced lot fourteen trees a front door with a brass knocker never knocked. (175)

The girl's list points directly at the suburban fathers, marking the suburb as a masculine space—the men are listed first, their addresses and the features of their houses (which include wife and children) trailing behind them. The list assigns

responsibility for the suburbs and its lifestyle to men, and describes (and describes) this lifestyle as one of superficial abundance with the inclusion of every luxury. By the third house the list topples under the weight of all it contains. The punctuation exits, leaving a jumble of amenities—“central air-conditioning automatic sprinkler automatic garage door.” Tellingly, the wife and children are lost in the middle. The problem with suburban affluence, the girl’s list suggests, is that for the fathers of the suburbs women and children become yet another marker of status, the private-school-educated daughter no different from an automatic sprinkler. What’s more, this affluence is meaningless: after making you think of the White House and Thomas Jefferson, the Clyde house leaves you thinking “of nothing,” and the brass knocker that ends this list is “never knocked.” The fathers of the suburb are summarized by their possessions, their lives folded into the language of a real estate listing. And lost within the list, among the meaningless and superfluous objects, are the wives and children. It’s no wonder the girl remains anonymous. She has no identity she feels worth claiming.

Several weeks after shoplifting, the girl takes a bus into Detroit. While Bloomfield Hills is a world of sprawling lawns and houses, Detroit is “pavement and closed-up stores; grillwork over the windows of a pawnshop” and “closed-down barber shops, closed-down diners, closed-down movie houses, homes, windows, basements, faces” (172, 180). Everything here is harsh (pavement, barred windows), closed (she mentions “closed” four times), and dangerous, as suggested by several references to “Negro gangs” and an Appalachian white “who may or may not have a knife hidden in his jacket pocket” (181). And yet the girl views the trip into Detroit as an awakening, an

escape into the real from her deadening surroundings: the harshness of Detroit seems more vital than the softness of the suburb, the “cats-cradle” waiting to save her. The descriptions of Sioux Drive suggest, on their surface, a pleasure-world—all those rooms, all those fireplaces and wet bars. But the only place the girl enjoys is the shut-down, collapsed city, where the barred windows contrast with the “brass knocker never knocked.” The city teems with life and struggle whereas the suburb is an artificial, lifeless world. Once in Detroit, the girl meets Simon, a junkie who gives her pills, sleeps with her, and pimps her, a motif that arises again in *Wonderland*. In choosing this life, she reacts to the false world she believes her parents’ suburb to be, where her body would be protected, as cherished as any other feature of the well-maintained suburban home.

After being arrested for vagrancy and taken back to the suburbs, she returns to the city, is again arrested, and taken to the House of Correction. There, she refuses to go home:

“No, I won’t go home I want to stay here,” she says, listening to her own words with amazement, thinking that weeds might climb everywhere over that marvelous \$180,000 house and dinosaurs might return to muddy the beige carpeting, but never will she reconcile four o’clock in the morning in Detroit with eight o’clock breakfasts in Bloomfield Hills. (184)

In her rejection of the suburbs, she refuses affluence and commodification. The house is a “\$180,000” house, and in her fantasy harm comes to it and the carpet. Instead of the niceties of suburban regularity (“eight o’clock breakfasts”) she prefers the anomie of the damaged city (“four o’clock in the morning in Detroit”).

This preference for the city changes after she is assaulted in the House of Correction’s bathroom by Princess, a black girl, and Dolly, a white girl. The “girl” asks, “Why is she beaten up? Why do they pound her, why such hatred? . . . revenge on

Bloomfield Hills” (185). Princess and Dolly are members of the underclass abandoned to the city by fleeing industry and the middle class, and they take “revenge” in response to the girl’s patronizing slumming. Bruised, the girl is “converted” (187). Having felt the brutal rage of the city against the suburb first-hand and received the physical reminder of her place in the class divide, she retreats to Bloomfield Hills, where she now appreciates “the beauty of chandeliers and the miracle of a clean polished gleaming toaster”—the kind of empty symbol of affluence she rejected before—and vows “*I will never leave home, this is my home, I love everything here, I am in love with everything here*” (188-9). The story leaves the reader in an ambivalent position. On the one hand, we don’t trust the girl’s conversion—desperation infuses her language. On the other hand, the life she has returned to is substantially better, materially, than the life she leads in Detroit. And we sympathize with Princess and Dolly, with their outrage at the girl who has been given everything they have been denied, and who wantonly gives it up to imitate a lifestyle they haven’t chosen but been forced into. Oates’s story chides the girl for her false romanticization of urban poverty, but also sympathizes with her disgust with the suburb. In the end she cannot escape the suburb’s grasp, nor its mark. No matter how we read the end, the result doesn’t change: the fugitive daughter has returned, her spirit broken, her body violated. In exchange for this sacrifice, suburban order is restored, and she develops uncritical love for Sioux Drive.

In drawing out the conflict between suburb and city, “How” does not restrict itself to the girl’s experience. In a section titled “Detroit” the story describes suburbanites en masse visiting downtown:

Shoppers shop grimly, their cars are not parked in safe places, their windshields may be smashed and graceful ebony hands may drag them out



through their shatterproof smashed windshields, crying, Revenge for the Indians! Ah, they all fear leaving Hudson's [the old downtown department store] and being dragged to the very tip of the city and thrown off the parking roof of Cobo Hall, that expensive tomb, into the river.  
(185)

Suburbanites symbolically plunder Detroit—coming in to shop for goods and take them away at their peril—and plunge into a racialized (the shoppers imagine “ebony hands”) warzone. Unlike the girl, who initially thinks she belongs in the city, these suburbanites fear Detroit. And rather than mock this fear, the outcome of the story supports it. The shoppers may be overwrought but they know their place in the divide.

Oates describes travel between the suburb and the city as a dangerous passage, but her story also reveals the privilege in the journey. The girl can go to the city and travel back, but those in the city are stuck. The only flow allowed from the cities to the suburbs is that of the servants who come in each day to cook and clean. For the girl, the notion that this path might be reversed—that someone in the city could move as freely as she—is frightening: she worries, “what if Simon seeks me out and climbs into my girl's bedroom here in Bloomfield Hills and strangles me, what then . . . ?” (174). The city is porous, the suburb is walled, and the right to move between the two is the suburbanite's privilege, as much a luxury as the automatic garages and sprinklers in the girl's list. In taking advantage of this privilege, the daughters in these stories align themselves with their fathers, who go into the city to make their living, and their mothers, who go there to shop.<sup>25</sup> Her attempt to escape the suburb and its privilege is, in fact, a deployment of this privilege, which is why her escape ultimately fails. Voluntary downward mobility isn't

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<sup>25</sup> We don't know if the girl's father works at a hospital in the city, but the father gets his wealth either directly or indirectly from the city.

allowed, because it's another mark of her status, tying her more closely—and leading her back—to the suburb.

### *Wonderland*

Oates's returns to the archetype of the fugitive daughter in her novel *Wonderland* (1971). The novel follows Jesse Vogel, an orphan from upstate New York, through medical school at the University of Michigan to his career as a respected neurosurgeon with his own clinic in Chicago and a stately home in Winnetka. The fugitive daughter appears in the novel's final section, "Dreaming in America," when Jesse's daughter Shelley twice flees her Winnetka home, first getting picked up on the streets of Toledo and put, like the girl in "How," in a house of correction, and next joining up with a drifter named Noel and traveling around the country (east to New York, south to Florida, then west to California) before finally coming to Toronto. Her trip is circuitous, but it ends in the city.

The "girl"'s escape is an isolated phenomenon—she goes into Detroit on her own, with the sole aim of leaving Bloomfield Hills behind—but Shelley leaves Winnetka to find a place among the 1960s counterculture (when her father looks for her, he looks among protestors and eventually finds her in a Toronto squatters' commune). Despite this difference, Shelley's rejection of the suburb closely mirrors the "girl"'s. In one of her letters to her father, Shelley describes her house in terms similar to the real-estate-like list in "How":

an expensive house of old, age-softened brick, three stories high, with a garage that was a house of its own, turreted and neat as a gingerbread house. A big dipping lawn. Elms, oaks, evergreens, etc. You soared with us to this house and dipped us down to it, landing us on the bright green

lawn one spring day. You said, “Do you like it? It belongs to you.” (420-1)

Aside from boredom with the details of suburban affluence (“etc.”), a sense of helplessness invests Shelley’s language—her father picks her up and drops her onto the lawn. While “the girl” describes the suburb as a masculine space in her list, for Shelley, the suburb’s masculinity is more immediate. Repeatedly in her letters she evokes her father’s gaze: “oh I burned in the sunshine in the glare of your watching me” (423). Oates never clearly establishes the nature of Shelley’s discomfort with her father. We don’t know if the feeling of over-closeness stems from abuse or Shelley’s instability. But it signals the father’s importance to the fugitive daughter’s decision to escape (452). Shelley constructs herself as a commodity owned and controlled by her father (picked up and installed in the house, forced to swim to please him (423)), and in leaving she rejects this possessive relationship, resisting her father’s control and a life as one of many markers of suburban status. More troubling for Shelley, her father has forced suburban ownership on her. The house is hers (“It belongs to you”), but not by choice. This bind articulates the difficulty both Shelley and “the girl” face. They want to align themselves with the urban class in the ongoing struggle between the suburbs and the cities, but by virtue of having lived in the suburbs and enjoyed, unwillingly or not, its advantages, they have taken ownership of it. This lack of control over where they live combined with an enforced ownership—and so responsibility—frustrates them. They flee, hoping to discard any suburban identity as they descend into the cities, but its too deeply imprinted and ultimately draws them back.

The fugitive daughter’s descent is almost always a journey of self-destruction. “The girl” takes heroin and is beaten up, and in Shelley’s letters she says she “must be

humiliated” (424). Noel, the drifter, leads her around a beach in Florida, naked and painted, gives her drugs, and prostitutes her, and Shelley accepts this. “He brought so many men to me to make me pure again, to make me into nothing,” she tells her father when he finally comes for her in Toronto (499). By then she is sick—jaundiced—and calling herself the “White Angel of Death” (483). Her flight has brought her near death, and substantially altered her appearance: even after Jesse finds where she’s hiding in Toronto, he doesn’t recognize her for several pages, thinking her a boy. She has retreated as far as possible from her suburban identity, doing penance for all her privilege, but is claimed in the end—ready, like “the girl” after her punishment, to be rehabilitated back into suburban life.

*Wonderland* may mirror “How” in its plot, but it differs in its point of view. The novel is told from Jesse’s perspective, and places the narrative’s focus on the pain of the searching father. After he brings Shelley back from Toledo, and before she runs off again, Jesse wanders his neighborhood, circling his house as he thinks, “Why did you leave me?” (456). When Shelley flees with Noel, Jesse remains unsettled for months, the reader following his steady collapse. Restless to find her, he gives up much of his work—he can no longer concentrate on his operations—and goes to his clinic only to check his mail, as it is there Shelley sends her letters. Eventually he follows her into the city, looking first in Chicago, then New York and Toronto. In all of the novels, it’s the father who worries, who searches, who suffers at the other end of the fugitive daughter’s path. The mothers are barely concerned—and when they are, their concern is made secondary. Both *Bullet Park* and *American Pastoral*, like *Wonderland*, are told primarily through the father’s perspective, via a close third point of view. The father brings the

family to the suburbs and wealth out of the city; it's the father's world the daughter flees, and it's for his sake she is punished. Physical and mental suffering, violated bodies—the daughters face a father's worst fears, and in the cycle of the fugitive daughter, the sacrifice and suffering is less hers (Shelley and the girl don't resist it, and Merry Levov, as we'll see, pays it no mind) than his, a sacrifice extracted as the last price for building suburban fantasy worlds at the expense of the dying city.

*Middlesex*

Callie, the narrator of Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*, travels the same path as Oates's two fugitive daughters. She is seven years old, not a teenager, and she goes into Detroit to find her father, not to flee him. But the path is the same, as is the tumult she enters. Oates's fugitives enter the fringes of the counterculture during their sojourns in the city, and Callie makes her trip during the 1967 Detroit riots.

At the start of the riots Callie's father, Milton, leaves home to protect the family's diner, the Zebra Room, which is in the middle of Detroit. Three days later Callie follows him, escaping from home—in a subdivision inside the Detroit city limits—and cycling into the city behind a national guard tank. Just as her motivation is different, her experience of the city differs from that of Oates's fugitives. Where the "girl" describes a closed, run-down Detroit, Callie picks up on the domestic elements of the city:

We pass lawns and porch furniture, bird feeders and birdbaths. As I look up at the canopy of elms, the sky is just beginning to grow light. Birds move among the branches, and squirrels, too. A kite is stuck up in one tree. Over a limb of another, someone's tennis shoes dangle with the laces knotted. (249)

Here the city is alive and festooned with the same detritus you might find in a suburban lane. Only after noting the lawn ornaments, elms, birds, squirrels, and kites does Callie recognize the war scene before her—street signs full of bullet holes and stores on fire. Her attention to the homier details of inner city Detroit reveals a sensibility not present in the other fugitive daughters. For her the city is not an exoticized locale she hopes to trade for her home life. It's someone else's home. This altered sensibility derives partly from her age, her mission (rescuing her father, not escaping him), and her history with the city (she has grown up in the Zebra Room and knows the neighborhood). Her sensibility, too, can be traced to the novel's elements of nostalgia. Oates's story and novel were both written in the late 1960s, contemporary to the events and world she describes, but Eugenides is reimagining the moment thirty-five years later, encapsulating it within a family saga that functions as an elegy to Detroit. But as significant as these differences are—age, motive, time of composition—the journey doesn't change. Even its end is similar: the "girl" and Shelly are reduced to nothingness, and by the time Callie finds her father her initial courage has turned to upset and she is in tears. Depicting the same time and place as Oates's fiction, *Middlesex* deploys this story arc, a young girl descending into the torn city.

