Spring 4-29-2022

Revolutionary Road And Gone Girl: Undermining The Veneer Of Domestic Bliss

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UNDERMINING THE VENEER OF DOMESTIC BLISS

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Bachelor of Arts in Education

St. Ambrose University

December 2012

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ENGLISH

at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

MAY 2022

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Student's Date of Defense: April 29, 2022

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ABSTRACT

Modern literature is rife with examples of authors dramatizing the various stressors suffered by families populating the American suburbs. Within this theme, two such authors, Richard Yates and Gillian Flynn, use their craft to explore not only the social orthodoxy expected by suburban residents, but also the performative aspects applied when that conformity is challenged by these inherent pressures. The presence of these social strains as it's examined by each author, both of whom are writing 60 years apart, furthers the commentary on the toxicities of suburban living in post-war World War II America (Yates) and the modern technological age (Flynn) by surveying the changes affecting husbands and wives once they choose a neighborhood residency and find themselves struggling to manage.

In this study, the analysis aims to prove how both Yates and Flynn use literary devices such as metaphor, irony, characterization, and symbolism with a subtle blend of dark humor to expose the tensions underlining suburban life. For Yates, writing in 1961, framing the social and emotional fatigue emerging steadily among suburbanites in 1950's America offers an intimate portrait of ambition soured by conformity; and by 2012 when Flynn publishes her novel, many of those same factors bridge the years between these respective publications through a more sardonic and savage narrative that considers how media and culture further perpetuate domestic pressures.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"The road to hell is paved with comfortable suburbs." -Roger Ebert

"Behind the picket fence lurked great horror." -Variously ascribed

Revolutionary Road and *Gone Girl*: How the Suburbs Undermine the Veneer of Domestic Bliss

As America's economy and culture surged in the late 1940s and 50s, the nation found itself in a honeymoon phase of post-war bravado. During this time, "many Americans retreated to the suburbs to enjoy the new consumer economy and search for some normalcy and security after the instability of depression and war" (The Affluent Society). The suburbs were the great promise to America's baby boomer generation, and for those who were white and middle class, a little piece of the postwar pie was theirs for the taking. Suburbia was the idea of the good life, something humans had been looking to attain for centuries but only the wealthy could afford: a place outside the city (Diamond). Young couples were being swept away by the seduction of how their lives could play out in the remote sanctuary of America's cul-de-sacs, where they were free to

start a family amidst the comfort of like-minded (and like-skinned) neighbors staking a claim in their own American Dream. It was, after all, a picture-perfect image of everything America had just fought so vehemently to protect: the freedom to live and love within a culture that promoted family and unity. And it was during this post-war time that suburbanization tore its way through the outskirts of American cities in a mass exodus known as "white flight". Consumerism boomed as couples outfitted their homes with washers, dryers, refrigerators, and televisions. New automobiles were showcased proudly in driveways up and down the street, and every lawn could be groomed perfectly with the advent of push mowers. Small businesses, grocery stores, public schools, and safe neighborhoods offered young couples the essential building blocks for an affordable piece of land for a lifelong peace of mind. At least, that's how it appeared in the eyes of many young Americans.

In the wake of World War II, America was alive with promise, ambition, and possibility – and yet the dream of getting married, having kids, and living a quiet, comfortable life in the suburbs was the country's biggest draw; however, the plight of the unhappily married couple has become an ugly side effect of domesticated life. Suburbia was rife with promise as the newness of these revolutionary estates led to inhabitants being labeled as "noble pioneers delving into the uncharted territory" of America's richest new chapter (Mayhew). How could anyone starting a family argue with the allure of a neighborhood setting that was just far enough from the big city to offer a quieter, calmer, and safer refuge after such a long and deadly world war? The suburbs offered an attractive escape from big city life where husbands and wives could instead dodge the traffic of Madison Avenue for the more subdued lull of a cul-de-sac where primacy and

privacy reigned. Yet, beyond the brochure pitch of a quieter, safer, and more relaxing life lay some cold truths about the tedium that accompanies domestication. Regardless, the legion of newlyweds and nuclear families flocked to the developing neighborhoods of post-war America under the spell of surface-level comforts and curbside appeal.

This surge continued into the late '50s and early '60s as the post-war exodus from the cities to the suburbs was still on the rise. Veterans of the Second World War and then the Korean War sought inexpensive homes of their own, far from the urban scrimmage that must have been, for some, a cramped extension of real combat. For so many returning veterans, the suburbs offered a safe space that Enterprising builders eagerly obliged, throwing up houses in a matter of months, modest Cape Cods and ranches that returning veterans were able to safely buy with little or no down payment, thanks to the GI bill (Siegel). Constructed quickly to accommodate the eager migration of suburban pioneers, these racially restrictive developments showcased rows of cheaply built tract houses, each with its own lawn, white picket fence, and state-of-the-art appliances. Suburban homeowners could walk barefoot on their freshly-cut lawns in the summer or build snowmen with their children in winter, all the while rejoicing in the sanctity of quiet, safe, homogenous living beyond the clutch of the metropolis. In an era of conformity, the similarity of routine from one family to the next made suburban life particularly appealing; the kids had a back yard and a group of friends nearby, easily accessible by bike, the dads had a commuter train, and the moms had housework, coffee dates, lunch dates, dinner dates (Forbes). From the outside looking in, the suburbs represented the new face of the happy American household.

Advertisement packages marketed the suburbs as a commodity, romanticizing the neighborhood lifestyle, and selling it with the promise of sustained happiness. Paired with the romanticization of the countryside, marketing targeted the suburbs as places to escape the crime, pollution, noise, and increasing social diversity of major cities. Like seaside resort advertisements, suburbs boasted of clean air, sunshine, absence of smoke, and overall better health than city living (Ward 33). Suburban developments in post-war America heavily promoted outdoor activities and more authentic interactions with nature through an overt emphasis on access to parks, walking trails, forests, and water. They cast neighborhood living in a positive light, offering tranquility, safety, appealing aesthetics, and a place to relax and thrive. These emotional appeals tapped easily into the victorious spirit of young American newlyweds who saw the suburbs as their ideal venue for starting a family and plotting their dreams. Despite the curbside appeal of suburbia, little did these optimistic couples know that there was a subliminal expense that veiled the truer cost of their investment.

The first proponents of suburbia thought they were embarking on a social experiment that might not work as scripted. Although they felt the optimism of pioneers, they shared in the widespread anxiety that this unprecedented American experiment presented, an anxiety that manifested as the daily, cumulative frustrations of suburban orthodoxy to more significant problems like stomach ulcers, heart attacks, anxiety, depression, sexual dysfunction, and juvenile delinquency (Kolson Hurley). As the post-war decades forged ahead, these feared spinoffs became realities for many of its subscribers. To keep up appearances, many suburbanites turned to performance as a way of masking these problems of domesticity rather than admit to any aversion with

conformity. The male performance, according to the gender roles of the era, required a well-groomed, stoic, and masculine presence that stood tall in the face of stress and adversity. The adult males suited up in the grin-and-bear-it cloak of masculinity which meant enduring the pressures of a weekly commute, being the sole breadwinner, being a father and husband, and hoping that there's anything leftover for himself on the weekends slowly chipped away at the core of their individuality. For women, the role of homemaker, caregiver, and supportive wife carried its own freight. The women were expected to be both demure and debonair, quick with a remedy, recipe, or reprimand while keeping a clean home and image. The commitment to representing the homebound face of the ideal nuclear family was a woman's primary suburban duty, and keeping this appearance polished and presentable for the neighborhood periphery required a believable stage presence. From the curb, they projected the beaming facades depicted in those suburban marketing campaigns and newly popular television shows, and yet past the allure of the white picket fences, manicured lawns, and picture windows resided a prosaic life of conservatism, conformity, and self-medicating. The latter, a side effect of the suburban culture, birthed a stock common figure in post-war culture: the harried suburban family man, gulping coffee each morning to catch his train into the city and returning to collapse, martini in hand, into his armchair each night (Kolson Hurley). Soon the idyllic portrait of the 9-to-5 working man and stay-at-home mom began to crumble as the two most immutable assumptions of suburban life proved unfulfilling. Gone were the days of their blissful youth and courtship when couples shared ambitions and dreams of a vivacious metropolitan lifestyle within America's next great chapter, suddenly usurped by the compromises of marriage and replaced with

monotony and contention. Sooner than later, these ostensibly innocuous neighborhoods had begun harming marriages and corroding livelihoods. The droll pattern of life in suburbia was bearing out the truth in Winston Churchill's axiom, "We shape our dwellings, and then our dwellings shape us." For those couples who chose a life in the cul-de-sac neighborhoods of suburbia, the reality was beginning to feel more like a life sentence.

While America had become a superpower nation after the end credits of World War II, the private lives of many domesticated citizens seemed to enter an existential tailspin amidst the suburbs. Husbands and wives soon felt the strain of keeping up the veneer of domesticity as their personal and romantic ambitions gave way to the daily grind of dehumanizing corporate jobs and the routine, mundane chores of household maintenance. In between these soul-draining commitments, husbands and wives often found themselves escaping deeper into evening cocktail hours or unleashing their pent-up angst and frustrations on one another. The reality of domestic bliss, as it turned out, was that the "bliss" didn't come with the other furnishings. What was becoming apparent to these young couples and to the literary artists observing them was that beyond the subterfuge of suburbia was a much more hostile environment where the dreams and ambitions of youth and adulthood were corrupted by conformity, and where those concessions gave way to contempt.