But *Middlesex* does more than reveal the ingrained nature of this path—a product of portraying this historical moment, here playing itself out with slightly altered specifics. It reveals the connection between this arc and the father who obtains wealth from the city and uses it to flee to the suburbs. Callie arrives at the Zebra Room at the same time as Marius Grimes, a black man from the neighborhood she has befriended, tosses a Molotov cocktail into the diner (229-231). Still inside the diner, Milton calculates the value of his

insurance policies and chooses to let it burn, collecting enough money to pay for his family's move from Indian Village to tonier Grosse Pointe and a new, more successful business of hotdog stands. Callie's trip isn't pivotal to this chain of events: Milton was leaving the diner, letting it burn, and planning to take the insurance money before he found his daughter waiting by his car. But the relationship between the flow of wealth and the sacrifice of the endangered daughter is limned more clearly here than in the other works. Daughter faces danger traveling into city. Father uses capital gained from the city to abandon it. Here they are concurrent, but the symbolic relationship remains the same.

### *American Pastoral*

Merry Levov, the literally fugitive daughter in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, leaves her Old Rimrock<sup>26</sup> home in the late 1960s. Moved by her opposition to the Vietnam War, she first goes into New York to take part in protests, then bombs the Old Rimrock post office and disappears until surfacing in 1973 in Newark. As in *Wonderland*, her flight devastates her father, the Swede, whose grappling with her actions and absence forms much of the book.

We're meant to side at least partly with the other fugitive daughters—to find their trips noble in their intentions, if nothing else—but *American Pastoral* doesn't allow us to sympathize with Merry, only with the worried suburban father. Throughout the book, Roth's alter-ego Zuckerman portrays Merry as the villain of the story. Jerry Levov, the Swede's brother, refers to her as, "The little murderer herself, the monster daughter. The

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<sup>26</sup> Old Rimrock is more exurban than suburban, but part of the general urban sprawl, and her father commutes into Newark.

monster *Merry*” (67). And later Zuckerman tells us, “The girl was mad by the time she was fifteen, and kindly and stupidly he [the Swede] had tolerated that madness, crediting her with nothing worse than a point of view he didn’t like but that she would surely outgrow along with her rebellious adolescence” (242-3). Merry is “mad,” she is a “monster,” and the Swede is stupid to tolerate her deviance. But what is this threatening deviance, this sign of her destructive future that has revealed itself by the time she turns fifteen? Her rejection of the suburban middle-class norm:

Vehemently she renounced the appearance and the allegiances of the good little girl who had tried so hard to be adorable and lovable like all the other good little Rimrock girls—renounced her meaningless manners, her petty social concerns, her family’s “bourgeois” values. She had wasted enough time on the cause of herself. “I’m not going to spend my whole life wrestling day and night with a fucking stutter when kids are b-b-b-being b-b-b-b-bu-bu-bu roasted alive by Lyndon B-b-b-baines b-b-b-bu-bu-burn-‘em-up Johnson!” (101)

She hasn’t yet blown up the post office or caused a murder or become an extremist in her politics—at least, no more extreme than much of the country at the time. What Zuckerman refers to as her madness is her guilt at and distaste for sharing suburban niceties while others suffer. She rejects the surface concerns of the suburb—“appearance,” “meaningless manners,” and “petty social concerns”—and from this mild rebellion Zuckerman grows her into a villain. Zuckerman, the story’s “author,” soon turns Merry’s guilt and political passion to hatred toward her parents: “There wasn’t much difference, *and she knew it*, between hating America and hating them [her parents]” (213). And not just her parents, but suburban normalcy. “That’s what she’s been blasting away at—that façade. All your fucking *norms*,” Jerry tells the Swede. “Take a good look at what she did to your *norms*” (275). For Zuckerman, Merry’s opposition to



her upbringing is the source of her bombing: Merry cannot stand upper-middle-class America, and so becomes a criminal.

Despite this construction of Merry—her madness ensuing from her rejection of the suburb—and Roth’s championing of the suburban ideal/idyll through the Swede, others in the book consider her madness a product of Old Rimrock. “You prepare her for life milking the cows? For what kind of life? Unnatural, all artificial, all of it” Jerry Levov claims (277). Jerry may condemn Merry as a “monster,” but he agrees with her reading of Old Rimrock. He knows what she’s rebelling against, and he knows what created her; the artificial world of the suburb’s pastoral fantasy, with its enforced innocence, can’t help but breed monstrosity. The Swede protests that “there *is* no connection. How we lived and what she did? Where she was raised and what she did? It’s as disconnected as everything else—it’s all a part of the same mess!” (281). Elsewhere, he claims he bears no responsibility because “I gave her all I could, everything, everything, I gave everything. I swear to you I gave everything” (279). Here abundance is cited not as a cause of the daughter’s rebellion, but as the father’s defense against any role in this rebellion—the Swede has given Merry “everything” and so should be absolved of guilt. The novel never establishes whether Old Rimrock is at fault, but it doesn’t waver from tying Merry’s later acts of domestic terrorism to her initial rejection of her home life. To malign the suburb is to take the first step on the path to madness and anti-American rebellion. Even Jerry, who seems to understand Merry and blames the Swede and Old Rimrock for her actions, does not sympathize with her. Yet, as chauvinistically suburban as the book is in its portrayal of Merry, it employs the punitive

cycle of the fugitive daughter which, despite the Swede's protests, suggests a connection between the way the Levovs live and what Merry does.

Merry first flees to New York to be with other anti-war activists: "That's why I have to go to New York. B-b-b-because people there do feel responsible. They feel responsible when America b-blows up Vietnamese villages" (107). Her reasons for going into the city differ from the daughters' in Oates's work. She's meeting activists, not seeking drugs and allowing herself to be pimped, but the basic motive is the same—she feels she belongs with the people of the city rather than the people of the suburbs, which she considers "the privileged middle of nowhere" (108). She rejects suburban affluence and suburb innocuousness, leaving a place where culpability for world events hide behind a pastoral landscape to go to a place where people "feel responsible."

After her activism escalates to the point that she bombs the Old Rimrock post office, accidentally killing a man, Merry makes her second escape, disappearing for five years. She later surfaces in Newark, the city the Swede abandoned in moving to Old Rimrock, and from which he still makes his income. When the Swede travels to the city to meet her, Roth focuses on the details of its collapse:

The dog and cat hospital [where Merry and the Swede meet] was located on the corner in a small, decrepit brick building next door to an empty lot, a tire dump, patchy with weeds nearly as tall as she was, the twisted wreckage of a wire-mesh fence lying at the edge of the sidewalk. (225)

The destroyed city, here as in the other works, serves as a visual reminder of its loss in the flow of power and wealth to the suburb—a loss enabled by the Swede. And the destruction is a component of the daughter's character—in her indifference to it (or preference for it, in the case of the "girl") she reveals how fully she has cut ties with the suburbs. We're told, "To get where Merry rented a room just off McCarter Highway,

you had to make it through an underpass not just as dangerous as any in Newark but as dangerous as any underpass in the world” (234). The underpass frightens the Swede, but it doesn’t bother Merry. She has adopted this environment, exchanged it for Old Rimrock, and grown comfortable there and so, like the other daughters, becomes immune to the fear that plagues the Swede and the other fathers (Milton hunched in the café, Jesse Vogel carrying a pistol as he moves among protesting youths). This frightening progress, an immersion into what they have wrought, forms a stage of the fathers’ sacrifice, as does the daughters’ alliance with the environment. In the city, Merry’s identity alters—she has changed her name, lost weight. Like Jesse Vogel, at first the Swede doesn’t recognize his daughter (230). And like Shelley Vogel and “the girl,” Merry has reached a state of nothingness: along with her indifference to her surroundings, she has become a Jain (practicing an ascetic faith that preaches extreme detachment), and according to Zuckerman, “destroy[ed] herself” (263). This too is part of the sacrifice, the daughter giving up the identity her father has given her and, rather than trading it for a new one, trading it for none at all, rebuking the importance of the life—hers—he cherishes. It’s not even worth turning into something else.

During the five years of her absence, the Swede has searched for Merry, hiring a private detective and cooperating with a sadistic militant feminist who claims to be an emissary from his daughter. As in *Wonderland*—and, to a lesser extent, *Middlesex* and “How”—the father is helpless, made vulnerable by his daughter’s flight. Earlier, in their fight over New York, the Swede tells Merry he worries about her being raped, and when he finally discovers her he finds out that in Chicago “she was raped on the night she arrived. Held captive and raped and robbed. Just seventeen” (258). Callie, a child,

escapes this part of the fugitive daughter's progress, but Shelley, the "girl," and Merry are sexually abused. Violation of the daughter's body—the most prized and most fragile of suburban amenities—is the highest possible price the city can extract from the father. The Swede dwells on rape when Merry goes to New York, and now, even after learning that Merry eventually made it to Oregon, where, packing dynamite, she was involved in two more bombings, "all he could think of was the two times she had been raped" (258-9, 266).

The Swede's suffering mirrors the other fathers', but unlike them he cannot retrieve his daughter. Where the "girl"'s loss of self has allowed a suburban identity to flood in to the point that she raves over toasters, Merry has become even more at home in the ruined city. She chooses to stay in Newark, and at the end of her meeting with her father, Merry asks him to leave, and he does (266). The Swede does not get his daughter back, but he does get a second wife and three sons and continues his suburban existence in Morris County (22). The ruined city takes its sacrifice, but in return grants a continuation of the suburban dream.

### *Bullet Park*

The fugitive daughters aren't the only children to stray from the suburbs—they're just the most common. In John Cheever's novel *Bullet Park* a suburban son follows a similar path. Tony Nailles makes one trip into the city (New York), but it's relatively tame: he returns home with a war widow, a Smith graduate who eats with his family and discusses Camus and then leaves. Despite this different, less threatening sojourn in the

city, we see the familiar archetype of absconding child and worried father. Elliot, Tony's father, fears for his son's safety in New York:

his only and dearly beloved son [he imagines] had been set upon by thieves, perverts, prostitutes, murderers and dope addicts. He was, in fact, not so much afraid of the pain his son might know as of the fact that should his son endure any uncommon pain he, Nailles, would have no resources to protect him from the terror of seeing his beloved world—his kingdom—destroyed. (91)

Elliot's fear isn't just that harm might befall Tony, but that he would be unable to protect him, to keep him innocent, to keep him from seeing his "kingdom"—again, the suburb is figured as the site of masculine power—destroyed. And as in *Wonderland*, when Shelley writes of her father telling her the house is hers, ownership is transferred to the suburban child—that "his" ("his beloved world," "his kingdom") is ambiguous, assigning possession of the suburb to both Tony and Elliot. But the thrusting of ownership upon him—ownership of a world he had no part in making—is what Tony resists.

Like Merry and Oates's daughters, Tony refuses a middle-class lifestyle. At a mini-golf course, Tony confesses to his father his uneasiness at the idea of marriage or a job, and, angered, his father attacks him with a putter (118). Tony ducks the golf club, but immediately after the attack he falls into a life-threatening funk, another self-effacement and the true analog to the daughter's trip into the city. He takes to bed for several weeks, and a visiting doctor tells the Nailles that though there is nothing medically wrong with Tony their son could die if he doesn't rise. After the doctor, a psychiatrist visits. He tells the Nailleses:

Men of his generation, coming from environments of this sort, very often present us with problems that resist analysis. I suppose you give the boy everything he wants? [. . .] There is a tendency in your income group to substitute possessions for moral and spiritual norms. (44-5)

Part of his problem, then, as with many of the other fugitive adolescents, is abundance. In *American Pastoral*, the Swede voices his inability to understand Merry's turn away from him and suburban normalcy by saying "I gave her everything." But for the psychiatrist in *Bullet Park*, this is the root of the problem. Later Elliot remembers Tony saying to him, "The only reason you love me, the only reason you think you love me is because you can give me things" (117). In each of these cases (except *Middlesex*), the fugitive child is resisting the suburban impulse of giving the child the best of everything—the best house, the best school, the best lifestyle. With these gifts comes either guilt at the suffering of others, which Merry feels, or resistance to the control implied in this giving, the subordination required in receiving the gift ("the girl," Shelley). Tony's resistance is less specific, but lies in his discomfort with claiming the life led by his parents (and its entailing responsibilities), the same discomfort he felt on the mini-golf course.

Tony rejects the suburb through an inward turn rather than an outward escape, but it's a realization of his father's fears just the same. In Oates's fiction and in *American Pastoral*, the worst that can happen to the daughter is that she be raped or turned into a prostitute. For Elliot, the worst that can happen to his son is death. Tony nearly dies during his funk and again later when Hammer, a psychopathic neighbor, becomes determined to murder him. The fugitive children resist suburban ownership. They are the actors—not the city, not the suburbs, not their fathers—spurred on by a repressed guilt. But their role in each of these instances (aside, perhaps, from the "girl"), is to make their fathers suffer. It's the fathers' suffering that is put on display, not the daughters'. The fugitive children are almost always subordinate characters in these works (true of

Merry, Tony, and Shelley, and also of Callie in the section I cite, as her trip serves no more narrative purpose than to put the riots on display and bring the novel to Milton), and their trips, whether into the city or into their interior, enact their fathers' greatest fear—a fear divided by gender, but presenting the same threat. The daughters allow themselves to be sexually violated, and the son nearly allows himself to die—each risk the integrity of their father's lineage.

The daughters, except for one, return, and in the end Tony is cured. Not by the doctor or the psychiatrist or the specialist who visit the Nailles' home, but by a black swami who lives in the slums of the suburban village and treats Tony with a series of chants (127). Just as Oates's fugitive daughters are reconditioned for suburban life by their journeys to the city, Tony is cured by a member of the urban underclass the suburban middle class has deprived. In each of these works, just when all is nearly lost—Shelley and Tony near death, Milton near bankruptcy—suburban renewal comes at the hands of the blighted city. While the city at first appears to threaten the suburb by swallowing its children, it proves to be the key to ensuring the suburb's continuance. The suburb, a sterile form, is reproduced by suburban children going into the cities, putting themselves in danger, then returning gratefully to the comforts of home. The city, helpless in the end, aides in the creation of a new generation of the suburban class, just as it did the previous one. The fugitive daughter may travel against the flow of capital, but her path becomes a figure for the suburb's continued reliance on and exploitation of the city.

## 2. Wandering Housewives

In each of these works, the wives are less concerned about their children's perils than the fathers, and are tangential to the daughters' (and son's) circuit between city and suburbs. But several times they emerge as a parallel to the fugitive daughter—the wandering housewife who steps out of the comforts of her suburban home and crosses into the city. Here again the books theorize the relationship between suburb and city. The cities give the lie to the pure utopia the suburbs pretend to by standing in as the nearest symbol of all the suffering and poverty the suburb depends on for its maintenance. Because of this, the city draws the rebellious daughters, who reject their parents' class. But also, in its capacity as a truth teller in opposition to suburban fantasy, it shocks suburban wives.

In *Wonderland*, Helene, Shelley's mother, doesn't actually go into Chicago but encounters a group of protestors—in all of these novels identified with urban space. After leaving lunch with Mannie Breck, one of her husband's colleagues with whom she considers having an affair, Helene sees protestors across the street. Already her day has rattled her. While at a shopping center, Wonderland East, she felt the music of a rock band mocking her, telling her, "You are too old, too old. Give up. Forget. You are far too old" (438). Now she crosses the street and goes over to the protestors, their faces "pale and frightened and angry. Their mouths twisted with hate" (444). One of the protestors, a girl holding a sign that "showed a crudely painted skull and crossbones, with the initials LBJ beneath it," notices Helene particularly and stares "hatefully at her." The girl curses at her, and Helene rides on the emotion: "She hated Helene; here was hatred; here Helene had finally found it! *It is over for you*, they all seemed to be saying, ready to



shout murderously at her, *it is over, over, over for you!*" (445). The music telling her she is too old, the skull and crossbones on the protestor's sign, the sense of the protestors telling her "it is over": rather than abundance, it's obsolescence that troubles Helene, and which the urban space forces her to confront. In response to her despairing feelings at the protestors' shouting, Helene slaps the girl with the skull and crossbones sign, an act that frees her of sexual desire: "The erotic glow in her loins, so teasing and warm, had spread lightly through her body now, light as May air, harmless. She was fulfilled. . . . She had freed herself. It was over for her" (445). As her daughter has hoped to do through her own suffering at the hands of Noel, Helene becomes nothing, finding peace in absence—the absence of desire, of future, of importance—through violence (against another's body rather than her own). And like her daughter, she has had to leave her Winnetka home to find this peace. The suburb, for all its pastoral pretensions, is unable to provide it.

In *Bullet Park*, the most jarring urban experience belongs to Nellie, Tony's mother and Elliot's wife, whose very name, Nellie Nailles, reflects suburban shallowness in its inane, anagrammatic restriction to a handful of letters. Early in the book Nellie goes into New York to see an experimental play in the Village for a modern theater class. During the course of the play a man takes off his clothes, and this act so startles Nellie that she cannot focus on the rest of the play. Still stunned after leaving the theater, she encounters a group of NYU students in Washington Square "carrying picket signs on which were written Fuck, Prick and Cunt" (30-1). Rather than obsolescence, Nellie faces a rampant sexuality that challenges her sense of norms and destabilizes her distinctively suburban—as Cheever will describe it—complacency. The experience disturbs her to the point that she questions her sanity: "Had she gone mad? She watched the procession

until it wound out of sight. Shit was the last placard she saw. She was weak” (31). Unlike Helene, Nellie does not find the encounter with protestors freeing, but instead is driven to a quick retreat, boarding a bus to take her home and looking “around for reassuring faces of her own kind, [...] for honest mothers, wives, women who took pride in their houses, their gardens, their flower arrangements, their cooking” (31). Assaulted by raw sexuality, she seeks reassurance in fellow suburban matrons with their staid surface concerns, the blandness she longs for finding its way into the rhythm of the sentence as it lists in a steady, orderly manner the things the women value (“their houses, their gardens” and so on). At first the bus—as transit, the halfway point between city and suburb—denies her this reassurance and confronts her with another “deviancy” of the city: “Two young men in the seat in front of her were laughing. One of them threw his arm around the other and kissed him on the ear. Should she thrash them with her umbrella?” (31). Still in the city’s grip, she feels antagonized and threatened, reading the men’s eroticism as an attack. But unlike Helene, who slaps the protestor, Nellie keeps her umbrella by her side, and so remains at the mercy of the city.

At the next stop an older, middle-class woman gets on the bus, a woman with whom Nellie feels she can identify. The woman talks to her of searching for fabric, just the relief Nellie seeks, but while the woman speaks Nellie cannot forget what she saw:

The words printed on the picket signs—Fuck and Prick—seemed to burn in her consciousness with a lingering incandescence and she could not forget the actor’s pubic brush and his unwatered flower. She seemed unable to return to where she had been. (32)

Her trip to the city leaves her troubled and risks destroying her suburban happiness—she fears she might not be able to “return to where she had been,” a state of complacency.

Shocked out of this complacency, she has come to share the opinion of suburban abundance held by the fugitive children:

How contemptible was a life weighted down with rugs and chairs, a consciousness stuffed with portables, virtue incarnate in cretonne and evil represented by rep. It seemed more contemptible than the amorous young men in front of her and the asininity of the students. She seemed to have glimpsed an erotic revolution that had left her bewildered and miserable but that had also left her enthusiasm for flower arrangements crippled.  
(31)

The city's sexuality has pulled back the veneer of her middle-class norms and left her uncertain about the rightness of the life she has built on flower arrangements and cretonne—like Merry and the others, she believes the surface pleasantries of the suburb harbors a more “contemptible” life than the surface deviancies of the city. Nellie's opposition of city to suburb appears purely sexual—free love and promiscuity versus chastity—but her values are tied to her class and her home. Otherwise what she sees in the city wouldn't disturb her happiness with every aspect of her life. The sexuality she witnesses doesn't make her rethink her relationship with Elliot, but instead makes her rethink her relationship with her home, revealing, if only briefly, the artificiality she has surrounded herself with.

Still, she holds out hope that she will find comfort in her home: “She was going home and she would, in the space of an hour, be able to close her door on that disconcerting and rainy afternoon. She would be herself again, Nellie Nailles, Mrs. Elliot Nailles, honest, conscientious, intelligent, chaste, etc” (31). As in Oates's work, the narrator describes the suburban space as masculine—Nellie's path to “herself” runs first through her first name, “Nellie Nailles,” to that of her husband, “Mrs. Elliot Nailles.” At first, physically returning to Bullet Park aids her recovery: “Contemptible or not, she

felt, as the train moved, the symptoms of restoration. When she left the train at her stop and walked through the parking lot to her car she had arrived back at herself” (31). Yet it doesn’t work—the effect of the city remains. After a throwaway conversation about the rain with her cook, Nellie finds

the utter artificiality of her sentiments galling, but how close could she come to the truth? Could she say shit to the cook and describe what she had seen on the stage? She climbed the stairs to her pleasant room and took a pleasant bath, but falsehood, confinement, exclusion and a kind of blindness seemed to be her only means of comprehension. She did not tell Nailles about the experience. (32)

Her trip to the city has affected her sense of her own life. She is overwhelmed with feelings of “artificiality” and “falsehood,” despite the “pleasant”ness of her surroundings and routine (the room and bath). And because of the stricture of Bullet Park’s norms, she is unable to communicate this new uncertainty to either her maid or Nailles, thus magnifying it. Like the fugitive children, she has been put in the world of the suburbs and been given ownership of it, but she can only discover this falseness—or begin to discover it—by traveling to the city. The fugitive daughters already understand this and make their trip *after* their discovery. The wives are more complicit, more entrenched, and so can only be shocked into a self-understanding by leaving the suburb. And even then it might not succeed. Nellie doesn’t fully articulate a resistance, as the fugitive children do, and steadily regains her comfort in Bullet Park.

But the city continues to frighten her, tarnishing her happiness in the suburb. When Elliot shoots a turtle in the yard, the sound of the gunfire makes her first think of rioters endangering their home: “There had been riots in the slums and she wondered for a moment if the militants had decided to march out of the ghetto and take the white houses of Chestnut Lane by force” (121). The city has left its mark on Nellie. First, in its

revelations it nearly takes away her complacency, and now—an escalation of that same threat—she fears it might physically destroy her suburban home. The city equals danger, and the danger is to her own comfort.

The city maintains its revelatory relationship to the suburbs in another novel from the 1960s, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. *Lot 49* is not typically considered a suburban novel, but Oedipa Maas, its main character, is a suburban housewife who follows a path similar to Nellie and Helene, and like Helene is liberated. Oedipa likens her life in the suburbs to being trapped in a tower and claims she only escaped by tracking the mystery of W. A. S. T. E., an underground mail system (8, 10-12). The divide between suburb and city is less overt in Pynchon's novel, but nonetheless Oedipa fits the pattern of the wandering housewife. She leaves her own suburb for another, San Narciso, to take up the duty of executing an old lover's will. While the suburbs in the other novels have been metaphorically built on the suffering of others, San Narciso is literally built on the bones of dead American soldiers. From this suburb Oedipa travels to San Francisco, and there finds most of her clues regarding W.A.S.T.E. in the cast-off places of the city—under freeways and in flophouses. Only after her trip into the city does she discover W.A.S.T.E.'s mission and extent and come to the brink of understanding the “mode of meaning behind the obvious” (150).

The novel ends just before she can confirm this meaning—whether W.A.S.T.E. lies beneath the surface of American (and world) history, or is a conspiracy put in place by her former lover to madden her. But even with this frustration, the city holds its position in relationship to the suburb—it is the place to learn and discover what can't be found out in the suburb. That the only access to discovery is by way of the city suggests

a suburban lack, and carries with it an indictment of suburban life as false. But the cycle of the suburban wife is truncated. There is no physical punishment and no worried husband or father (Oedipa's husband is barely present, Helene and Nellie's husbands never learn of their trips). Helene retreats into a state of nothingness, accepting the inevitability of death, and Nellie and Oedipa both stop short of revelations—Nellie draws back from her thoughts of the falseness of suburban life, and *The Crying of Lot 49* ends before Oedipa can confirm what she has discovered. They are left in these demi-states because they are no longer important to suburban renewal. Nellie and Helene have already produced children, and Oedipa has fully turned away from the suburb (8). As the music tells Helene, it is over for them. Instead, it is the next generation that must be taken through the cycle of rejection and acceptance to continue the suburb's existence.

### 3. The Suburban Veil

When suburban wives leave their homes, they are soothed by what they learn (Helene's peace with realizing she will some day die, Oedipa's freeing discovery of W.A.S.T.E.), or upset by it (Nellie's nervous meltdown over the artificiality of her world). Either way, they only learn by leaving their suburb. Meanwhile, the fugitive daughters generally leave their homes out of disgust with suburban affluence. Moving both wives and daughters is the suburb's antagonistic relationship with reality: the carefree landscape that veils a ruling class in innocence.

The only suburban fugitive to receive serious critical attention is Merry Levov. The critics, citing the novel's concern with identity, ascribe her bombings to her father's retreat from Jewishness. At one point in the novel, we're told the Swede imagines

himself as Johnny Appleseed: “Whom he felt like out in Old Rimrock was Johnny Appleseed. [. . .] Johnny Appleseed, that’s the man for me. Wasn’t a Jew, wasn’t an Irish Catholic, wasn’t a Protestant Christian—nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American” (315-6). The Johnny Appleseed fantasy frames his move to Old Rimrock and marriage to Irish Catholic Dawn as a bid to escape his own specific heritage as a Jew (an escape allowed for by his Nordic looks, hence the nickname) and become simply an American. According to Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky, this explains the failure of the Swede’s first attempt at domestic happiness. “Perfectly poised,” Rubin-Dorsky writes,

to inherit the immigrant legacy, generously endowed to fulfill America’s promise [as a Jewish homeland], the Swede made the fatal mistake of misunderstanding both, reaching outside himself for something that was not himself, embracing the alien as if it were the genuine, locating value in what was fundamentally valueless. (101)

Rubin-Dorsky is correct to notice the “fundamentally valueless” nature of the Swede’s Old Rimrock home, but Merry’s rebellion isn’t only a problem, as he claims, of the Swede’s failure to create an “authentic Jewish” life (101).

Where Rubin-Dorsky sees the Swede’s eschewal of a non-WASP ethnic identity as the cause for his general failures, Timothy Parrish reads the Swede’s Johnny Appleseed fantasy as the specific cause of Merry’s disaffection:

Merry has become Merry by virtue of Swede’s indifference to the sort of cultural identity conflict his Johnny Appleseed vision has engendered. [. . .] Merry’s disappearance ‘into the American berserk’ is the inevitable consequence of Swede Levov’s dream of being Johnny Appleseed. (92, 98)

Growing up, Merry has had trouble reconciling her Jewish and Catholic roots, and has gotten little help from her father and mother, who have been busy fashioning lives based on a dream of American traditionalism (an 18<sup>th</sup>-century home, raising cattle). But

Merry's complaints in the novel are motivated by politics, not identity. Besides, this would explain the actions of only one fugitive daughter, and Roth's narrative of the deviant Merry, as we've seen, is far from unique. True, the Swede's goal of abandoning his ethnic identity and conforming to a semi-rural American ideal differs little from the suburban project as a whole—the move outward from the balkanized city into a pastoral, homogenous landscape. The parents of the fugitives in these novels are often newcomers to suburban society: Jesse Vogel is an orphan from rural New York, the Swede a Jew from Newark, the Stephanideses Detroit Greeks. But the loss of ethnic identity doesn't cause these fugitive daughters to launch out into the city; it's the blind affluence of the suburbs that characters like Oates's "girl" try to escape.