To distract and soothe those unable to reconcile these bleak realities, advertising campaigns, television, and fiction writers stepped up their original pitches to offer some reinforcing depictions of how life in the suburbs could or should be when specific standards are upheld, and roles are played according to an agreed-upon script. These

scripted roles tended to depict terminally happy marriages and households with a rather limiting view of how husbands and wives truly "performed". Regardless, those who had bought into the American dream as it was scripted for suburbia then had more colorful and sanitized models to emulate. Products and images representing the greener grass of life in small-town USA set the benchmark for young husbands and wives while pop culture saturated the market with fairytale-like stories that depicted happiness as suburbia's most abundant natural resource. Soon several television productions like *Father Knows Best, Leave it to Beaver,* and *The Donna Reed Show* were broadcast weekly to provide yet another example of the ideal nuclear family thriving in the realm of American splendor. As a result, these idealized templates prompted many suburbanites to take these roles to heart, affecting their own renditions of the beaming suburban archetypes so as not to let on to any ruptures within the family fabric. With the unrelenting portraits of domestic perfection invading print and media each week, every family and home in suburbia was feeling compelled to project familiar effigies and deploy the same rhetoric in order to sustain the veneer of domestic bliss.

There were in contrast, however, many American artists who anchored their observations on the real drama unfolding backstage of nearly every suburban home, developing a literary strain of criticism that presented a daring alternative view of life in the suburbs. After all, where were the honest depictions of how the ennui of suburbia preyed on mental health? Why were there no free broadcasts depicting husbands and wives in the throes of an argument, each spewing venom on the other for the integral compromises made that fostered their contempt for one another? Lee Siegel, a

contributing writer to the Wall Street Journal, had this to offer in his 2008 retrospective about America's "long artistic tradition of claiming spiritual death by station wagon":

> It's easy to see why artists and intellectuals felt that they had to alert the general public to the emergency of these sudden new places' peaceful, leafy streets. For one thing, the suburbs seemed not to offer the primary experiences of either country or city. The backyard is but the reminder of a meadow; the tree-lined intersection is but the faint echo of a busy urban intersection. The suburbs were the embodiment of that period's fashionable existential fear: "inauthenticity."

The more these unpleasant truths began seeping into American suburbs, the more American artists cast their eye on the melodrama rather than the pretense of mirth. Literary artists, time and again, willingly broke from the standardized imagery of advertisers and television producers who were so often seizing their opportunity to protect the cherished vestige of domestic bliss by creating weekly programming that broadly sanitized these issues. In his 1955 poem "Howl," Beat poet Allen Ginsberg "elevated suburb-phobia to the level of myth. He excoriates the 'invisible suburbs' -- i.e. they are so spiritually dead that they are hidden from a living eye -- as one of the pernicious manifestations of Moloch, the destructive god of soulless materialism" (Siegel). Soon after, in 1957, the author and former Washington Daily News journalist John Keats wrote *The Crack in the Picture Window*, a lacerating novel indicting the post-war suburbs as "open air slums" (Kolson Hurley). That same decade, *The Split-Level*

Game and *The Split-Level Trap* were published, exploring the moral, social, and sexual behavior of young suburbanites as the effects of homogenous living presented sociologists with alarming new data. John Conway's novel *Love in Suburbia* became a hot seller with the subtitle, "They spiced their lives with other men's wives!", hinting at the reckless abandon that resulted from suburbia's flatlining culture. In Sylvia Plath's 1963 autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar,* the author's protagonist steps off a train and has this infernal experience: "The motherly breath of the suburbs enfolded me. It smelt of lawn sprinklers and station wagons and dogs and babies. A summer calm laid its soothing hand over everything, like death" (113). For these literary artists and social observers of the post-war era, "it went without saying that the suburbs could transform the people who had committed the error of moving to them into the walking – make that driving – dead" (Siegel). Enter Richard Yates, a young novelist who tossed his authorial hat into the conversation with his first book that presented readers with a deeply cynical and unflinching look at the results of suburban conformity. That novel, *Revolutionary Road*, would soon become a seminal work in America's long strain of anti-suburban literature.

As these bitter realities of suburban life could no longer be limited by marketing curators, some American authors chose to spotlight the stress and hostility of suburbia, canvasing the deceptive neighborhood appeal from the nation's economic boom of the 1950's through the modern age of technology and information to craft superbly ironic and darkly comic melodramas. Now, in today's modern age of technology and information, Americans still retreat to their suburban bubbles – only to *fake* the road less traveled through a more detached and highly-curated rendition of their realities via Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. These modern channels of performance may be a far

technological advancement from the 1950s, and yet the desire to keep up appearances for the sake of friends and neighbors seems aligned with those standards of yesterday. It's here where author Gillian Flynn took up her pen to craft her best-selling novel *Gone Girl*, a scathing social commentary written to satirize these phony suburbanites and the shocking lengths that many would attempt for the sake of upholding their *digital* neighborhood reputation. Flynn's sardonic approach to the material coupled with her incisive domestic criticism made for a popular read that, in spite of its 1950's roots, felt like a fresh spin on where Yates' husbands and wives may have found themselves today. The suburbs of Flynn's pages offer a similar retreat from their original billboards, and yet the pretense of domestic bliss continuously tends to yield general madness and mental illness that begs the inquiry: why do young couples subscribe to the enchantment of domesticity when they're inundated with viable information to steer them clear of such futility?

Two such authors, Richard Yates and Gillian Flynn, provide acute examinations of these suburban dualities in their best-selling novels *Revolutionary Road* and *Gone Girl*, respectively, to probe the question that has haunted American neighborhoods since their inception: is it our suburbs that are the problem or are the suburbs a symptom of a larger national ideal? To bridge the gap between 50 years of domesticity, readers would likely not suspect Richard Yates' melodrama to align as it does with Gillian Flynn's contemporary thriller. How is it, one may ask, that the glistening appeal of the post-war Connecticut suburbs would five decades later resurface in North Carthage, Missouri? To begin, Flynn's iteration of the contemporary suburb uses the historical city of Carthage to stamp the town with the metaphor of a once-thriving city that has since fallen to

economic collapse. Flynn drops her readers into the country's vast Midwest where the author's characterization of suburbia struggles for relevance in the wake of another generational boom – and its subsequent aftermath – this time perpetrated by the surge of American excess and development of Yates' era. In 2012, however, much of the gloom and decay left in the suburbs is reframed through the lens of social media and instant image sharing. Seizing upon the image-saturated culture of the social media blitz during this time, Flynn's suburbanite couples stay together for the communal pat on the back, as well as for the opportunity to present themselves in highly edited, glossy depictions that project the appearance of living at the apex of their American drem. This polyphonic narration dramatize both authors' views of the toxicity of suburban living in ways that impugn and undermine readers' ideas of domestic bliss.

Although the texts were written 50 years apart, *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates and *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn provide acute examinations of marriage in American suburbs and the irony that lies therein: the suburb seduces couples and families with the promise of the American Dream when in actuality suburban life corrupts individuality and marriages. Ultimately, the realm of suburbia and the smiles of its residents are the product of an ongoing performance intended to placate neighbors, spouses, friends and online followers with the illusion of having found the formula for happiness within a limiting system. According to Shakespeare, all the world's a stage; however, in the corresponding novels of Yates and Flynn, the suburbs are where the curtain rises.

CHAPTER II

BENEATH THE VENEER OF DOMESTIC BLISS

The years after WW2 was the time of Eisenhower's conservatism and conformity in America, and there was nowhere else quite like the suburbs for patriotic citizens to adopt those ideals. During this time, the ad campaigns were omnipresent in the print media. One such ad campaign was a series of advertisements called "Home Life in America" that ran from 1946-1956 showing an idealized mid-century America enjoying their post-war promises of suburban prosperity with the phrase, "In this friendly, freedom-loving land of ours…" ("Blueprint for the Middle Class"). These charming portraits of suburban America were punctuated with idyllic illustrations that "all portrayed an eerily homogenous landscape of spacious homes and smiling prosperous self-satisfied Anglo-Saxon families" (Edelstein). Other documentary-style advertisements were played during early television news broadcasts. One such ad was titled "Living the American Dream, 1950s Suburban Life," a three-minute promotional blurb that presented neighborhood living as being able to finally "have the home [you've] always dreamed of; the happiest investment [you'll] ever make" (The Kino Library). Though the dream of owning a home while starting a family in these quiet neighborhoods may have felt customized in the minds of these eager suburbanites, the

truth was that every home along the road both inside and out looked eerily similar. By 1961, the same year Richard Yates published *Revolutionary Road*, the historian and critic Lewis Mumford damned the suburbs in his National Book Award-winning study "The Culture in Cities" with a description that's defined them in the popular imagination ever since:

> A multitude of uniform, undefinable houses, linked up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods.

Mumford's research revealed a stark conclusion: the American suburb had become an oasis of clones. "The Culture of Cities" painted a picture of row after row of look-alike houses and yards providing sanctuary for dime-a-dozen families – all gathered to live a national dream rather than an individual one. The homogeny of the suburbs was clear to Mumford, but the humanity therein had been polluted in favor of keeping up appearances. After the honeymoon decade of the 1950's, the literary world started to reflect a more honest depiction of what was really happening in American suburbs. According to Jessica Mayhew's research on the "abject boredom and pantomimes of death" prevalent in American suburbs, Yates' depiction of boredom in his novel *Revolutionary Road* is "death-like, concealing its sublime characteristics through monotonous routine, resulting in a challenge to the characters' selfhood" (618). *Revolutionary Road* was author Richard Yates' first novel in 1961, and it tells the

story of a promising young husband and wife, Frank and April Wheeler, trying to break out of their suburban rut while living on the eponymous neighborhood street in 1955 Connecticut. Throughout the novel, Yates digs deeper into the tragic frustrations lurking beneath the veneer of domestic bliss with a brutal honesty that advertising campaigns and television producers kept from their spotless renditions of suburbia.

"During the fifties," stated Yates in a 1972 interview, "there was a general lust for conformity all over this country – a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price" (Yates, et al). It was the orthodoxy of suburbia from which Yates caught his muse. As a young author surveying the melodrama lurking beneath America's honeymoon phase, Yates discovered that the mass exodus of young couples from the big city meant that a powerful seduction must be at play. As he considered the charms of suburban life that turned so many young, ambitious lovers out into its ranks, Yates recognized the enchantment for everything it promised to be for them; however, once that varnish had been scrubbed and the reality of making a life in the cyclical nature of suburbia USA began chipping away at those ambitions, he began to understand and examine the truer nature of these neighborhoods.

As he came upon the title for his novel about the Wheelers, Yates admitted that "Revolutionary Road meant to suggest that the revolutionary road of 1776 had come to something very much like a dead end in the fifties" (Yates, et al). It was there at the dead end that Yates began his story, opening with a stage production by a local theater group called the Laurel Players. Immediately, Yates literally and figuratively sets the stage for the dead end melodrama he's about to unfold. The author knows how American culture has embraced the dramatic arts as an available channel of escape from adult pressures,

hoping to suspend the drama of their reality long enough to forget what lies waiting for them beyond the stage. So, from the beginning, *Revolutionary Road* is grounded in performance (Mayhew). As he sets the tone for his novel, Yates reveals that it isn't the Laurel Players' production of *The Petrified Forest* that matters, for "the main thing… was the company – the brave idea of it, the healthy, hopeful sound of it: the birth of a really good community theater right here, among themselves" (Yates 7). Here the author is using the stage and its dramatic players as a metaphor representing the harsh reality of the Connecticut suburban stage just beyond the theater doors. Developing this metaphor further, Yates describes the tension mounting on opening night of the production: "The trouble was that from the very beginning they had been afraid they would end up making fools of themselves, and they had compounded that fear by being afraid to admit it" (5). As they prepare to take the stage for their maiden performance, the players reflect what Yates aims to examine throughout his novel – the collective angst and frustration boiling over amidst the realization that they had all been duped by the promise of domestic bliss. The author's opening suggests that there's a meta-performance aspect to these Connecticut suburbanites, in love with the idea of performing as a community through the medium of community theater.

Among the cast of Laurel Players is 29-year-old mother of two, April Wheeler. When the play begins, April feels she is delivering a strong, believable leading performance; however, as the drama unfolds it becomes clear to her, the other cast, and the audience that the entire performance is a stilted flop. Right there again in the novel's opening pages is Yates' great metaphor for suburban life: it begins with promise and zeal, only to become stale and listless as the "performance" wears thin. Bringing more edge to

this blade of truth is Frank Wheeler, April's husband, who sits in the audience, grimacing as he watches the act fall apart. Yates continues building tension in these opening pages as April's stage persona begins to crack:

> Before the end of the first act the audience could tell as well as the Players that she'd lost her grip.... She had begun to alternate between false theatrical gestures and a white-knuckled immobility; she was carrying her shoulders high and square, and despite her heavy make-up you could see the warmth of humiliation rising in her face and neck. (9)

April's inability to keep up the act foreshadows the pressure and anxiety we will soon see playing out in her home.

From the opening scene into the next, Yates transports readers deeper into the abyss of suburbia. After the failed production by the Laurel Players, there are then subsequent performances by spouses and neighbors all pretending it was a success: "When the curtain fell at last it was an act of mercy... Then the house lights came up, and nobody in the audience knew how to look or what to say. The uncertain voice of Mrs. Helen Givings... could be heard repeating, '*Very nice*' over and over again" (10-11). To end the night, the Wheelers drive home to Revolutionary Road where a different kind of performing will commence – one in which husbands and wives pretend to be happy with the life they've chosen. After such a disastrous night, the Wheeler's home in the suburbs should be the sanctuary they need. The ride home, ironically, proves to be a grand tour of the surrounding pretense that Yates feels is contributing to the death of young couples like the Wheelers.

For instance, as they drive, Yates reveals a memory of when the couple was first shown the house on Revolutionary Road by their realtor, Mrs. Givings: "…as the house emerged through the spindly trunks of second-growth oak and slowly turned toward them, small and wooden, riding high on its naked concrete foundation, its outsized central window staring like a big black mirror" (31). This ominous introduction is played off by the actress April Wheeler as a "nice" amenity of the property from which there's "no escaping" (31). To this, Frank surveys the imposing "black mirror" and jokes, "I don't suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities" (31). Though Yates does not explicitly describe Frank's tone, it's hard not to conclude based on Yates' opening pages that his intentions here were to foreshadow the figurative death of these zealous suburbanite personalities. April, too, is quick to placate her own trepidations by observing that no one could possibly be "frightened in as wide and bright, as clean and quiet a house as this" (31). Clearly the Wheelers are aware of the reputation these suburban dwellings have accrued, though they are too headstrong in convincing themselves otherwise to accept the possible implications it may impose on their own marriage. Together they eschew the urban folklore in favor of the appearance it will afford them, each affecting a performative aspect to their house-hunting intended to convince not just Mrs. Givings of their commitment to making a life in the suburbs work, but to enchant themselves as well. Jessica Mayhew, a British researcher, studies this moment in Yates' text to analyze the Wheelers' collective performing here in her essay "Pantomimes of Death Within Suburbia":

> The frightening aspect of this environment is difficult to articulate because it is concealed in blandness. The floorboards are straight, the doors close without scraping, and their imagined future children would be able to run about without getting splinters. And yet, the question carries a note of self-encouragement, even of reproach. They can sense the capacity within themselves to be "frightened" here, which is the seeding of abjection, and even when the house has been theirs for years, and the imagined children have become manifest, the house resists their tentative attempts at imposing their own "homeliness" on the enforced, suburban domesticity. (618)

By examining the rhetoric Yates uses in this scene, Mayhew asks us to recognize the underlying dread lurking below the Wheeler's smiling apprehensiveness and to prepare ourselves for the likelihood of a tragic outcome. For readers, a deeper inspection of the undercurrent provoking Frank and April's diction reveals Yates' darkly comic tone that suggests, perhaps, his young protagonists deserve what they suspect is coming to them.

In this extended flashback, Mrs. Givings affects her own performance, coating her sales pitch with perfunctory emoting. Yates describes the realtor layering her pitch with a laughter that shrouds the Wheelers in "a warm shelter of flattery," which clearly reflects the image this prized suburban home lends to its prospective buyers (31). As the couple continues surveying and considering the property, Yates takes us into the minds of the Wheelers as the glossy rhetoric of the sales pitch begins seducing them both: "The place

did have possibilities… reassuring and protective… undeniably appealing…. each of its floorboards lay straight and true… doors hung in perfect balance… free of mildew and cockroaches and grit… it did have its possibilities" (31). Noticing how the author twice mentions the *possibilities* of the house on Revolutionary Road reveals how much the Wheelers need to believe in the potential of their aspirations beyond the big city, especially when taking into consideration how "the gathering disorder of their lives might still be sorted out and made to fit these rooms" (31). As it's been pitched, the suburbs are where the anxieties of their life will disappear, though the Wheelers' commitment to concealing their dysfunction amidst the great American victory march reveals that, perhaps, the suburbs are exactly where those anxieties will rise.

Swiftly, Yates brings us back into the real time setting of his suburban melodrama where the Wheelers are approaching their home with a palpable sense of dread, of which Mrs. Givings certainly never hinted at as part of the package: "Now, as the house swam up close in the darkness with its cheerful blaze of kitchen and carport lights, they tensed their shoulders and set their jaws in attitudes of brute endurance" (32). What should serve as a comforting return to their safe and inviting home is made contrary by the angst festering in the Wheeler's car. April is first to enter the home, and as she turns on the lights, she seems disoriented by the arrangement of furniture and décor that now registers as a foreign, hostile living space. Casting her eyes about the interior, April is finally able to recognize one small corner that "showed signs of pleasant human congress" while noting that it had only become to feel that way just six months ago – when they added a television set (32). Yates' use of irony here lends itself to his darkly humorous tone, as the Wheeler family's only ostensible moments of harmony come from watching a

rebranded iteration of suburban life on television. And yet as these highly-curated performances provide the Wheelers with a resident sense of order, they subliminally reinforce the pressures of maintaining the suburban ideal that shields them from the inherent dysfunction of their nuclear family.