Another explanation, put forward by *American Pastoral* itself—Zuckerman and the novel's characters spend much time mulling over the reason for Merry's actions—is that Merry's rejection of Old Rimrock is simply a product of her generation. Jerry describes the moment of the bombing: "That was '68, back when the wild behavior was still new. People suddenly forced to make sense of madness. All that public display. The dropping of inhibitions. Authority powerless. The kids going crazy. Intimidating everybody." (69). The zeitgeist is to blame. The kids were crazy, end of story. Zuckerman accepts this generational explanation (though he accepts several explanations in the novel), and claims the bombing initiates "the Swede into the displacement of another America entirely, the daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking, the plague America infiltrating the Swede's castle and there infecting everyone" (86). Later, he says,

The Newark riots, then the Vietnam War; the city, then the entire country, and that took care of the Seymour Levovs of Arcady Hill Road. First the



one colossal blow—seven months later, in February '68, the devastation of the next. The factory under siege, the daughter at large, and that took care of their future. (163)

The generational explanation absolves the Swede of any blame. In fact, he becomes a victim—his factory attacked, his daughter a traitor, the decade at fault. This explanation gets closer to the cause—the decade matters—but errs in its portrayal of the Swede caught up in events beyond his control.

True, the Swede himself has no power over the war or the country, but his class, white suburban men, the class of factory owners and executives and the professionals who serve them, have guided the country, have brought about the war in Vietnam, have abandoned the city and moved their families to the suburbs.<sup>27</sup> The Swede, like the other fathers in these books, is an actor in the flow of capital David Harvey describes, choosing first to move his home and then his factory out of Newark, helping to create the berserk that claims his daughter and brings about the destruction of the city where he eventually finds her. Contributing to the flow of capital steadily rending the city apart and pitting it and the suburb into an oppositional relationship, he has tried to ignore his role. The book describes his keeping his factory in Newark for six years after the riot as an attempt to show he hasn't turned his back on the people of Newark, but in the end he moves anyway. Responsibility for the "berserk" of the times lies with him more than anyone else, though the book's characters and the book itself try to deny this, foisting it on generational upheaval and the casting of Merry as a mad creature.

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<sup>27</sup> This may seem to conflict with the portrayals of upper-middle-class suburban men in Chapter Two, but actually they're the same. Charlie Pastern and Lewis Medlock's problem is that they think they're powerless—the suburban veil has worked too well. In fact, despite their individual difficulties, they still wield a great amount of power and it's their mistake the brings about their punishment.

Elsewhere the book's characters put the blame for the city's fall—a key part of the berserk—on Newark's black population. When the Swede meets with Zuckerman, he describes the collapse of Newark:

It's the worst city in the world, Skip. Used to be the city where they manufactured everything. Now it's the car-theft capital of the world. Did you know that? Not the most gruesome of the gruesome developments but it's awful enough. The thieves live mostly in our old neighborhood. Black kids. Forty cars stolen in Newark every twenty-four hours. (24)

While the novel, and the Swede, are fully aware of Newark's disastrous fall, and mourn it as the destruction of their (the Swede's, Zuckerman's, Roth's) old home, they can only point away from themselves in ascribing blame. The Swede bears no guilt; it's the "black kids" in his old neighborhood who are the problem. Later in the novel but earlier in its timeline, the Swede's father rants: "A whole business is going down the drain because of that son of a bitch LeRoi Jones, that Peek-A-Boo-Boopy-Do, whatever the hell he calls himself in that goddamn hat" (163). What the Swede's father misses in his attack on Amiri Baraka—who was present for the riots, and later tried for fomenting the violence—is the role he and his son have played in creating this conflict. Baraka has written of Newark's relationship with the suburbs:

Downtown is a ghost town after 5 because the Crackers live off somewhere WestOrange-SouthOrange-Teaneck-Montclair-Maplewood, &c.&c.&c., a hundred suburbs dripping with money taken out of Newark. And the downtown's for white people in daylight, long gone by fingerpoppin night. . . . Newark is a colony . . . where white people make their money to take away with them. (Cohen 226)

What Baraka has seen is what the fugitive daughters have discovered and the Swede and the other suburban fathers have hidden: the suburb's economic reliance on the inner city to fuel its lifestyle.

Even with the Swede and Zuckerman's blindness, the novel shows glimpses of the parasitical relationship the suburbs have with the city:

All over Newark, the oldest buildings were missing ornamental stone cornices—cornices from as high up as four stories plucked off in broad daylight with a cherry picker, with a hundred-thousand-dollar piece of equipment; but the cop is asleep or paid off and nobody stops whoever it is, from whatever agency that has a cherry picker, who is making a little cash on the side. The turkey frieze that ran around the old Essex produce market on Washington and Linden, the frieze with the terra-cotta turkeys and the huge cornucopias overflowing with fruit—stolen. Building caught fire and the frieze disappeared overnight. [. . .] The street where Merry lived was paved with bricks. There couldn't be more than a dozen of these brick streets intact in the entire city. The last of the cobblestone streets, a pretty old cobblestone street, had been stolen about three weeks after the riots. While the rubble still reeked of smoke where the devastation was the worst, a developer from the suburbs had arrived with a crew around one A.M., three trucks and some twenty men moving stealthily, and during the night, without a cop to bother them, they'd dug up the cobblestones from the narrow side street that cut diagonally back of Newark Maid and carted them all away. The street was gone when the Swede showed up for work the next morning. (235-6)

The suburbs' raid of streets and buildings literalizes the nature of their relationship with the city. They have already drained Newark of power and wealth, and here they take pieces of the city itself. Nellie Nailles may fear the urban underclass coming out to the suburb to destroy her home and happiness, but in the war between city and suburb, the suburb is on the offensive.

And yet the ongoing transfer of power remains hidden behind suburban innocuousness. Earlier in *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman wonders of the Swede, "How had he become history's plaything? History, American history, the stuff you read about in books and study in school, had made its way out to tranquil, untrafficked Old Rimrock, New Jersey" (87). Zuckerman is stunned, but why shouldn't history reach into the Swede's home? "Tranquil, untrafficked Old Rimrock" has become the residence of those

who guide history, the American elite. They have veiled this power with Old Rimrock's (and other suburbs' and exurbs') putative innocence, a claim to simple, out-of-the-way life—veiled it so effectively that they don't see it themselves, nor do the authors describing them. But the connection between the suburb and the rest of the world cannot remain hidden, and it's the suburbanites' attempts to hide these connections, to retreat from responsibility, that brings about the daughters' sacrificial descent into the city.

Suburban happiness depends on hiding these connections, and suburbanites grow anxious about any breach in the neighborhood's barrier of innocence. *American Pastoral* puts some of the blame for Merry's crime on television because it represents a break in the barrier, allowing her to witness the horror of Vietnam:

That was what had done it. Into their home the monk came to stay, the Buddhist monk calmly sitting out his burning up as though he were a man both fully alert and anesthetized. The television transmitting the immolation *must* have done it. If their set had happened to be tuned to another channel or turned off or broken, if they had all been out together as a family for the evening, Merry would never have seen what she shouldn't have seen and would never have done what she shouldn't have done. (154)

Her parents, raising her in Old Rimrock, have tried to keep her ignorant of the larger world, of seeing what she “shouldn't have seen.” But the monk “comes into their home,” crossing the suburban barrier and leading Merry to do “what she shouldn't have done.” The suburban bubble popped, soon Merry makes connections, noting the ties between her home community and political oppression:

They [the Vietnamese] just want to go to b-bed at night, in their own country, leading their own lives, and without thinking they're going to get b-b-blown to b-b-b-b-b-bits in their sleep. B-b-blown to b-b-b-b-bits all for the sake of the privileged people of New Jersey leading their p-p-peaceful, s-s-secure, acquisitive, meaningless l-l-l-little bloodsucking lives! (108)

While the Swede may come off as blameless—he’s portrayed as an all around decent fellow—he’s part of the larger shift of power that hides behind suburban innocuousness. The indictment comes from his own daughter who, like the other fugitive daughters, reacts to the suburb’s affluence (“acquisitive” lives) and links it directly to the suffering beyond the suburb (Vietnam).

Later, when he meets Merry in Newark, the Swede seems to understand this connection:

He heard them laughing, the Weathermen, the Panthers, the angry ragtag army of the violent Uncorrupted who called him a criminal and hated his guts because he was one of those who own and have. *The Swede had finally found out!* They were delirious with joy, delighted having destroyed his once-pampered daughter and ruined his privileged life, shepherding him at long last to their truth, to the truth as they knew it to be for every Vietnamese man, woman, child, and tot, for every colonized black in America, for everyone everywhere who had been fucked over by the capitalists and their insatiable greed. The something that’s demented, honky, is American history! It’s the American empire! It’s Chase Manhattan and General Motors and Standard Oil and Newark Maid Leatherware! Welcome Aboard, capitalist dog! Welcome to the fucked-over-by-America human race! (256-7)

The Swede puts himself, via his company (Newark Maid), on par with the corporate movers of the “American empire,” admitting to his place in the American structure of power. He understands the “destruction” of his daughter and his “privileged life” as revenge for economic and social inequality, and that he shares responsibility for this inequality because, though not individually as powerful as Chase Manhattan and General Motors, he is a member of the ruling class. But then he retreats from responsibility, blaming the vague “American history” of which he is elsewhere described as a plaything, not an actor. He gets it, but he doesn’t get it, and this is the closest he comes to understanding his place in American society.

*Bullet Park* doesn't dwell on the movement of American history in the 1960s the way *American Pastoral* does, but Elliot Nailles displays more self-awareness about his place as an upper-middle-class suburbanite. While talking to his son, Nailles admits,

Charlie Simpson is really a great fellow but he and Phelps Marsden and a half a dozen other prominent and wealthy men around here make their money in deals with Salazar, Franco, Union Miniere and all those military juntas. They talk about freedom and independence more than anybody else but they furnish the money and the armaments and the technicians to crush freedom and independence whenever it appears. (67)

Nailles understands the truth of the suburb. His neighbors can control the course of other nations' histories—and the suburban father can drain the cities of wealth, leaving them crippled—but they mask this power behind a pastoral fantasy. I've already discussed the importance of factoring in class when considering suburban fiction. It's no accident that every one of the fugitive children comes from the upper-middle class, which, with its collective power, has shaped the world to its benefit.<sup>28</sup>

In the end, the fugitive daughter's progress is not about the city, but about the upper-middle-class suburb. The victims of the suburban class of men stretch to Vietnam and Salazar's Portugal, but the city is the nearest victim, and so becomes the scene of the daughters' sacrifice. The fathers attempt to hide their accumulation of power behind an innocent domestic facade and so deny their culpability, but the city, standing in for all the

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<sup>28</sup> Eugenides's Callie is the only borderline case, and the Detroit riots lift her and her family firmly into the upper-middle-class of Grosse Pointe. The suburban space itself is neutral. The problem, in the novels, in the archetype of the suburban novel, is who lives there. Oates's novel *them* follows an inner-city white working class family's experience of the 1967 Detroit riots. Following the riots, Loretta, the mother of the family, gets a brief escape to the suburbs, thanks to the riots, after she loses her apartment to a firebomb. She and four others are taken in by a family in a neighborhood on the far northwest side of the city, suburban in its distance from the city center and the quality of its houses. She has no guilt over the suburb, and can freely enjoy the "large brick home with a front hallway and two fireplaces." Watching television coverage of the riots, she feels "happy just to be here, in this room, this lovely room, with all these people" (500). She bears no responsibility for the inequality the suburban class benefit from, and so can purely enjoy their home.

losers in the flow of power and capital, claims their daughters in revenge. And yet, this sacrifice only ensures that the suburban men keep their claim on the suburb. Despite the daughters' temporary choice of the city over the suburb, and the fathers' emotional suffering—great enough in *American Pastoral* to be the guiding force of the novel—nothing in the relationship between city and suburb changes. What do we make of this static exchange, this sacrifice that achieves nothing for the cities? The cycle of the fugitive daughter becomes a figure for complacency. In each of the works, writers rely on the fugitive children to provide a glimpse beyond the suburbs, of the suffering the suburbs rest on. But just as American suburbanites haven't changed their ways, this suffering isn't great enough to effect a change in their fathers' or their own lifestyle. The father temporarily experiences the pain he has wrought beyond the suburb, and the daughter becomes uncomfortable with her role as a marker of her father's status, coming alive to the brutal inequalities that maintain her home and rejecting her implicit though unchosen ownership of (and responsibility for) the suburb. But after the father and daughter's trial, they regain—and renew—the suburb, drawing the veil of innocence once more over their lives.

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## Chapter Four

### “The Polluted Garden”: Danger and the Postlapsarian Suburb

The novels in the previous chapters belong, for the most part, to what I call the first generation of postwar suburban fiction, while the novels in this chapter come from the second generation.<sup>29</sup> As we cross into this second generation, constants remain: for instance, women in these novels are still more vulnerable and more impatient with suburban life. But a pronounced, intriguing change occurs, a change that forms the subject of this chapter: the fall of the suburb.

The fictional suburbs fall in 1973. Before then, they may witness occasional violence or house unhappy families, but these are usually portrayed as aberrancies in a community that usually hums along without open discord—the point in these portrayals is that the suburbs are on their surface sedate and dull. But after 1973 families are breaking apart while children die, girls are abducted, and suburbanites are mugged on their own streets. The pre-1973 suburbs are relatively safe (the fugitive daughters, after all, must leave the suburb to be put at risk) and might witness marital stress, but not divorce. In the books of the new era of the suburb—what I call the postlapsarian suburb,

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<sup>29</sup>Of the two novels in the last chapter written in the 1990s and 2000s—*American Pastoral* and *Middlesex*—I’d place *Middlesex* in the second generation but *American Pastoral* in the first. Roth as a writer belongs to the generation preceding Eugenides, and his narrative concerns regarding the suburb do as well. If nothing else, the subtle difference between the two can be seen in the ages of the fugitive daughters. Merry is a teenager during the sixties while Callie is still elementary-age—the fictional children of the second generation always reach adolescence in the 1970s or later.

in which danger and broken families become the new everyday—all suburban protections are lost. What happened?

I choose 1973 as the year of the suburb's fall as that's the year in which both *The Ice Storm* and *The Virgin Suicides*, two novels that articulate the moment of collapse, are set. But there's another reason as well. Each of the novels I examine posits a different cause for the suburb's fall. *The Ice Storm* suggests the blame lies with the historical moment and with the spread of divorce, *The Virgin Suicides* that it rest with over-isolation, *Jernigan* that the suburb's surfeit of cultural meaning cripples any independent life, *Independence Day* points to an economic downturn coupled with an over-romantic demand on housing, and *Jesus Saves* to the blind, commercialistic embrace of the new. At the root of each of these complaints, I argue, is a profound disappointment in the suburb. Since their creation, the suburbs have promised a better life—have promised to protect their residents from the harms of the city and, as early booster Andrew Jackson Davies claimed, make them better citizens. By 1970, the nation had become a suburban nation—it was then America's suburbs became more populous than either its rural areas or cities—and the young families that fueled postwar suburban expansion reached maturity (Jackson 283). Only now can the question be asked, what difference have the suburbs made? In answer we find that families are disintegrating, and rather than foster a vast civic improvement the suburbs seem to have changed the country for the worse. Historians have described the mid-70s as a turning point in American history. Francis Fukuyama terms the era “The Great Disruption” and Philip Jenkins writes that

A marked change of the national mood occurred in the mid-1970s, bringing with it a much deeper pessimism about the state of America and its future. [. . .] Sensational incidents of child sexual abuse, serial murder, or cult atrocities appeared in the headlines at just the same time as events

such as the Iran hostage crisis, the Miami race riot, and the gasoline shortages, and contributed to the sense of pervasive national malaise, decadence, and social failure. (4, 16)

Elsewhere Jenkins notes this period is “exemplified by crime, family breakdown, and a general loss of trust within society”—the exact problems that plague the suburbs of these novels (16-7).

When the English Evangelicals advocated the earliest suburbs outside London, it was to nurture the nuclear family in isolation. In every one of the novels, either through divorce or death, a family is falling apart—a sign of the suburbs’ failure and the suburbs’ reneging on their original, most deeply held promise. But the portrayal of fracturing families isn’t simply about the risk of divorce (as could be construed), nor are the new, more sensational plots of these later suburban novels about a world grown more violent. After all, it hasn’t. As Brian Glassner points out in *Culture of Fear*, the dangers typically associated with the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (kidnappings, sexual predators, serial killers) are nothing new. Instead, this dangerous suburb arises from the realization that the place that is supposed to be a safe, nurturing world, isn’t different from the outside after all. The suburbs have disappointed. They haven’t changed the nation or the world. Instead, the new suburban age seems to have made it worse. As a consequence of their broken promises, they lose their charms against death—where before death in fictional suburbs was rare, now it becomes rampant.

### *The Ice Storm*

Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm* follows the Hood family through the Friday after Thanksgiving, 1973, shifting between the points of view of each of its four members:

father Benjamin, mother Elena, daughter Wendy, and son Paul. Benjamin and Elena attend a key party—in which married couples redivide based on which man’s keys a wife pulls out of a hat—while Wendy wanders the neighborhood, eventually winding up in the bed of the younger son of the Hoods’ neighbors the Williamses, and Paul suffers in New York, visiting a school friend he longs to make his girlfriend. By the next morning Paul is stranded on the train back home to Connecticut, Elena has paired with Jim Williams (whose wife has been having an affair with Benjamin), and Benjamin, the odd man out at the key party, discovers the dead body of the Williams’ older son, Mike, who has been electrocuted by a fallen power line. Mike’s death acts as the novel’s linchpin, the tragedy holding the Hood family together, briefly, before they fall apart.

In its articulation of the suburb’s fall, *The Ice Storm* relies on history, pointing to a moment of transformation like that described by Fukuyama and Jenkins and other historians of the 1970s. Setting the stage for its story, the novel opens with a series of paragraphs describing the state of America in 1973:

Much was in the recent past. Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Jim Morrison were in the recent past. Four dead in Ohio, one at Altamont. [. . .] In the recent past, buildings had already been occupied and abandoned at Columbia and Berkeley and everywhere else. Now Abbie Hoffman was in hiding. Now Jerry Rubin was writing for the *New Age Journal*. Angela Davis had been acquitted. The Beatles were recording solo albums. The war in neutral Cambodia was heating up. [. . .] The energy crisis was getting under way. Rose Mary Woods had just accidentally erased eighteen and a half minutes of a subpoenaed conversation. (4)

This introductory list works on two levels. At its most basic, it’s simply informational, slipping the reader into 1973. But the list also sets a distinct mood of “postness.” The opening line, “Much was in the recent past,” tells us that we are in a fractured “post” moment, a moment that feels more like the end of an age than the hopeful start of a new

one, and each item in the list connotes loss. Sixties radicals have disappeared from prominence (acquitted, in hiding, or writing for a new age magazine) and the Beatles have broken up and gone their separate ways. Meanwhile the Watergate Scandal is metastasizing, and the energy crisis—the first serious curb to the American economy in the postwar era—has begun. This, the historical details suggest, is an era of decline and disappointment.

But not only has America—and the suburb—declined. It now embraces falsehood, a point Moody drives home throughout the novel with his fascination for period touches. He charts Elena's reading of pop psychology, expounds on the synthetic clothes and home décor of the suburb (noting "plastic had also penetrated far into the house"), and every time the characters make fires, they use Duraflame logs (150-4, 105, 131). There's a distinct unwholesomeness in the details Moody chooses. Each one represents a quick, artificial fix—easy answers for life from pop psychology or an easy fire in the family's hearth from packaged, processed wood. What's more, this everyday, pervasive falseness—fake logs, fake wool carpet—suggests dishonesty permeates this new age. Such details may seem peripheral, but they correlate to the dishonesty that has leached into the Hood family. Watergate, which arises again and again in the novel, represents a loss of trust, the break-up of the Beatles the dissolution of a seemingly perfect union, the synthetics filling the house duplicity at the center of American life. Meanwhile, the Hoods—like many families in the new era of the no-fault divorce—have discovered this dishonesty has spread to their private world. As Benjamin Hood says to his wife, "It's the law of the land. People are unfaithful. The government is unfaithful. The world is. [. . .] Nothing is the way we think" (71).

This wide-reaching assumption of unfaithfulness—from the government to your neighbors—causes a profound shift in the suburb. Families, of course, have been unhappy before. But in novels that portray the earlier suburbs, happiness is the assumed norm. Think of the evocations of the blindly happy neighbors-as-peasants in *No Down Payment*, or the Wheelers stringing together last names in *Revolutionary Road*—“the Wingates, the Cramers”—to evoke benighted contentment. Now, almost twenty years later, the Hoods don’t have blindly happy neighbors. Instead they have Janey Williams, who tells them of her own life with her husband: “Separate floors, separate lives, separate everything” (124). And they have neighbors eager to swap partners for the night. Rather than make the Hoods stand out—as it would in earlier suburban novels—the Hoods’ unhappiness makes them merely one of many fracturing families, which in turn makes it easier, without peer pressure, for them to seek a divorce. In Moody’s *New Canaan*, discord and faithlessness are the norm, dissolving the bedrock familial configuration the suburbs are built upon. Without the nuclear family, the suburb falls.

According to their mythos, suburbs are supposed to nurture family and protect children. In *The Ice Storm*, the shattering of the first illusion leads directly to the shattering of the second. Paul, Benjamin’s son, worries about being attacked on the train after a man approaches him claiming to be a friend of his father’s: “As the door slammed shut behind the man, Paul gathered himself up and ran back, as far in the opposite direction as he could, past the sleepers and their uncomfortable dreams, waking some as he hurried. *Rapist*, Paul thought, *murderer*” (200). Trapped on the train, Paul believes himself in danger and wants to get home. But he’s safer on the train: the real danger lies in *New Canaan*, the failed promised land, where the crushing news of his parents’

impending divorce awaits him, and where the ice storm, downing power lines, brings about the death of his sometime friend Mike Williams. Mike, adrift in the suburb, spends the evening wandering the neighborhood, and, overcome with “weariness and remorse, [. . .] regret about having left the house to wander the streets without ever being caught, without ever being searched for,” sits down on a guardrail that is then touched by a live electrical line, electrocuting him (214). A minor character, Mike’s death serves the novel by commenting on the fallen suburb and setting in motion the final reunion of the Hood family. His electrocution occurs while the neighborhoods’ parents—attending the key party—have abandoned their children, all of whom are on their own in the book. The tie couldn’t be more clear: as the parents chase their own pleasures through the breaking of marriage bonds (i.e. perverting the suburban intention of preserving the nuclear family), one of the children dies, a death caused in large part by his despair of “ever being searched for.” The moment the parents neglect their duties to their marriages and their families, the suburb’s spell breaks, and its children, no longer protected, face death.

But the thematic importance of Mike’s death doesn’t end here. As the sacrifice representing the loss of the happier, more innocent suburban age, Mike’s body becomes a totemized charm with the power to temporarily restore dissolved families. Benjamin Hood, the only parent who fails to couple into a new union—and so the last representative of the old familial order whose passing Mike’s death marks—finds the body. After carrying Mike to his home, Benjamin calls an ambulance and accompanies the body to the Williams house, where he finds his wife (who has slept with Mr. Williams) and his daughter (who has spent the night with the Williams’ younger son Sandy). Without Mike’s body, Hood would have no cause to go to the Williams house

and discover his wife and daughter, and, without the weight of tragedy, once he did find them they would likely fall into argument and punishment (as Elena and Wendy have already done, before learning of Mike's death). But with Mike's body the family is reunited and, shaken, returns home together then goes to pick up Paul from the train station, the first and only time in the novel the entire family is brought together. In a novel fiercely concerned with family—Paul iconicizes his family by continuously comparing them to the comic book heroes the Fantastic Four, and we find out at the novel's end that he is the narrator, the book his elegy to his broken family—this brief trip to the station, enabled by Mike's body, offers one last, precious moment of union.

The novel, though, is about the moment a family breaks apart rather than the moment it stays together. Despite the healing shock of Mike's death, the Hoods are beyond repair. When Hood returns home bearing Mike's body, he discovers the ice storm has caused the pipes in his house to burst:

Water was trickling, no, streaming down the walls in Hood's house. The enormity of it took a moment to sink in—as the water itself was sinking into the antique planks and walls of his home. From the ceiling the water came in sheets, and beneath it a large, brownish stain, more than eighteen inches wide, with the curvilinear shape, say, of a Smiley Face, perhaps, or the flame of some Yuletide candle. (223)

The storm that brings the family together through Mike's death has also ruined their home. Moody makes sure we catch the meaning. As Benjamin tries to fix the pipes, the narrator tells us, "He felt he could reach into the thundering heart of his home, and thus into the heart of his family" (224). Benjamin—who, though he is faithless, doesn't want a divorce—hopes to repair both his home and family, but, a negligent husband and homeowner, he's too late to save either. Elena has told Benjamin she wants to divorce



him, and the novel ends just as Benjamin is about to tell Paul and Wendy and formally dissolve the family unit.

The Hoods aren't alone. The pipes in the other homes have burst, too (250). With divorce—with Mike's death, with the ice storm—the suburb has broken. Homes are no longer safe, nor are the children. But the problem isn't simply divorce or a general national malaise. It's a turn to selfishness. With the heavy-handedness of Mike's death—the portrait of self-involved parents at play, the children left on their own, Mike wishing an adult was looking for him—the novel suggests a turn away from family to the individual. Here too the suburb has failed. It is supposed to inspire commitment to family but instead has nurtured narcissists.