Authenticity then becomes a recurring motif in Yates' story about married adults pretending to be happy where they are not. So much of what unfolds in the bulk of the novel is rooted in failed performances that mirror those in the opening chapter, and from other academic observers of this suburban pretense, the tendency to play make-believe as a means of blending in was, ironically, life imitating art. In her essay, "Real Phonies", author Abigail Cheever explores society's obsession with authenticity in post-World War II America, citing in her research that "what really worried [suburbanites] was the thought that everyone might be the same to begin with" (278). Developing her study, Cheever reflects on the ultimate suburban woe in the epiphanies of husbands and wives who discover the "vast wasteland of conformity" that is middle-class America (278). Considering their respective experiences and potential, Frank and April Wheeler seem to think they have a deeper subjectivity beyond the big city, and they want so desperately to believe that they have not fallen victim to the bland continuity of the suburbs, and that they have what it takes to avoid becoming just another ugly side effect of domesticity. These grand delusions, however, are no match for the reality seeping into their daily lives, as Frank Wheeler has learned to be a performer not unlike his wife.

Unfortunately for Frank, he feels compelled to start performing before he's even dressed for the day. Waking up on what should be a peaceful Saturday morning in the neighborhood turns quickly into a stark reminder of the tension brewing just beneath the

surface for Frank. Jolted from his slumber by a neighbor running his lawnmower earlier than expected, Frank surrenders to his commitments, reluctantly rises from bed, and goes to face himself in the bathroom mirror. Again, Yates pours on the descriptive language ("he rolled heavily upright… squinted through the brilliant window… stolidly pushing and hauling…") to make Frank's first movements of another day in the suburbs feel cumbersome and cursed (36). Once in front of the mirror, Frank's motivations are further tested when he comes to struggle with the stranger he sees in the reflection. His unease soon boils over and he's fighting the urge to clench his fists, which Yates tells us "would have sent him whimpering to his knees" (36). Frank, however, suppresses these potential outbursts and adopts the façade of complacent husband, father, and neighbor. Another day is another round spent in the ring fighting off the urge to scream at what his life has become. The following day, Frank tries joining his family in the living room, only to find himself trying desperately to escape in the comics section of the Sunday newspaper. Typically a routine that provided him with some reprieve before his domestic duties of being a doting and playful father of two, on this particular day, however, no amount of scripted humor could tunnel him out of suburban hell:

> He felt as if he were sinking helplessly into the cushions and the papers and the bodies of his children like a man in quicksand. When the funnies were finished at last he struggled to his feet, quietly gasping, and stood for several minutes in the middle of the carpet, making tight fists in his pockets to restrain himself from doing what suddenly seemed the only thing in the world he really and truly

wanted to do: picking up a chair and throwing it through the picture window. (59)

Frank Wheeler has found himself backed into a corner – in this case, the corner of his own living room – from which his life now looks like an inescapable trap. Immediately following this boiling point, Frank internalizes his angst yet again with another silent query: "What the hell kind of life is this? What in God's name was the point or the meaning or the purpose of a life like this?" (59). Considering how Yates uses rhetorical questions here, Frank's problem now becomes an issue not only for his characters, but for his readers as well. Less than 60 pages into his novel and already Yates has steeped readers into the trenches of suburbia where even the sanctuary of one's own home becomes a prison – tapping further into the irony of Americans seeking refuge in the sanctity of these safe neigborhoods while the legacy of war lingers beneath the surface.

Rather than exorcise his frustrations through a healthy, reflective process, Frank instead digresses into pantomimes of complacency. Though privately he continues brooding and self-medicating with booze (and later a sexual affair), Frank sees his home in the suburbs as the stage where he still must act according to the *life here is grand* mentality projected in all the pleasant ads and TV shows about life in suburbia: "He was caught. He had to open the door and stand there in an attitude of welcome" (42). Still, there are moments when Frank struggles with stifling his angst. In conversation with their neighbors, Shep and Milly Campbell, Frank airs some of his grievances regarding suburbia's misleading siren song: "It's as if everybody'd made this tacit agreement," Frank declares, "to live in a total state of self-deception. The hell with reality! Let's have a whole bunch of cute little winding roads and cute little houses painted white and

pink and baby blue" (68-69). The awareness of suburbia's artificiality then becomes fetishized by its inhabitants, shrouding the unknown expanses of boredom with an element of absurdity (Mayhew 627). And even as the Campbells struggle with their own performances of dismissing Frank's observations as the product of a sour Sunday mood, Frank realizes that he, too, is performing again. "It was the kind of outburst that normally won their clamorous approval", Yates tells us in the subsequent moments (69). The use of the adverb "normally" reveals that Frank's show of anti-conformity has been repeated and ritualized into suburbia. Through this ritual, the acknowledgment of the artificiality of their environment has become assimilated into the conventions of their conversation (Mayhew 619).

In contrast with the malaise of life in the suburbs is the enchantment of life – real life – in the big city. In *Revolutionary Road*, Yates emphasizes the powerful allure of what life in the big city can mean for the young and ambitious. Whether it's the hurly-burly of New York City or the romantic whimsy of Paris, France, Yates draws from each to instill a beacon of hope for his symbolic Wheelers. The pull of suburbia leads with the promise of safety and serenity beyond the reach of big city crime, traffic, and anxieties. The suburbs, by design, are a peaceful collection of neighborhoods where husbands and wives can start families and live modestly while cultivating their own piece of the American dream, albeit at a snail's pace – a pace that tends to bleed one's aspirations. At the end of Main Street, however, the road splits off into a system of highways that thread back into the hub of hustle and commerce. Life in the big city is hyperkinetic, but those who harness its vitality know that settling for any*thing* else any*where* else is a betrayal to one's potential. Frank's office window in New York City

even boasts the "product benefits [of] SPEED, ACCURACY, CONTROL", emblazoned there for him to see each day he enters as a reminder of everything he and the suburbs are lacking (81). In the wake of America's greatest victory, it seems an odd choice to Yates that the husbands and wives of the 1950's were seeking to make their dreams a reality by opting for the quiet sedation of suburbia over the thriving current of a metropolis.

When setting the scene in one venue or the other, Yates' prose transitions accordingly to accent the contrasts. For instance, suburbia through the author's lens casts a shadow of pessimism: "On their right a black marsh, the spring peepers were in full and desperate song... shapes of hatred.... scabs... simple" (27-30). Transitioning later to establish Frank's professional esteem and second life in the Big Apple, Yates presents New York City as "heroic... with grandeur... nothing frivolous" (72), a place where people go "and live" (99). Back in the suburbs Frank is an edgy, sulking lurch; when he's away from home in the city, however, he's a risk-taker, passionate, "at the top of his form" (101). Here Yates prompts his readers to consider again ones own potential when brought into the city to thrive versus the soul-draining realm of suburbia. Frank's double life, then, causes him several instances to pause and reflect on this dichotomy. On one such occasion, Frank is having a dinner date with his secretary/mistress after work and finds himself coldly regarding himself in private in what he recognizes as "a portrait of himself as decent but disillusioned young family man, sadly and bravely at war with his environment" (101). There seems to be no escape now from who he's become, but he takes refuge in the weekly escape he's afforded through his connection to the city. Readers are reminded of Churchill's warning as, by this point, Frank's lifestyle has become a product of his dwelling.

For Frank, the only escape he has from his hell on Revolutionary Road is the daily commute to New York City where he works as a salesman for Knox Machines, the same company for which his father was employed and through which Frank could recognize a familiar subsequent contempt brewing. And though the job is indeed a respite from his performative hell on Revolutionary Road, Frank is unhappy out here in the business world as well, ostensibly going through the motions ("he walked into the Knox Building like an automaton") to collect a paycheck big enough to either impress or mirror the other phonies in his neighborhood – whatever it takes to preserve a semblance of domestic bliss (81). Despite his unrewarding role in the sales department, Frank is privately grateful for the opportunities the job avails him for living a secret double life. For instance, Frank's second life in the big city affords him the chance to exploit a casual sex relationship with his secretary, Maureen. This relationship with Maureen is attractive to Frank the more time he spends with her at work, as his own relationship with April has hit an impasse during this section of the novel. He and April rarely have sex, and when it does happen, it's typical the result of a heated argument that culminates in his inebriated action to release hostility. With Maureen, however, the sexual tension is born of the fresh courtship that feels so long removed from Frank's memory. As he seduces Maureen at the office, Frank assigns her menial tasks with directions that suggest his own introspection, telling her, "The thing is, it's got to be revised. This means I've got to dig up all the material that went into it, right from scratch. Now if you'll look at the inactive file… you can trace the thing back to original sources" (93). Here it can be inferred that Frank is asking for Maureen's help in taking a closer look at the man he's become and enlisting her in the exploration of his existential tailspin. To Frank, the choices that

brought him to his current unhappiness on Revolutionary Road need a review, and while Maureen is there to help him on a professional level, he's using her to exorcise the sexual aggression he's been stewing in back home.