### *The Virgin Suicides*

Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* was published in 1993, the year before Moody—Eugenides's college roommate—published *The Ice Storm*, and the books share a number of parallels. Both are set in 1973, both take place in upper-middle-class suburbs (Grosse Pointe in the *The Virgin Suicides*), both chronicle a suburb's descent, and both put death in the suburb at the center of their plots.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, death comes in the form of the suicides of the five Lisbon daughters. The novel is framed by two summers, following the adolescent calendar of a school year bounded by summer vacation. The youngest daughter, Cecilia, kills herself during the first summer (she jumps from her bedroom and impales herself on an iron fence), the four older daughters take their lives a year later, in the second summer (all in one night, through asphyxiation and overdoses), and the novel spends most of its time

charting the period in between, when the Lisbon girls retreat into mystery. As Moody does with Mike's death, Eugenides uses the Lisbon suicides to mark the suburb's fall. And in *The Virgin Suicides*, the fall of the suburb is self-consciously framed as a fall—specifically, as the Fall, the loss of the suburb as Eden. Prior to the suicides, the narrators—the book, narrated by a “we,” is a collective account written by the boys, grown now, who knew and watched the Lisbon girls in high school—tell us, “There had never been a funeral in our town before, at least not during our lifetimes” (35). Once the suicides begin, Grosse Pointe proves ill equipped for death: the suburb has only one cemetery, and during the time of the story the cemetery workers are on strike, so there are no burials (36, 15). The suburb has tried to banish death, to become a new Eden, but the Lisbon girls' suicides introduce death into the deathless Garden. Meanwhile, at the same time as the Lisbon daughters bring death into the suburb, Grosse Pointe is losing its elms to disease: the Garden is being destroyed. The narrators describe the moment the city comes to fell the dying trees:

It wasn't uncommon to see a family gathered on the lawn at a safe distance from the chain saws, a tired mom and dad with two or three long-haired teenagers, and a poodle with a ribbon in its hair. People felt they owned the trees. Their dogs had marked them daily. Their children had used them for home plate. The trees had been there when they'd moved in, and had promised to be there when they moved out. But when the Parks Department came to cut them down, it was clear our trees were not ours but the city's, to do with as it wished. (179)

The loss of the elms is the first sign of the suburb's impermanence. The trees had “promised” to be there when they moved out, but the suburb isn't solid, after all, nor is it the particular place its residents have imagined: “We got to see how truly unimaginative our suburb was, everything laid out on a grid whose bland uniformity the trees had hidden, and the old ruses of differentiated architectural styles lost their power to make us

feel unique” (243). The suburb’s charm disappears with the trees, ushering the narrators into a disorienting anonymity, just as the Lisbon daughters’ deaths remove the suburb’s sheen of immortality and safety. Paradise is lost.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, the narrators openly contemplate the suburb’s fall and ascribe it to the suicides. “Everyone we spoke to dated the demise of our neighborhood from the suicides of the Lisbon girls,” they tell us, and note that in the new age after the Lisbon girls’ deaths the old constants of Grosse Pointe are lost (244). There are no more barbecues, Sammy the Shark Baldino, the local Mafioso protected by suburban insouciance, is arrested, and even the snow changes:

Nowadays, because of shifting winds from the factories and the rising temperature of the earth, snow never comes in onslaughts anymore [but...] back in the days of the Lisbon girls, snow fell every week and we shoveled our driveways into heaps higher than our cars. Trucks dumped salt. Christmas lights went up, and old man Wilson sprang for his annual extravagant display. (246, 166-7)

The suicide of the Lisbon girls ushers in a broken, fallen suburban world.

Of course, the deaths don’t cause these changes—the outlawing of barbecues has nothing to do with the Lisbon suicides—but in linking the suburb’s decline to the Lisbon suicides, the novel suggests they are related. What, then, brings about the Lisbon girls’ suicides? The novel resists offering an explicit answer. At times they are attributed to Mrs. Lisbon’s over-primness—throughout the book she tries to shield her daughters from sexuality, sewing concealing dresses for their Homecoming dance and painting over a mermaid’s breasts on her husband’s model ship (25). Elsewhere the suicides are attributed to chemical imbalances, to “something sick at the heart of the country,” to capitalism, to “living in a dying empire,” to “our music, our godlessness, or the loosening of morals regarding sex we hadn’t even had” (220, 231). While the narrators “could

never agree on an explanation for [the suicides], ” when we examine their effect on the Lisbon house, the connection to the suburb’s fall becomes clear (220).

Cecilia’s suicide marks the beginning of the Lisbons’ steady withdrawal from the suburban order, a withdrawal completed when the last daughter, Mary, kills herself (by chance she survives the group suicide, but overdoses on pills a month afterward). The novel illustrates this withdrawal through staggered descriptions of the Lisbon house. Early in the novel, the narrators present a picture of the house before its decline: “As the snapshot shows, the slate roof had not yet begun to shed its shingles, the porch was still visible above the bushes, and the windows were not yet held together with strips of masking tape. A comfortable suburban home” (5). Here we see both what the house was (“a comfortable suburban home”) and what the house becomes by the last suicide, the lost shingles and broken windows mirroring the disorder within. The house’s decline begins after Cecilia’s suicide, though at first it is restricted to the yard:

The year of the suicides the Lisbons’ leaves went unraked. On the appropriate Saturday Mr. Lisbon didn’t stir from his house. From time to time as we raked, we looked over at the Lisbon house, its walls accumulating autumn’s dampness, its littered and varicolored lawn hemmed in by lawns becoming increasingly exposed and green. (92)

Abandoning suburban ritual and orderliness (after all, the yard is “littered”), the Lisbons now find their house unprotected, “its walls accumulating autumn’s dampness,” mirroring the vulnerability—a failure of the suburb’s promise to protect—exposed by the loss of the daughter. Moreover, Mr. Lisbon’s refusal to join his neighbors in the yearly ritual of raking leaves separates his house from the others, whose green lawns make his yard stand out and draws attention to the Lisbons’ break with suburban normalcy. This attention and difference, ironically, comes from a desire to hide: the other lawns become

“exposed” while the Lisbons’ lawn remains unseen beneath a bed of leaves. The Lisbons don’t want the curious attention the suicide draws from their neighbors, but their effort to hide only makes them stand out all the more and signals that they, in their grief, have become separated from the suburban community.

As the season changes, the Lisbon house continues to shun viewers and grow more isolated:

Mrs. Lisbon closed the downstairs shades. All we could see were the girls’ incarcerated shadows, which ran riot in our imaginations. Moreover, as fall turned to winter, the trees in the yard drooped and thickened, concealing the house, even though their leaflessness should have revealed it. A cloud always seemed to hover over the Lisbons’ roof. There was no explanation except the psychic one that the house became obscured because Mrs. Lisbon willed it to. (141)

The house now becomes opaque—with the shades drawn, the boys can’t see inside the house, and the leafless trees block views of the house’s exterior. But, again, the efforts to hide the house—those made by Mrs. Lisbon and those imagined by the boys—only draw further attention to it. The narrators tell us “even our own parents began to mention how dim and unhealthy the place looked” (145). When Mr. Lisbon loses his job at the high school, the house continues its descent: “He was dismissed. And returned to a house where, some nights, lights never went on, not even in the evening, nor did the front door open” (162). Now, with the daughters withdrawn from school and no one leaving the house (even the groceries are delivered), the house turns feral:

For even as the house began to fall apart, casting out whiffs of rotten wood and soggy carpet, this other smell began wafting from the Lisbons’, invading our dreams and making us wash our hands over and over again. The smell was so thick it seemed liquid, and stepping into its current felt like being sprayed. We tried to locate its source, looking for dead squirrels in the yard or a bag of fertilizer, but the smell contained too much syrup to be death itself. The smell was definitely on the side of life,

and reminded David Black of a fancy mushroom salad he'd eaten on a trip with his parents to New York. (165)

Mrs. Lisbon has enforced her family's isolation in an attempt to protect her daughters, and the house becomes a sign of this attempt's failure. Like the Hoods' house, the condition of the Lisbon house tells us about the condition of the Lisbons—more insistently in this case as the narrators, unable to observe the Lisbon girls in any other way, focus more and more on the house. By the end of the decline, when the Lisbons have cut themselves off completely from the rest of the suburb (neither Mr. Lisbon nor his daughters going to the school, the center of suburban community), the house emits a potpourri of smells. The smell of “rotten wood and soggy carpet” and the mushroomy smell that is “on the side of life” reveal the double bind of the house's isolation: it's both rotting the house, and the girl's lives, and bottling and intensifying life to the point the house becomes a feral loner among its staid, less pungent neighbors. Rather than shielding the girls or stifling their (to Mrs. Lisbon) prurient desires, this isolation concentrates their passions to an unbearable, lethal degree, and the hope for protective removal backfires.

The house's decline reaches its fullest after Mary, the last Lisbon daughter, commits suicide. “When we awoke the next morning,” the narrators tell us, “the Lisbon house was empty. It looked even more run-down than ever and seemed to have collapsed from the inside, like a lung” (241). In a year the house has fallen from the normal suburban home of the snapshot to a distressed site of tragedy. This steady change pits the house against the rest of the suburb: through the suicides it is removed from the patterns of normalcy. But through its concentration on the house, the novel also suggests the suicides are the natural product of suburban isolation. When Cecilia commits suicide,

we're told "The sprinkler system, timed to go on at 8:15 p.m., spurted into life just as the EMS truck appeared at the end of the block" (33). By mentioning the sprinkler system, the narrators seem to oppose the suicides to the steady course of suburban life. And yet, in having the EMS team arrive just as the automatic sprinklers click on, the novel suggests the suicides are (or should be) an expected phase in the schedule of life in the suburb. Rather than a suburban pariah, the house becomes a suburban bellwether.

The Lisbons' isolation acts as a figure for the general isolation that describes Eugenides's vision of his narrators' lives. The daughters are isolated in the house, cut off from human contact, just as families have become isolated in the suburb in an effort to enforce innocence. The novel conveys its characters' suburb-centric world by balancing the richness of their knowledge of the neighborhood and its lore—they can tell us the history of any house or lawn—against their limited interaction with the outside. We're told they have "conversations about baseball and busing," but not what those conversations are, that Cecilia writes about "the commercial of the weeping Indian paddling his canoe along a polluted stream, or the body counts from the evening war" in her journal, and that both the narrators and the daughters remember when paratroopers landed in their backyards (19, 44). But this is all we learn of their impressions of the world beyond the borders of Grosse Pointe. The suburb insulates them from the world, mediating all their experiences—pollution comes to them only through a commercial, and the riots, raging just down Jefferson Avenue from their homes, are remembered for the day soldiers appeared in their yard.

This distance also defines their relationship with Detroit. After Cecilia's suicide, the narrators climb onto the roof of the house across the street and briefly observe the city:

The sun was falling in the haze of distant factories, and in the adjoining slums the scatter of glass picked up the raw glow of the smoggy sunset. Sounds we usually couldn't hear reached us now that we were up high, and crouching on the tarred shingles, resting chins in hands, we made out, faintly, an indecipherable backward-playing tape of city life, cries and shouts, the barking of a chained dog, car horns, the voices of girls calling out numbers in an obscure, tenacious game—sounds of the impoverished city we never visited, all mixed and muted, without sense, carried on a wind from that place. (34-5)

The narrators experience Detroit as a far away, unknown realm they can only discover by mounting their houses and looking southwest. Distanced by their place in the suburb, they fail to understand life there: what they hear and see is “indecipherable,” “obscure,” “mixed and muted,” “without sense.” Moreover, the city is foreign (“that place”), an impoverished land of slums and factories. This distance, of course, is manufactured. Grosse Pointe directly abuts Detroit, and the separation isn't physical, but social. Eugenides paints the suburb's isolation through his characters few looks outside—making the city and the world beyond all the more distant by its rarely being mentioned—and through the novel's focused setting: like the narrators, the novel never visits Detroit, save for a brief trip to Belle Isle's conservatory. The suburb, then, is the Lisbon house writ large. In raising the narrators in Grosse Pointe, their parents have imposed an isolation similar to Mrs. Lisbon's in the hopes of protecting them from the perceived danger of the city and the outside world. But the Lisbon girls' suicides suggest that the real danger lies within the suburb, with over-isolation. In the months before they take their lives they desperately seek any contact with the outside, whether through



daydreaming with travel catalogs, exchanging cryptic messages with the narrators, or Lux's sleeping with men from the city on her roof—contacting the outside world in the most intimate way possible without leaving her home (147). In their flailing grasps for connection and their subsequent suicides, we see a warning of what happens to those confined to the suburbs.

But not everyone is in danger. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the suburb's falls only for adolescents, standing in for coming of age. The Lisbon girls are adolescents, as are the watchful narrators. And consider the family watching the elm being taken away. They are an older family, the children teenagers, the tree tied to bygone youthful memories. The lost trees act as both metaphors for their maturity and the imminent dismemberment of the family—the kids will soon move away to college or new lives. Toward the end of the novel, when the narrators are enlisted by the Lisbon daughters to help them escape (a cover for their multiple suicides), they tell us “Our new height astounded us, and later many said this contributed to our resolve, because for the first time ever we felt like men” (205). It's this realization, allied with the suicides, that causes the suburb's fall, leading the narrators to divide their experience of Grosse Pointe into two ages: the age of innocence before the suicides, and the broken age of adulthood that comes after.

In all the other novels, adults and children alike share the fall, but in *The Virgin Suicides*, the adults don't experience any change. The adults have seen the outside world, have had experiences beyond Grosse Pointe. When the neighborhood fathers come together to remove the fence Cecilia impales herself on, the narrators realize

how ancient [the fathers] were, how accustomed to trauma, depressions, and wars. We realized that the version of the world they rendered for us was not the world they really believed in, and that for all their caretaking and bitching about crabgrass they didn't give a damn about lawns. (55)

This is the first moment the narrators understand that their parents have led lives beyond Grosse Pointe—and that the suburb is not permanent and they, too, will move beyond it. The parents have experienced “traumas” and “depressions,” and so can easily return to “their tennis foursomes and cocktail cruises” after the suicides, but for the narrators the girls’ deaths take on an epoch-shifting import, representing their own coming of age and the danger of not moving outside of the false, pretend, “rendered” world of the suburb, a world that enforces innocence and attempts to stifle the experimentation and exploration necessary for the transition from childhood to adulthood (231).

### *Jernigan*

Both *The Ice Storm* and *The Virgin Suicides* feature families in mid-disintegration. The other novels I turn too—set in the late 1980s and early 1990s—center around families that are already broken. We have passed the moment of the suburb’s fall, and are now in its aftermath, a postlapsarian world in which violence becomes widespread and the suburban landscape more bleak.

David Gates’s *Jernigan* starts on the one-year anniversary of the death of Peter Jernigan’s wife Judith, and the history of the Jernigan marriage offers an updated portrait of *Revolutionary Road*’s Wheelers. Like the Wheelers, the Jernigans suffer from stunted ambitions—the Jernigans are failed academics who have turned to real estate (Peter) and staying at home (Judith). Like the Wheelers, the Jernigans buy a house they dislike (Jernigan calls it a “shitbox”) in the suburbs because they can’t afford to live anywhere else (19, 29). And like the Wheelers, the Jernigans try to live there without becoming tainted. But instead of relying on intellectual pretension to maintain their distance, the

Jernigans use irony. When Jernigan carves turkeys for Thanksgiving, he tells us he rolls his “eyes ceilingward so nobody missed the irony” (31). And while the Wheelers decorate their house to stave off suburban identity, Judith runs toward it with referential irony: “On one of the days when Judith’s sense of camp was at its most manic, she’d gone to half a dozen places before she found wallpaper with roosters” (106).

As the novel makes clear with Jernigan’s compulsive references to movies, television shows, and commercials, the Jernigans turn to irony because they feel the suburb (and life) has become polluted with stereotype. Even in describing his wife’s death, Jernigan can’t help making a cultural reference: “It looked like a scene out of an old *Twilight Zone*, neighbors on some little suburban street looking at the flying saucer whose arrival would soon reveal what fascists they all were” (31). Our lives have become so inundated with and defined by popular culture, this moment argues, that the most tragic event in a character’s life makes him think first of the *Twilight Zone*. Popular culture mediates experience, getting between Jernigan and his experience of life, and oppresses any chance for an individual, fresh existence. In answer, the Jernigans embrace stereotype—the turkey, the wallpaper—but are careful to roll their eyes.

This oppression of meaning might not be problematic in itself, the book suggests, if it didn’t provide hopelessly false expectations: real happiness can never match the happiness of the suburban image at its most earnest or manic. Underscoring this point, Gates scatters references to *It’s a Wonderful Life* throughout the novel. The video store in the mall is called Bedford Falls Video, and when Dustin—the friend of Jernigan’s teenage son—commits suicide in Jernigan’s house, he does it while watching a tape of the movie (133). Jernigan discovers Dustin’s body while the television plays the scene in

which Jimmy Stewart returns to his house to find it empty and himself forgotten and asks, “What’s happened to this house? Where’s Mary? Where’s my kids?” (133). The scene, of course, reflects Jernigan’s condition—he’s lost his wife and is losing his son (while living together in his girlfriend’s house during the novel’s present action, they remain emotionally estranged). But it also mocks him. There’s no happy ending for Jernigan—his wife is dead, his son drifted beyond reach. Neither his life nor his suburb will measure to the happiness Jimmy Stewart learns to appreciate by the movie’s end.

The Jernigans battle both this oppressive surfeit of meaning and the necessary disappointment of suburban life with irony. But it doesn’t work. Judith is unhappy—disappointed with their sex life, and her failed attempt as an academic—and during a party in the summer before the novel’s opening she jumps in the pool, then strips off her clothes, runs to the car, and backs out and is hit by a truck. Like *Revolutionary Road*, a marriage that rests on suburban compromises ends in the wife’s death—brought about in this case by unavoidable disappointment and the failure of irony to remedy it. Even so, a year later Jernigan is still relying on irony—“With me, always assume irony,” he tells his girlfriend Martha Peretsky (81)—and only departs from it after Dustin’s suicide.

This second death, a second sign of the suburb’s fall, rattles Jernigan, causing him to realize he’d “been making a loveless hell” for his son, his girlfriend, and his girlfriend’s daughter (138). His remedy is to embrace earnestness, proposing an expedition with his son to cut down a Christmas tree—the kind of domestic rite that would normally make him cringe—and hold back from making ironic comments (141). His over-reliance on irony, he understands, has poisoned his relationship with his son and his girlfriend. It might insulate him from suburban stereotype and from dwelling on his

wife's death, but it also prevents the necessary expression of honest feeling—expressions he's too wary of because he's oversensitive to earnestness. But when he tries earnestness, it fails him, too. While he's been worried about domestic stereotype, the suburb has changed, becoming not the place of sit-com insouciance that he and his wife imagined with their referential gestures of domesticity, but of danger. The suburb has been broken beyond repair, crushed beneath its cultural weight, and neither earnestness nor irony can fix it.

The novel offers a long chain of failure: Jernigan's wife's death comes about through a failure of irony, itself brought about by the suburb's surfeit of cultural stereotype and its failure to match the blissful contentment argued for in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Meanwhile, Jernigan might have survived the weight of stereotype but for the weight of personal tragedy. He's haunted by "that place where the driveway met the street"—where his wife has died (57). This is just another way the suburbs have failed. He and Judith might not have been happy in the suburb, but they thought they were safe. Suburban stereotypes, for all their oppression, promise dullness, protection, a world of carved turkeys and rooster wallpaper. But his wife is killed in a freak accident at the foot of his house, and so fear becomes the new norm. Inducted into this new suburban world of danger, early in the novel, when Jernigan prepares to get more gas for his lawn-mower, he naturally imagines the worst:

I set [the can] on the blacktop next to the Datsun and went in for my keys, worrying about an explosion. This is how it would happen: black retains heat, therefore heat from the blacktop would touch off what gas remained in the can, which would touch off the gas tank of the Datsun. (22)

Judith's death has unhinged Jernigan from suburban security—a security he claimed with irony, but claimed nonetheless. Once more, the fallen suburb becomes a dangerous

suburb—the imagined explosion, Dustin’s suicide, Martha’s violent husband returning to threaten them—which robs suburbanites of their assumption of safety. Jernigan tries to survive in this broken suburb—through irony, then earnestness—but his only solution is escape. At the end of the novel, he flees his girlfriend’s house (which has become his home) for the New Hampshire wilderness and, eventually, a rehabilitation center. The postlapsarian suburb, Gates’s book argues, is a broken, poisonous place—all the children in the book are either on drugs or suicidal, the adults violent, unstable, or racist—that must be abandoned.

### *Independence Day*

One of the first things we learn in Richard Ford’s *Independence Day* is that Haddam, New Jersey—the novel’s fictional suburb—has declined. With housing prices falling, Haddam has changed: residents have grown nervous, downtown boutique businesses have gone out of business, and the town now draws a seedier crowd (4, 23, 34). Like the other suburbs, Haddam’s fall is marked by a broken family. Frank Bascombe, the novel’s narrator, is divorced, and his son and daughter live with his ex-wife and her new husband in Connecticut. And like the other fallen suburbs, Haddam has become a site of danger. Just before the book’s opening, three kids on mini-bikes mug Frank one street over from his house; Clair Devane, Frank’s fellow realtor and one time love interest, is raped and murdered in a condo; and at the novel’s end a road crew discovers a skeleton beneath the street in front of his house (4, 409). Even the birds are suffering: Karl, who works at Frank’s root beer stand, tells him “there’s a decline in songbirds now that’s directly credited to the suburbs” (138). And while a child doesn’t

die, Paul, Frank's son, severely injures himself with a pitching machine (361). Once more, violence reveals how the suburb has fallen short, has proven unable to provide its residents with safety and happiness.

But unlike the characters in the other books, Frank is clear-eyed about the suburb's inadequacies. While dealing with recalcitrant clients, he reflects on the disappointments of real estate:

Unhappily, the Markhams, out of ignorance and pigheadedness, have failed to intuit the one Gnostic truth of real estate (a truth impossible to reveal without seeming dishonest and cynical): that people never find or buy the house they say they want. A market economy, so I've learned, is not even remotely premised on anybody getting what he wants. (41)

From the beginning, Frank believes, living in the suburbs (or anywhere, for that matter) requires a compromise. Perfection is unattainable because it doesn't exist—or isn't available in your price range—and so buying a home naturally gives rise to disappointment. If the fallen suburb is a disappointing suburb, then according to Frank any suburb can't help but be fallen, can only fail to meet expectations. This necessary compromise leads to morbid thoughts:

My own view is that the realty dreads (which is what the Markhams have, pure and simple) originate not in actual house buying, which could just as easily be one of life's most hopeful optional experiences [. . .] but in the cold, unwelcome, built-in-America realization that we're just like the other schmo, wishing his wishes, lusting his stunted lusts, quaking over his idiot frights and fantasies, all of us popped out from the same unchinkable mold. And as we come nearer the moment of closing [. . .] what we sense is that we're being tucked even deeper, more anonymously, into the weave of culture, and it's even less likely we'll make it to Kitzbuhel. (57)

Buying a suburban home means compromising and surrendering the illusion of difference. It means buying permanence and giving up on dreams of escape. One American fantasy—owning a home, settling down—necessarily opposes another: taking

off, starting over, reinventing yourself. Of course, we've seen this before. It's the fear that drives April Wheeler to despair. But Frank puts it up front, acknowledges it, understands that he is not exceptional, that he is "popped out from the same unthinkable mold."

Frank is the only character in these novels to craft anything approaching happiness in the fallen suburb. Knowing that the suburb must necessarily disappoint, he is not disappointed: he sees the houses as simply houses, nothing more. At the novel's end, he provides a model for achieving that happiness. When looking at his old house, he thinks about how it means little to him, how he feels no attachment to it, adding,

Is there any cause to think a place—any place—within its plaster and joists, its trees and plantings, in its putative essence *ever* shelters some spirit ghost of us as proof of its significance and ours? No! Not one bit! [. . .] We just have to be smart enough to quit asking places for what they can't provide. (442)

He doesn't romanticize the suburb, nor does he worry about its cultural meaning. It is, for him, simply a place to live, and so he takes its disappointments in stride.

*Independence Day* reveals an important aspect of the postlapsarian suburb—the suburb's fall only troubles those who believe their neighborhood entitles them to an extra measure of happiness and safety, who ask the place for what it can't provide.

### *Jesus Saves*

In these novels, ordered in rough chronological order by their settings, conditions in the postlapsarian suburb progressively worsen. At first deaths are isolated to one child, then to one home. Then, as we move into the 1980s with *Jernigan* and *Independence Day*, danger and death become increasingly common. In Darcey Steinke's *Jesus Saves*,



set in the mid-90s, the suburban landscape has reached its nadir, turning into a hyper-dangerous wasteland, a trashed domain populated by serial killers and sexual predators. The novel is set in the Atlantic south<sup>30</sup>—though the only markers of southernness are small details such as mentions of kudzu or the direction a highway runs—and its characters inhabit the new, cheap suburban fringe erected on former farms and wilderness, where strip malls bleed into housing tracts, and woods hiding dumps run between developments. The novel’s action follows two girls: Ginger and Sandy. Both come from broken families. Ginger, who gets most of the novel’s attention, has lost her mother to cancer and is distanced from her father, a Lutheran minister steadily losing hold on his church. She spends most of her time drifting through the suburb and the center city, wandering its trashscapes and returning repeatedly to a dump in the woods with her boyfriend. The other girl, Sandy, is the daughter of a single mother and has been abducted from a local camp. In chapters that alternate with Ginger’s story, the novel follows Sandy through her descent into tortured madness while the man who has taken her (called “the troll”) keeps her in a dark room and repeatedly rapes her. The two girls’ stories converge when we discover, through Ginger, that the troll lives on the same suburban street as her friend “the girl” (Ginger, however, doesn’t recognize this), and the second time when the troll briefly seizes Ginger in the woods (160).

The plot alone—stolen, molested girls kept inside the suburb—tells us we are in a fallen world, and from the beginning danger and death infuse the novel. In the opening action of the book Ginger’s boyfriend Ted hits a deer with his car. Steinke focuses on the struck animal, detailing its death throes and the “pink foam” filling its mouth, indicating this will be a book about violence in the seeming idyll of the suburbs (4). Immediately

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<sup>30</sup> Either North Carolina or Virginia

following the deer, the novel launches into a recitation of suburban dangers as Sandy thinks how “Every day you heard about another grisly murder and there were always mug shots on the news of the dead-eyed perpetrators and blurry snapshots of their victims smiling” (5-6). She thinks about “the serial killer captured a few weeks back, how he kept chopped-up human bodies carefully wrapped in butcher’s paper in his basement freezer,” and about Sandy Patrick, the abducted girl (5). “Just last week,” we’re told,

somebody found a photograph in a convenience-store parking lot the next state over. An underexposed Polaroid showed Sandy lying on a mattress, her arms tied behind her back, black electrical tape sealing her mouth. Her eyes were closed, so it was hard to tell whether she was dead or just sleeping. (6)

Tellingly, just after Ginger recalls this unsettling, unexplained picture of the bound Sandy, she looks at the near subdivision: “She saw bits and pieces of ranch houses through the thin strip of woods, sliding doors tinted blue with TV light, bright kitchen windows and murkier bedroom ones” (7). Placing Sandy’s photograph next to this view, the novel suggests a relationship between Sandy’s condition and the comforts of the suburb, the blue “TV light” and “bright kitchen windows.”

As the novel progresses, it attempts to define this relationship, one of whose chief elements is suburban vulnerability. At night in her bedroom, Ginger fears being attacked:

Hairs on her arms prickled; her flesh goose-pimpled as she walked over and slammed the frame shut, twisted the metal lock. Anyone could shimmy up the drainpipe, latch onto the deck rail, and slip inside the window; that’s how a convict escaped from a chain gang had raped a lady the next state over. (142)

This doesn’t represent the safety and contentment the semi-rural, new-start setting of the suburbs promise. The constant news of murder and abduction have drained suburban comforts of their powers. The problem isn’t just a seemingly more dangerous world, but

the suburb's flimsy houses. Ginger's fear may originate in the news stories—she thinks of how she could be attacked based on what she has heard happened in a neighboring state—but it only plagues her because she feels unprotected. “Each house took two weeks,” she reflects in the novel,

first the pine skeleton, and then they stapled up the pressed-board walls and stuffed them with pink insulation. Using a chain saw anybody could cut through the house's exterior. As a child she set garlic on the window ledge to repel vampires and kept a baton under her pillow to bash intruders in the head. She practiced fire drills incessantly. (143)

The houses are vulnerable, their walls easily breached, and so rather than feel immune to the dangers of the outside world, Ginger feels threatened, worrying about vampires and convicts.