As eager then as Frank is to embrace the escape provided by the big city, so too is he ready to step outside of his marriage. Often times in the late afternoon, Frank leaves work and takes a crosstown bus to where he lets himself into a "wide clean room" where a "beautiful, disheveled girl would be waiting, a girl as totally unalike the wife of a Knox man as the apartment was unlike a Knox man's home" (80). This dalliance far and away from April and the children on Revolutionary Road provides Frank with the sort of excitingly illicit intermissions he's missing in the suburbs. Yates is using Frank Wheeler here as a vessel for exorcising the fantasies of the bored, unsatisfied domesticated husband. The author's development of Frank's motivations up to this point channels the sexual psychology outlined in the observations and research of Dr. Esther Perel:

> Often when someone cheats on their spouse, they're not so much cheating with a person as they are cheating with a previous version of themselves that they miss. They aren't looking for another partner, they are looking for another part of themselves. They don't want to leave their partner, they want to leave who they've become. (Shepard and Perel)

Frank's realizations of what his commitment to domestic bliss has done to him cause him to act out in a way that betrays his marriage. His life in suburbia has left him hollow and bitter, and as he considers the choices he's made and the resulting circumstances, Frank's

subconscious is reaching out for a connection to his former pre-suburban self when both his potential and romantic life were still exciting. Reflecting on his behavior after one of these late afternoon trysts, Frank privately confesses that he has become a "disillusioned young family man, sadly and bravely at war with his environment" (101). Yates' play on words here reminds his readers of the irony of America's veterans returning from war only to face another in the privacy of their own homes. For Frank, he has no intention of leaving April for Maureen; however, he hastens to indulging his private cravings and longing for the type of cathartic release denied to him by his commitment to the ostensibly inescapable trench warfare of domesticity.

April Wheeler, also, is not without her own internalized frustrations and acting out. Resulting from her own lot in suburbia where she's assigned the thankless role of homemaker, April's days are a boring elliptical spent doing household chores and longing for something more enriching than curbside appeal. In her work "Changing Suburbs, Changing Women", University of Nebraska scholar Kim Englund reports that the design of suburban communities and houses in post-war America "reinforced the notion that women's place was in the home doing housework and raising children" and that, in short, these suburbs "provided men with a private retreat largely maintained by women, and helped to reinforce specific lifestyles that ultimately perpetuated inequalities" between husbands and wives (Englund 26). From the start, we see April Wheeler as a young woman striving to transcend this menial role as housewife by escaping into the performing arts where more exciting roles for women are in abundance. Just as her husband gets to act out his fantasy life in the big city, April finds her own temporary escape in the arms of her neighbor, Shep Campbell. April's longing

to break free from the confines of 1950's domesticity and gender roles boils over into a rushed, hopeless affair with Shep that culminates immediately in their post-coital haze when she confesses to him, "I don't know who I am" (276). Similar to Frank's infidelity, April's choice seems to have been born from a desperate need to reconnect with something she's lost out here on Revolutionary Road, and at this tender moment of vulnerability, April's escaping through performance has finally brought her to an epiphany: what happened to the strong, young, idealistic woman who stood by her husband and forged on in the face of pressure?

The search for reclaiming her identity and authenticity keep April moving forward in her tedium. These long, prosaic days for April serve as a stark reminder of the "claustrophobia and inescapable mundanity" of suburban life (Castilho and Pacheco). Her unhappiness in suburbia is not unlike her husband's, and she leans into her own theatrics to keep up the façade of happy homemaker until it becomes clear that the only way to save them both from this way of life is to quit pretending and escape it. April wants her marriage with Frank not just to *work* but to succeed. It has become abundantly clear to them both by this point that conforming to the veneer of the suburbs has meant that both she and her husband have compromised their dreams and personalities which has resulted in a seismic shift in the authenticity of their respective identities. To reclaim themselves, April devises a plan for the family to uproot their lives from suburbia and relocate to Paris, France where Frank has always dreamed of living and working. When she finally musters up the courage to present the "idea born of her sorrow" to her husband, she does so by dropping the performance and confronting Frank with their harsh reality:

> You see I happen to think this is unrealistic. I think it's unrealistic for a man with a fine mind to go on working like a dog year after year at a job he can't stand, 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, living among a bunch of frightened little – my God, Frank, I don't have to tell you what's wrong with this environment. (115)

This abrupt shift in April's tone reveals to Frank that she has finally had enough with playing along and that, perhaps, she has rekindled that spark and confidence he recognized in her during their courtship. Still, despite the allure and promise of April's plan, Frank's confidence in his own ambitions has long been choked out of him. Refusing to back down, April abandons all pretense: "We both got committed to this enormous, obscene delusion – this idea that people have to resign from real life and 'settle down'… It's the great sentimental lie of the suburbs" (117). April's monologuing becomes more impassioned with conveying the truth ("at each 'true!' she thumped a tight little fist on her naked knee") and by holding Frank accountable for his own original standards ("When I first met you, you were…") and aspirations until, finally, the prospect of starting over beyond the finite grasp of suburbia sinks in and Frank agrees (118-119). This pivotal moment in Yates' portrait stings with unflinching realism as both husband and wife are no longer able to pretend that they cannot see through the great lie, no matter how sentimental it's made them feel about themselves or their country.

Embracing their newfound optimism, the Wheelers begin to take action on making April's plan their new reality. Doing this means putting their highly sought home

on Revolutionary Road up for sale, and for this they will need to once again enlist the help of their realtor, Mrs. Helen Givings. Though instantly concerned and secretly leery of their lofty international relocation, Helen knows that she will have no trouble selling the Wheelers' house. Reflecting later on their news, Mrs. Givings shares her skepticism privately with her husband, Howard, as a way of reinforcing her belief in the sanctuary of suburbia, telling him, "Goodness knows, all I hear about is young couples *dying* to come and settle here" (176). Yates' use of irony here in the character's emphatic use of the word *dying* lingers over the rest of the novel imposing a sense of dread. As she considers how the Wheelers' example tends to provide the pathos necessary for suburbia's curbside appeal, Helen Givings is happy to help – with a condition tucked casually into the exchange: that she and her husband can bring their mentally ill son, John, over to visit with the Wheelers as a way of reconnecting him with "permanent people" (174). Here again Yates is playing with his readers' sense of dread by juxtaposing the concepts of dying and permanence. Adding to the dark humor of the novel, Yates allows Mrs. Givings to ramble on emphatically about the Wheelers' decision to move away while her husband secretly turns his hearing aid off to ignore her. At this moment – one that Yates encores later in the novel's closing line – readers catch the author's jab at how, eventually, residents go deaf to any notion of moving away from suburbia.

As Abigail Cheever observes, "the vexed relationship between normativity and authenticity" is what continues driving the conflict in *Revolutionary Road* (279). John Givings' introduction to the novel serves as a direct channel to these motifs. Just as Frank and April have learned to shake off the counterfeits of domestic bliss, Yates challenges their rebranding by crafting an episode wherein their choices and lifestyle are

scrutinized with brutal honesty. John Givings comes to visit with the Wheelers while on a supervised leave from the state mental hospital. Upon arriving at their home, his brazen demeanor and confidence bring tension back into the Wheelers' house. Surveying their property, he sardonically concludes, "I like it here. Looks like a place where people live" (195). As the Wheelers sit with the Givings family, John's unfiltered pursuit of authenticity slices through the pleasantries of small talk. When Frank admits that he's been working at a job he hates, John Givings is aghast and triggered:

> You want to play house, you got to have a job. You want to play very *nice* house, very *sweet* house, then you got to have a job you don't like. Great. This is the way ninety-eight-point-nine percent of the people work things out, so believe me buddy you've got nothing to apologize for. Anybody comes along and says 'Whaddya do it for?' you can be pretty sure he's on a four-hour pass from the State funny-farm. (198)

The resulting awkwardness is felt only by the Wheelers and John's parents; John Givings, however, knows that his unwillingness to "play house" casts him as the "crazy" person in this social setting and that those choosing to compromise their integrity are perceived as the sane, rational adults (198). Speaking to this notion in her essay, Abigail Cheever recognizes how "discourses of authenticity impacted post-war models of mental illness", and that the character of John Givings is drawn by the author Yates to illustrate what failing to perform according to suburbia's norms looks like and how, ironically, it is perceived as a sickness amidst these dialogues (282).

To ease the tension brought on by John Givings' undisguised observations, Frank and April invite him to take a walk in the woods just beyond their property. As they walk and talk, Yates suggests to the reader that perhaps the mad son of Helen Givings has brought with him a fresh perspective for the Wheelers: "Up in the woods behind the house, steaming in the sun, the newly rainwashed earth gave off an invigorating fragrance" (199). Frank and April honor John's unflappable candor by sharing their plans to leave the suburbs behind for the big move to Paris, which prompts him to scrutinize their motives. When Frank admits that he and his wife ultimately long to abandon the "hopeless emptiness" of their American dream life in suburbia to go and embrace the romanticized potential of Paris, John's hostility simmers (200). "Wow," he responds, "It takes a certain amount of guts to see the emptiness, but it takes a whole hell of a lot more to see the hopelessness. And… when you do see [it], that's when there's nothing to do but take off. If you can" (200). For John Givings, he is all too familiar with the stifling nature of suburbia and that, even though he's technically been removed from it, his alternative means being stigmatized as a mentally unstable non-conformist who's been relegated to an insane asylum. During this episode, however, John finds an unexpected camaraderie with the Wheelers as they stand together beneath the shelter of the woods, beyond the walls of their suburban home. Finally feeling connected with these "permanent people" as his mother had called them, John Givings softens a bit and lets himself enjoy the rest of the afternoon with the Wheelers.