Rather than just being passively vulnerable to new dangers, the novel suggests the suburbs have helped create them. Steinke articulates this causal relationship by continually returning to the trashed landscape of the suburban woods, the site of much of the novel's action. The teenagers hang out there, Ginger and her boyfriend have sex there, and the book's characters are constantly endangered there: Sandy dies in the woods, the troll abducts “the girl” in the woods, and later almost takes Ginger in the woods (193). At one point Ginger imagines them in terms of a spoiled Eden: “Trapped between that heaven and this earth, they were like the sinful Adam and Eve, [. . .] but instead of being cast out, God confined them to the polluted garden, to these fouled and fucked-up woods” (123). The importance of the woods to the suburbs' fall reveals itself as, each time Steinke takes us into them, she carefully evokes the “polluted garden” in specific detail. Ginger visits a “greasy lake” with “oil-soaked weeds” and a “gunky surface” (79); she runs through woods “littered with Coke cans, empty cigarette

packages, the aluminum and plastic catching what was left of the highway's white light" (87); in another suburban strand of woods "trash clumped in the weeds; rain ruined paperbacks and silver gum wrappers. These woods were domesticated; an old fort hung precariously in one tree, a tire swing in another" (110); Ginger has sex with Ted in the forest while "by her head, a plastic grocery bag spilled out a roast bone, old spaghetti, yogurt cups, paper diapers that smelled of ammonia and melted butter. Junk mail and slimy plastic wrap were intertwined with the vines of kudzu" (124); later, she's walking in the suburban woods when

behind McDonald's, just inside the tree line Ginger came upon a configuration of objects. In the middle was a dead cardinal, a muted female, its belly split to expose shiny red innards, gluey and crimson as menstrual blood. Nightshade berries circled in the soft dirt followed by a wreath of white plastic roses. In the roots of a maple tree a motor-oil can filled with pee balanced in front of a ravaged doll's head. Someone had scribbled swastikas into her forehead with green magic marker. (166)

And, finally, just before Ginger runs into the troll, "Branches rattled against one another like dime-store wind chimes as she moved onto the dirt path past the cat skeleton and the broken-down high chair" (205). Every time Ginger crosses into the woods, Steinke describes the trash to be found there. The woods have become a place of the damned, "fouled and fucked up" with refuse that is in turn used for unexplained rituals—the dead cardinal, the swastika'd doll—that seem products of a world unmoored from meaning or moral assurance. But more important is the origin of the trash. Dolls' heads, junk mail, yogurt cups, a broken-down high chair, this trash is suburban trash, the byproduct of a consumer culture. The woods tell the true story of the suburbs. Wrapped around the subdivisions, they receive all the suburb hopes to cast off and deny about its lifestyle. The clean streets of suburbia, where the blue light of the television flashes warmly and

invitingly from the windows, depend on a culture of disposability. But the problem isn't only ecological. The suburb's culture of disposability, the book argues, leads directly to the abducted girls—a point not so subtly made when Sandy is left on a pile of trash and later taken to the woods, like all the other suburban refuse, to die “surrounded by broken plates” (81, 193).

While the trashed woods reveals the underside of suburban consumption, one of the novel's secondary storylines—the conflict at Ginger's father's church—attacks consumption's accompanying error, the blind embrace of the new. Already, at the urging of Mr. Mulhoffer, the most powerful member of the church, the congregation has abandoned its downtown location in favor of a new, bland building in the suburbs, a move Ginger and her father both opposed. The new church replaces the old, beautiful church building with a building that, to Ginger, “felt generic as an airport”—a cardinal sin in a novel invested in aesthetics (19). In moving, the congregation leaves behind elderly parishioners who can't get out of the city and, in hoping to avoid the “drug addicts” and “petty criminals” of downtown, turns its back on the very people whose welfare the church should be concerned with (24, 144-6). Moreover, in the new church the former bonds of community have been lost: before, the congregation shared a communion cup, but now, out of fear of disease (specifically, AIDS), they use separate disposable cups (75). Having already engineered the church's move, at the start of the novel Mulhoffer is pushing Ginger's father to quit the old, High Church ways of worship in favor of the style of a megachurch—the final shift, according to the novel, from true faith (embodied by Ginger's father, who, in case we miss the point, is eventually forced out) to a market-oriented religion (106-7).

The church errs by abandoning authenticity for the flash of the new. To make sure we catch this, Steinke ties Mulhoffer to modern suburban tackiness. He owns a “pressed-wood factory” in the suburbs, where “he’d made a fortune in cheap colonial bedroom sets, Formica dinettes, couches that looked like overweight lazy-boy recliners” (18). The suburban trash that fills the woods begins, in part, with Mulhoffer’s cheap furniture. But Mulhoffer’s worst fault—the fault that plagues the church and the suburb as well—is that “he believed unequivocally that anything new was better than anything old” (18). It’s that “unequivocally” that’s so important, for it’s the blindness that Ginger and the novel despise—the automatic assumption that “anything new was better.”

Ginger, the novel’s moral center, holds so closely to this distrust that it forms the basis of her relationship with Ted: “He was the first person to say the new post office as well as everything else out here was ugly and she was so grateful; a few hours later she went for a ride in his car and fucked him in the backseat” (35). Newness, ugliness—and, worse, blindness to what’s wrong with them—aggravate her, and make her gravitate to anyone who understands.

Of course, one could chalk this conflict up to taste and personality. Ginger dislikes suburban architecture. Mr. Mullhoffer is a boor. These don’t constitute solid indictments against suburban life, even if they do direct our sympathies. But the trashed woods remind us more is at stake than aesthetics, and the novel makes an explicit connection between the blind, commercial following of the new and the danger in the suburbs when Ginger reads the paper:

That redneck councilman was rallying strong voter support for his theme-park proposal, stating that it would bring thousands of much-needed jobs into the area, and the woman with terminal breast cancer settled her case out of court with the electric company. Company spokesperson Lisa

White, conceding a settlement was necessary to curb bad publicity, continued to deny that power lines have any relationship to cancer. On the religion page, “If the Deerpath Creek mega-church were a business, you can bet people would be clamoring to pick up some shares of its stock,” an article began. Buried near the back by the movie ads was a police drawing of a man with a beard and in small caps: POLICE MAY HAVE BREAK IN PATRICK CASE. (72)

Stories of crass commercial angling—the theme park proposal, the success of the mega-church Mulhoffer wants the Lutherans to emulate—alternate with stories of suburban dangers: cancer-causing powerlines and Sandy Patrick’s abduction. Placing these stories together, Steinke makes the same consequential tie that pairs Ginger’s thinking about the picture of Sandy Patrick to her glance at the subdivision, and that guides her description of the trash in the woods. Each reminds us of the relationship between a culture of disposability and the dangers (sex predators and serial killers) plaguing the suburbs.

But with the newspaper Steinke not only reminds us of this relationship, she deepens our understanding of it, showing that the natural, problematic offshoot of disposability is the denial of responsibility. The electric company denies wrongdoing while paying off the victim, just as suburban trash is dumped in the woods rather than properly taken away and the church, at Mulhoffer’s urging, abandons the elderly and homeless of the city. Like the fathers in Chapter Three who leave the city and ignore their role in the world, those who have moved to the middle-class fringe have sought their own pleasures without taking responsibility for their lifestyle. By the start of *Jesus Saves*, these decisions have caught up with them. Their garden is poisoned, their cul-de-sac grown dangerous, their families broken, the suburb itself become a site of disposal:

A lot of women were abandoned here, left to raise teenagers in exhausted-looking split-levels. Mothers who were at work, or at the club, or so tired in the evening they didn’t care what happened. Some slept all weekend with their doors locked; some went out to the Hilton Bar and drank

margaritas. Inside these houses, the TV was always on and kids jumped on the beds until the slats broke and had wrestling competitions in the basement. Walls were smudged with food and toothpaste and [Ginger had] even seen muddy tennis-shoe tracks on the ceiling, as if divorce had made the children light as feathers. (47)

With husbands gone to chase new delights and mothers tired, overworked, and often away themselves—at work, at the club, or at the Hilton Bar—the suburban haven turns from nurturing to a poisonous place absent of discipline, where the television plays constantly and children run riot. This abandonment, the novel suggests, is simply the end point of the suburban lifestyle, of the continued embrace of the new and the leaving behind of the old, of the shedding of responsibility by both parents (the men may be the worst offenders, but the women don't get off easily, either). All three girls taken by the troll (Sandy, “the girl,” and Ginger) are children of broken homes; Sandy and “the girl” live with single mothers and when “the girl” is taken, her mother is gone, staying at her boyfriend's condo (184). In *The Ice Storm*, parents turn away from their responsibilities—attending a key party while an ice storm claims one of their children—and again in *Jesus Saves* we find adults' abandonment of responsibility resulting in harm to children. But in *The Ice Storm* Mike dies in a freak accident. In *Jesus Saves* the children die in a pattern of violence that has become everyday, serial killers and sexual predators an expected aspect of suburban living. The suburb has fully fallen, become not just as dangerous as the world beyond its borders, but more dangerous.

The suburbs progressively worsen in these novels, but two things remain constant—broken families and danger. These are the symptoms of the fall, not the cause. The cause is disappointment. By 1970 the US suburban population outnumbered that of



either cities or rural areas, and by 1990 US suburban population outnumbered both combined. The problem isn't that the suburbs have grown worse. It's that the suburbs haven't proven to be any better at nurturing happiness, protecting families, or producing good citizens—all the things promised since the earliest suburbs—than anywhere else. In fact, in the era of suburban dominance, families are breaking apart more rapidly, and the suburban majority has ushered in an era of malaise and stagflation. In earlier novels, the suburb was often portrayed as stale, articulating a fear that the vast expansion of the suburbs would dull Americans, make them into pliant, unthinking automatons absent of individual identity. But this nightmare never came true—the suburbs didn't change people. It's this inability to effect a change that drives the portrayals of post-1973 suburbs. Decades later, fictional suburbs still have the power to harm their residents, but rather than sap their identity they become places of murder, rape, and suicide. The suburbs were supposed to offer a new, better life—both *The Virgin Suicides* and *Jesus Saves* invoke Eden, and the suburb in *The Ice Storm* is New Canaan, the new promised land<sup>31</sup>—but they have failed to do so, and so all protections are lost and they become as dangerous, if not more so, than the outside world.

This argument, though, demands a coda. I haven't yet discussed class, an omission that indicates something problematic in the failed suburb of fiction. The characters in these novels come from very different orders of the middle class—from upper-middle class Haddam, New Canaan, and Grosse Pointe, to *Jernigan's* solid middle-class New Jersey suburb, to the lower-middle-class fringe of *Jesus Saves*. In fiction set in earlier suburbs, class distinctions hold. Not only are Cheever's suburbs different from

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<sup>31</sup> And New Canaan's colonial roots tie the suburban hope for a new life to that of the English puritans who settled in New England in the seventeenth century.

Yates's or Updike's, but his characters' worries and experiences are different. But with the new era of the disappointing suburb, the suburban experience becomes uniform across the class spectrum as all suburbanites suffer from the same disease. Both Benjamin Hood and Peter Jernigan are into "degradation" and come off as almost the same kind of suburban character (Moody 18, Gates 19). But there's a real difference between jobless, nearly destitute Peter Jernigan and upper-middle class Benjamin Hood. The fallen suburbs, while signaling real disappointments with the suburbs and the ways in which they can't help but fail, avoids class differences by making the two equal in their misery. Consider Frank Bascombe, Benjamin Hood's class peer. Frank can be clear-eyed about the fallen suburb and find ways to enjoy it not just because of his balanced look at housing but because he's upper-middle class. He lives in an upscale Haddam (modeled on Princeton) and has enough disposable income to indulge his whims: for instance, buying a root beer stand for the sake of nostalgia. Meanwhile, Peter Jernigan, who also lives in a New Jersey suburb and also has a problem son, has no choice but to flee. Money still counts, but in the new age of the fallen suburb, where everyone is allegedly in equal danger, real class differences get written over and the upper-middle class, who still hold as much power and agency as before, get let off the hook after a play for sympathy. At last, then, we have the answer to what kind of people the suburbs will create, and to qualms among the upper-middle class about mass-middle-class encroachment: the suburban experience has become uniform as everyone is disappointed, and everyone suffers.

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## **Conclusion**

### **Looking Forward**

I began this project by grouping texts thematically. Meta-suburban texts for one chapter, novels that engaged the Cold War for another, and so on. This allowed me to find evocative, beneath-the-surface commonalities among each of these groupings—commonalities missed by other critics, and that I missed in my early readings—such as the place of class fears in Chapter One, or the role of the fugitive daughter and the suburban veil in Chapter Three. But this approach also had a downside. It led to a project that lacks a certain wholeness, that is more a collection of essays rather than a total work. At first I attempted to circumvent this lack by focusing on class. But though class arises in each of these chapters, as I moved forward its importance diminished. Class remained relevant, but other themes kept asserting themselves, kept reminding me I was not giving the entire story.

Only now, with the chapters brought together and enough distance from the work to see it more clearly, have I been able to trace other thematic thru-lines, detecting larger narratives about gender and literary inheritance operating alongside that of class. In this project's next incarnation, I will restructure the chapters to allow for these readings. I'll turn what are now chapters into broader sections, keeping the overall chronological approach while opening up spaces within each of the sections for fuller discussions of

gender, class, history, craft, and race. And to fully serve these topics, I will bring in more material. For instance, the issue of race is currently underserved in this project, arising primarily in the discussion of Jim Kemp in *No Down Payment*. To make up for this lack, the future project will include readings of Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*, as well as Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*, Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, and the novels of Gloria Naylor, using them to examine African-American, Asian-American, and Jewish-American engagement with the codes of the suburbs as well as the ways in which suburban fiction constructs whiteness. As I move forward I'll also open up more discussions of craft, looking closely at how style reflects the authors' construction of the suburb: how, for example, the creation of lists becomes a widely adopted method for evoking abundance and banality.

The suburbs represent the way most Americans live, making fiction of the suburbs already important. But a project that takes on the suburbs must rise to this importance, speaking not of the suburb alone, but beyond it. These chapters are simply the beginning of a fuller work. In writing them I have uncovered their limitations, but I have also discovered the arguments and findings that will guide that fuller work's future.