Later in the novel John Givings returns to the Wheelers' house, optimistic about celebrating their farewell. By this chapter, however, John is unaware that April has become pregnant and that she and Frank have pulled the plug on their move to

Paris. Triggered by what he deems as a betrayal, John lashes out at the Wheelers for turning their back on authenticity to play it safe in the suburbs: "What happened? You get cold feet? You decide… it's more comfy here in the old Hopeless Emptiness after all? You know something? I wouldn't be surprised if you knocked her up on purpose, just so you could spend the rest of your life hiding…" (301). John's brutal honesty is more than Frank is capable of handling anymore, as the choice to stay in suburbia has brought him, also, to the brink of madness. With more of John's incisive probing, Frank snaps, shouting for Mrs. Givings to remove John from their house and for him to "keep his God damn opinions in the God damn insane asylum where they belong!" (302). Here again Yates leans subtly on the irony of John Givings being branded as a madman for questioning the transparency of suburbia's theatrical social norms. As he's being escorted out of the Wheelers' home, John breaks free for a moment to lean back into the room where a shaken Frank and April quiver in his wake. Pointing a "long yellow-stained index finger… at the slight mound of April's pregnancy", John Givings roars, "I'm glad I'm not gonna be *that* kid!" (303). Yates ends this chapter right then, punctuating with a final hammer blow what remains of the Wheeler's collective performance.

After this episode, Frank and April find themselves whirling in the unrelenting reality of John Givings' farewell. Who had they let themselves become out here on Revolutionary Road? The question fuels every remaining argument in the novel, as April hints at aborting their unborn child as a means of evading any further compression to what is left standing of their marriage. Frank shames his wife for suggesting such an act, but April feels strongly that having another child is the equivalent to adding another

brick in the wall that prevents them from ever escaping the stasis of life in the suburbs. Believing that this pregnancy has bound her to this life sentence, April eschews any further confrontations with Frank and begins scheming in private for a way to terminate her pregnancy (Mayhew). Pulling off this private plan means that April must rely yet again on another performance – that of subordinate homemaker to Frank's patriarchy. In this concluding section of the novel, Yates helps April get herself into character by combining her inner monologue with Yates' own omniscient chastising of the great social delusion of domestic bliss:

> What a subtle, treacherous thing it was to let yourself go that way! Because once you'd started it was terribly difficult to stop; soon you were saying "I'm sorry, of course you're right," and "Whatever you think is best," and "You're the most wonderful and valuable thing in the world," and the next thing you knew all honesty, all truth, was as far away and glimmering, as hopelessly unattainable as the world of the golden people. (320)

Returning to his motif of authenticity, Yates takes readers inside April's head to spotlight and review the performances she's adopted to play the role of suburban housewife. She's ready to drop the act while her husband has decided to keep "playing house" no matter how much he longs for something more beyond the clutch of Revolutionary Road. Again, the irony of Yates' title lurks just beneath the surface here as a reminder of this counter-revolutionary moment.

Yates' critique of 1950's suburbia stings with its recurring irony and cynicism, resulting in a narrative rife with dark humor. Reflecting on the novel, it can be posited that what the author wants his readers to laugh at is not the outcomes that eventually sink the Wheelers but their willingness to ignore all the signs pointing directly to them. Closing in on the specific choices made regarding diction and tone, close readers of *Revolutionary Road* notice the subtle nuances of Yates' commentary wherein he pulls focus on the big little lies husbands and wives are willing to tell themselves in order to "play house", and the performances that are born from those lies that turn into second jobs during weeknights and weekends. The suburbs according to Yates reflect the melodramatic nature of a culture of adults acting like children – spending their days and nights playing make-believe to create the illusion of the perfect family and life. Performance, then, reigns at the primary natural resource of suburbia. Through Yates' lens and within the pages of his novel, adults who choose a life of domestication must also play the part of adults who are happy living there. And there it is, behind the metaphorical curtain of the residential stage, where Yates reserves his harshest and most necessary evaluation of domesticity's unavoidable fate: America's cul-de-sacs are a carousel where conformists go to ride and die.

CHAPTER III

DOMESTIC BLISS IN THE MODERN AGE

The roadmap from 1950's Connecticut to North Carthage, Missouri in 2012 reads like a cardiograph of America's tumultuous economy throughout this nearly 60-year expanse. While Yates' novel explored the boom of post-war suburbia, author Gillian Flynn aimed her lens at the heartland of America where the economic collapse of 2008 seemed to hit suburbanites the hardest. Both authors use their art to craft fictional narratives that represent times of triumph and rehabilitation within the American timeline, and in *Gone Girl*, Flynn was poised to advance Yates' theme by adapting it to the social context of 21st Century suburbia. Gillian Flynn's best-seller struck a chord with readers mainly for its appeal as a pop culture thriller, and yet what many critics, scholars, and suburban readers were discovering underneath was another scathing jab at just how inauthentic life in suburbia still is in the modern age, and how marriages give way to pretense when trying to stand out from the surrounding conformity. Upon its release, Flynn's novel was described as an "insidiously realistic take on marriage" ("Gone Girl Book Review"). Criticism like this one from New York Magazine was common, capitalizing on Flynn's violent undertones to enhance its marketing appeal and incite controversy regarding the novel's horrifying climax. Close readers of *Gone Girl*,

however, tuned astutely into Flynn's prose when they sensed that the author's sardonic wit and barbed tone was intended to satirize the state of marriages for the Facebook generation.

Flynn's examination of suburbia's negative impact on marriages is what anchors the first half of her novel, and *Gone Girl's* approach to undermining domestic bliss capitalizes on the cultural shifts since *Revolutionary Road*. The roles of husbands and wives have evolved since the Wheelers struggled with conformity in the 1950s, but the struggle, according to Flynn's scrutiny, is still very much a hallmark of suburbia. "Much of the previous literature on suburban women," writes Kim England, "has basically emphasized structural and spatial constraints at the expense of human agency. Preference has been given to a somewhat caricatured, stereotypic image of suburban women as helpless victims of a built environment and patriarchy" (30). And though Flynn's novel does its fair share of volleying from the perspective of both husband and wife as in Yates' earlier story, the deepest insights into suburbia's infectious clutch come through the author's characterization of the mercurial Amy Dunne, as her ongoing commentary leaves no room for subtlety when it comes to her loathing of domesticity. Flynn uses Amy to observe and voice the author's perception of just how dark it's gotten for the suburban American housewife in the modern age wherein conformity and performance, albeit slightly evolved, are still essential components to curating appearances. And it's through Amy's incisive focus that Flynn probes the new pressures that come with keeping up appearances not only for the neighbors but for the ubiquitous digital peer group watching online – all of whom are competing to be the most "liked".

In the novel's opening pages, Flynn's protagonist Nick Dunne is reflecting on the very first moments when he introduced his young wife, Amy, to their newly furnished but emotionally vacant residence in suburban Missouri. "Should I remove my soul before I come inside?", Amy teases as she stands at the threshold of their new home (Flynn 4). This section continues elaborating on the nuances of "compromise" and the essential role it plays in initiating the downward spiral of a relationship trying to thrive amidst the mundanity of the cul-de-sac culture. Flynn's description of the suburbs calls back to Yates' vision of the post-war ideal, only by now the veneer has been chipped away by years of criticism, exposing the short-sightedness of the enterprise: "North Carthage, which makes it sound like a twin city, although it's hundreds of miles from the other and the lesser of the two: a quaint little 1950s town that bloated itself into a basic midsize suburb and dubbed it progress" (9). Furthering this connection, journalist Jamie Adair's article "Death in the Suburbs" recognizes that Nick and Amy's "circumstances touch upon the same restive undercurrent" as Frank and April's in *Revolutionary Road*, and that both novels "capture the malaise of suburban America. People who, once they achieve the modern-day equivalent of a white-picket fence residence, find themselves saddled with monotonous jobs, hour-plus commutes, little leisure time, and, perhaps, an undefinable angst". Like Yates, Flynn establishes her opinion of the suburbs right away, and then drops an ambitious young couple from the Big City into its dominion.

In these early pages, Flynn perpetuates her tone for the remaining chapters – that of a caustic nature wherein her characters process the severity of their tumult through a casual commentary of bitter asides, vitriolic monologues, and trenchant behaviors. As Amy moves about the kitchen of their new suburban home, Nick recognizes that she's

"humming something melancholy and familiar… and then I realized it was the theme from *M*A*S*H*. Suicide is painless" (7). Flynn's rapid characterization of Amy merely suggests her violent nature, but the choice of theme song here seems to punctuate the perception of life in the suburbs as seen through both character and creator. It's a bold thrust into characterization as readers get their first taste of Amy Dunne's volatile essence – which should feel out of place in the safety of this suburban setting if not for Yates' lingering legacy. Amy is practically one foot in the door and already Flynn herself is stepping in to announce her contempt for suburbia, as this abrupt shift to domesticity has infected Amy almost immediately, and her subliminal hints to Nick, her husband, establishing her character as an edgy companion to his stable suburbanite. Flynn perpetuates her hostility toward the suburbs before the chapter break as Amy reflects on how quickly the move to North Carthage has changed them: "We never talked about our old lives. We were Dunne's, and we were done, and strangely content about it" (17). With their life in New York City now only a romanticized memory, Amy resigns her former self and accepts that here in the suburbs is where her passion has come to die. What is born right then is a mutual hostility for one another; Amy is contemptuous of Nick for relocating her to the boring Midwest; Nick resenting Amy for not appreciating his native soil. And though their hostile relationship stems from Nick and Amy being inherently different people, their sudden move to suburbia instantly begins to breed disdain as they are no longer fit to pretend to be as close as they once were when living in New York City. This disdain, much like in *Revolutionary Road*, soon becomes veiled in the type of performance typical of suburban couples

playing make-believe in order to convince their family, friends, and neighbors that they are happier here in the suburbs.

Flynn's examination of authenticity and performance in *Gone Girl* draws its impetus from love in the modern age of technology, whereas Yates' novel drew heavily from the social norms of a post-war society bursting into technicolor for the first time. In both novels, however, the festering hatred engendered by performative domestic expectations bridges the nearly 50-year gap between publications. In Flynn's novel, the sudden move from NYC to suburban Missouri thrusts Amy Dunne into a scenario that requires her to adopt a certain character and mentality in order to fit in with the slower, quieter, and less exciting way of life in Middle America. Flynn develops Amy's transition, initially, with a cynical sense of humor as she subverts the heartland trope romanticized by so many modern Hallmark movies by polluting its integrity and denying Amy the nourishment provided to those screen characters within their beloved midwest neighborhoods. Amy's transformation reflects the façade that Flynn sees as the great national lie lived by so many in the modern age of online citizenship where showcasing one's highly-curated lifestyle and virtues perpetuate the veneer of domestic bliss, which channels the sentiments of filmmaker Mike Nichols: "It's the great American danger [of the suburbs]. That we'll bargain away the experience of being human for the appearance of it." Flynn uses *Gone Girl* as a blunt instrument to crack open and expose those who've made the move into the suburbs as a people very adept at transformations who "all have cameras at [their] fingertips, practicing [their] best angles… and requiring [their] domestic partners to mirror [their] projections in order to

keep up the façade" ("Gone Girl – Exploring the Modern World"). In suburbia, through Flynn's eyes, everyone wears and marries a mask.

These domestic affections eventually push Amy Dunne over the edge. Soon into the novel, Amy vanishes, leaving her husband Nick to work with detectives while they try to piece together the clues. Reflecting on the days, weeks, months, and years of their marriage leading up to Amy's disappearance, Nick cannot ignore just how quickly Amy began to change once they moved to the suburbs:

> The Amy of today was abrasive enough to want to hurt, sometimes. I speak specifically of the Amy of today who was only remotely like the woman I fell in love with. It had been an awful fairy tale reverse transformation… Amy literally shed herself, a pile of skin and soul on the floor, and out stepped this new, brittle, bitter Amy. My wife was no longer my wife but a razor-wire knot daring me to unloop her… (49)

In the wake of Amy's vanishing, Nick's private inventory surveys how their marriage was so suddenly vaulted into acrimony once they left the excitement of New York City for a flatlining existence in North Carthage, Missouri. During a localized search of the Missouri suburb for Amy, Nick does not find his wife, but he does find answers into what likely contributed to her disappearance from herself. Scanning the bleak surroundings of the area, Nick realizes that by asking her to move to the midwestern suburbs "brought Amy to the end of everything… The end of our marriage. The end of

Amy" (108). This section of Flynn's novel is rife with these observations and assessments of the "blanketing malaise" of suburban life (74).

It is only through Amy's private diary that readers learn of her internal struggle with adopting the external ways of suburban life. Once she disappears, Amy's diary is discovered by police and, thus, Nick is able to discover the real Amy – the Amy who hated her husband for asking her to relocate to the suburban Midwest to help care for his dying mother. Nick learns that shortly after their move, when the couple attended a welcome party in their honor, that Amy instantly felt detached. "You're not supposed to be here," growls Nick's dementia-laden father when he first meets Amy. "She doesn't belong here!" (122-123). Flynn's use of irony here is that even a man who has lost his mind can still recognize a fish out of water when he sees one. This moment, also, reminds readers of the institutionalized John Givings in Yates' *Revolutionary Road*: a character who would have to be "crazy" in order to publicly articulate suburbia's harshest truths and risk exposing the charade. Startled by this encounter, Amy leaves the party to walk the neighborhood streets, hoping that Nick will give chase: "I walk a loop around the neighborhood, waiting for Nick to appear, to guide me back to our house… I really believe Nick will come after me. I turn toward the house and see only a closed door" (123). Feeling abandoned in suburbia, Amy starts thinking of ways to adapt her personality to "this strange new captivity" as a means of building a new persona to share with her new friends and neighbors (118). This new version of Amy will serve as the character alibi necessary for implicating Nick in her disappearance and, later, framing him for her murder.

In spite of the vast social progress regarding gender equality since Yates' novel, Flynn knows that she is writing in a time where women are still pigeonholed as victims in a patriarchal society. Using these stereotypes to her advantage, Flynn crafts the character of Amy as someone willing to be exploited as a victim of suburbia's role-playing. In order to play the victim, Amy has to become a shrewd observer of the suburban mentality and its various nuances, all of which Amy loathes. In the following excerpt from *Gone Girl*, Flynn takes us under Amy's microscope:

> It's a very difficult era in which to be a person, just a real, actual person, instead of a collection of personality traits selected from an endless Automat of characters. And if all of us are play-acting, there can be no such thing as a soul mate, because we don't have genuine souls. It had gotten to the point where it seemed like nothing matters, because I'm not a real person and neither is anyone else. I would have done anything to feel real again. (73)

And here is where the unique "problem" of the suburbs emerges from the subtext of Flynn's central conflict to align itself with Yates' commentary. The suburbs, by design, are supposed to offer a respite from the scarring pace of the big city, and yet Amy's anxiety is born in the 'burbs when she realizes that keeping up with the Joneses requires her to adopt an even faster pace than when she lived in NYC. What Amy is willing to do, however, is what truly sets *Gone Girl* apart from Yates' drama in *Revolutionary Road*. In the latter, April Wheeler is willing to play the happy housewife if it means keeping her

marriage together, whereas Amy Dunne feels compelled to play that role as a ruse for escaping not only her marriage but the suburbs altogether.

Amy's method acting approach to preparing for her new role as Nick's doting suburbanite wife is all part of the maniacal scheme she's concocting as a vehicle to escape what her Midwest life has made of her. To be a housewife in North Carthage means that she must embrace, albeit performatively, this tedious way of life, and for a young woman who grew up dialed into the fervor of New York City, this sudden extraction and forced assimilation into suburbia serves as the greatest challenge for Amy when adopting this new persona: "I feel myself trying to be charming, and then I realize I'm obviously trying to be charming, and then I try to be even more Charming to make up for the fake charm, and then I basically turned into Liza Minnelli: I'm dancing and types and sequins, begging you to love me" (11). Flynn's allusion here links Amy's acting with the timeless appeal of one of Broadway's most celebrated performers, highlighting her intense devotion to the inherent theatrics of suburbia. This performative task will call on Amy to capitalize on her various skills and intellect to curate the undeniable persona she wants her neighbors (and later the entire country) to know. To accomplish this, Amy will tap into her affluent upbringing in Manhattan as a means of juxtaposing that lifestyle and its inherent privileges with those likely denied a modest midwestern housewife. Amy will need to study her neighbors to become one of them; to purport an essence of local engagement and contentment within a frequency of life she immanently abhors: "I have become a strange thing. I have become a [house]wife. I find myself steering the ship of conversations—bulkily, unnaturally… I have become a bore, I have been asked to forfeit my Independent Young Feminist card" (38). Amy's admitted

transformation here has made her ready to take the stage as a brand new leading lady of suburbia – an iteration of the domesticated housewife who Flynn sees as a passive-aggressive sociopath in the sense that Amy's adaptation requires both external and internal performances. On the outside, Amy is affecting the persona of a friendly, complacent partner and neighbor while on the inside she's churning her self-loathing into a sinister plan of escape.

This interesting exercise in comparing and contrasting the banality of the suburbs between Yates and Flynn begs the reader to pull focus on the fact that, regardless of the 50-year period since *Revolutionary Road's* flagrant social commentary, *Gone Girl* still doesn't feel that far removed from the neighborhoods of the 1950's. While Frank and April Wheeler were certainly all about keeping up appearances to shield others from their dysfunction, so too are Nick and Amy Dunne with regards to the suburban standards of the modern age. For Amy, it is essential that her marriage to Nick is perceived in a specified context by those observing their union from the outside. These terms, as defined by the standards of what is both cool and romantic amongst suburbanites, are what Amy uses as guiding principles for affecting her performance as the ideal modern wife: "All the stuff I don't like about myself has been pushed to the back of my brain… I am fun. I am playful. I am game. I feel naturally happy and entirely satisfied. I am a wife!" (39). But being a wife in the modern age has certainly changed shape since Yates was observing the suburbs. With daily inundations from women's publications like *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* to the more readily accessible and popular websites like Buzzfeed and EliteDaily boasting Top 10 Lists of "how to become the perfect cool girl that every guy wants to be with", Amy's contemporary influences are like a spice rack for

her recipe to rebrand herself (Brantz). Long gone are the days of the home-bound-prim-and-proper housewife; Amy Dunne is a modern day woman on a mission to be the perfect "Cool Girl" wife for Nick (222). Even though Amy feels "offended" by the extensive pretenses associated with the Cool Girl persona, she is willing to adopt the personality of one of "these pretender women" if it helps her to fit in with Nick's suburban standards:

> I was playing the girl who was in style, the girl a man like Nick wants: the Cool Girl. Being the Cool Girl means I am hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth… while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. (222)

Once again, performance is key to keeping up appearances in the suburbs, regardless of the era. Amy's Cool Girl performance, however, eventually becomes too much for her to sustain. Not being able to project her true self-made Amy realize that Nick's fantasy girl was not real, and her resentment for both him and the suburbs becomes more than she can pretend to hide: "that's when the hating first began" (225). Soon Amy's societal obligation pushes her over the edge. Her ongoing critique of the suburbs reveals how easily women subjugate their own desires and erase their own identities for the sake of

keeping up with the Joneses. To escape the trap of modern suburbia, Amy concocts a plan to fake her own death, and by doing so, will reinvent herself. In the opinion of one feminist critic, it is posited that "by willingly creating a new image as the vulnerable woman ordinarily assumed by [the suburbs], Amy once and for all disposes of the Cool Girl and becomes the Gone Girl" ("Mad Woman in the Suburbs").

Unlike April Wheeler's contribution to the Laurel Players in Yates' novel, Amy Dunne is writing and staging her own one-woman show for the unwitting neighbors in North Carthage. Flynn capitalizes on the irony of these suburban productions as she develops Amy Dunne's characterization through the layers of meta-performances she must endure – from cosmopolitan socialite to domesticated Cool Girl to missing suburban wife. Amy is keen to the audience built into her plight, and she's accepting of the fact that in order to engage this audience and anyone in a position of broadcasting to them, she will need to exploit these new American stereotypes of femininity. After all, in the modern era of empowering women, Amy's disappearance and the discovery of her fabricated diary are all the necessary fodder TV personalities like Nancy Grace or Oprah Winfrey would need to explode this domestic episode into a nationwide soap opera. The author's commentary here seems to run parallel with Yates' sidebar on suburbia's hidden prerequisite for theatrics. Both Frank and April became unwitting actors on their neighborhood stage, and in Flynn's novel, both Amy and Nick find themselves getting into character, too. For her final performance, Amy uses the image she has created for herself as a way of making her disappearance from suburbia believable for those who "knew" her. In her thesis "Escaping the Confines of the 'Living Grave'", author Paige

York analyzes how Flynn's characterization of Amy Dunne capitalizes on these suburban theatrics:

> These performances serve… Amy's own efforts to assert agency and power by whatever means necessary. They conceal [her] desire for agency under these façades in order to adhere to the feminine ideals espoused by their respective… societies. [She] is expected to uphold unrealistic, performative versions of womanhood, and when their performances expose the unsustainability of such expectations, they are ultimately punished for being performers... (1-2)

Ironically, it is Amy who chooses to punish herself in this way, but it's her method acting approach to details and nuance, however, that prove she understands what it takes not only to blend in with suburbia but also how to disappear from it altogether.

Upon Amy's disappearance, Nick is left to face a maelstrom of media coverage. At the start, it's just local police and news affiliates moving in on the suspected crime scene, and Nick, at first, plays it cool because he knows he's innocent. And though the foundation of their marriage had begun trembling upon their move to the suburbs of North Carthage, Nick still recognized himself as Amy once did: "Good Guy Nick… [not] the kind of guy who'd abandon his wife… He'd rather stay and suffer with me" (204). However, as the pieces of Amy's plotting start implicating her husband, the police consider Good Guy Nick to be the prime suspect in her vanishing. Soon the police and media are performing an invasive and intense dissection

of Nick and Amy's entire marriage, which prompts Nick to begin crafting a performance of his own. As the scrutiny ramps up and the spotlight is thrust upon him whenever he leaves the house, Nick knows that now he must live up to the suburbs' expectations of a sympathetic, loving husband: "… and like some awful piece of performance art, I felt myself enacting Concerned Husband" (23). It doesn't take long for Nick to become acutely aware of exactly when the investigation and media coverage are on him so that he can step into character and become one of suburbia's "dancing monkeys" (55). Here again, Flynn pulls focus on the metaphorical curtain that divides the public and private performances of suburbia's husbands and wives.

Much has been written, critiqued, and discussed regarding the direction Flynn's novel takes at the midway point when it's revealed that Amy Dunne has staged her own disappearance. From there, the author changes channels to craft a taut thriller wherein Amy's original plan doesn't go according to script and she's forced to once again capitalize on the keen perceptions of the society and marriage she tried so desperately to escape in order to reappear in it once again. At this point, Flynn has revealed her novel's big twist to both Nick and her readers: that Amy's self-kidnapping and sinister improvisations have turned her into a sociopath whose stoicism in the wake of her crimes and revised scheming represent the cruel and consuming nature of suburbia. Unbeknownst to her friends and neighbors in North carthage, Amy's transformation from Cool Girl to Cruel Girl sets the tone for take two of her marriage to Nick. Amy's tumultuous journey back to her husband is shaped through shrewd manipulation of her local audience's willingness to believe in a long shot love story – the type of fantasy most of her housewife friends and neighbors in North Carthage escape to

in their own reveries – and an intimate understanding of Nick's own desire for something more than suburbia could ever offer. When she aligns herself just right with the revisions of her plan, Amy stages a theatrical resurrection of sorts for all to witness in the driveway of the neighborhood home she shares with Nick:

> Amy Elliott Dunne stood barefoot… in a thin pink dress that clung to her as if it were wet. Her ankles were ringed in dark violet. From one limp wrist dangled a piece of twine. Her hair was short and frayed at the ends, as if it had been carelessly chopped... Her face was bruised, her lips swollen. She was sobbing. (371)

Amy's return to the suburbs is a showpiece indeed, and Nick realizes immediately that the Amy he sees before him is no longer the woman he married, but a performance piece that has been tailored for their unwitting neighbors to envy and embrace. At this moment, Amy holds center stage as the kidnapped housewife returning to her husband after a harrowing ordeal beyond the sanctuary of suburbia – all played out for her neighbors, police, and the media surrounding their home like a rapt theater audience. Playing it through, Amy runs to Nick and collapses in his arms, cuing him to resume his role as her doting husband:

> The cameras were blasting us, the reporters closing in with microphones, everyone yelling Amy's name, screaming, literally screaming. So I did the right thing, I held her to me and howled her name right back: "Amy! My God! My God! My darling!" (371)

With all eyes and cameras on them, Amy and Nick crystalize their performance with a dramatic gaze into one another's eyes, and here Flynn holds the curtain just long enough to reveal her burning truth about suburban marriages as Nick privately breaks character: "And [I] buried my face in her neck, my arms wrapped tight around her, and let the cameras get there fifteen seconds, and I whispered deep inside her ear, "You fucking bitch." Then I stroked her hair, I copped her face in my two loving hands, and I yanked her inside (371). By this point, Nick has discovered Amy's malicious plot to frame him for her disappearance and murder, but Amy's devotion to making their marriage work in the wake of their highly publicized local tragedy implicates Nick in the grander scheme of it all. In the end, Nick stays with Amy because he can't live without the tension and excitement she adds to his boring suburban life.

Together they will move forward as accomplices *and* co-stars in the fake love story playing out for their friends and neighbors, and as Flynn concludes her story, she leaves readers with a biting example of yet another marriage corrupted by conformity but sustained through performance.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Since their introduction to society in post-war America through today's highly connected multimedia landscape, the suburbs have claimed to be a place of sanctuary, but are often a realm of unique toxicity as well. Almost from the onset of suburban living, authors like Richard Yates became aware of the strange patterns of performance being staged in American neighborhoods as married couples veiled these frustrations behind self-medicating tools like alcohol, sexual affairs, and pretending. The culture of suburbia was one based on appearances; a culture *appearing* to thrive in the wake of its country's most celebrated global victory where aspirations took flight and dreams became realities. Apart from the resort-style marketing of these affordable plots beyond the reach of the big city, however, was the reality of those dreams once the authenticity of the dreamers had been corrupted. For the Wheelers, life in the suburbs meant that they were missing out on their own potential instead of centering themselves in the big city where the truer lust for life was constantly being fed by the genuine pulse and flow of America's victorious momentum. Contemporary scribes like Gillian Flynn dialed into this same dilemma as it morphed into something more sinister. Amy Dunne's initial attempts to adapt to the heartland ironically meant poisoning her own heart, resulting in one of

contemporary literature's most contentious anti-heroines. In both novels, each author seemed to approach suburbia through the same lens: pretending to be happy leads to complacency, which ultimately produces legions of unhappy, conformist couples all willing to keep up the charade if it means not being spotlit by the ubiquitous public eye. The show must go on. And though the pretending ranges from the childish to the profound, adults, according to this pair of authors, are no longer free to be themselves under these circumstances. Instead, they become part of a cast of local players all faking their way through a life that cannot live up to the promise of its own campaign. Husbands and wives then are left haunting their own homes.

Authors dove headlong into the drama of these neighborhoods where adults were behaving like children. Yates' portrayal of suburbia in *Revolutionary Road* pulled no punches in 1961 when it pushed in through the Wheeler's vast picture window to expose a common theme threading American neighborhoods: domestic bliss was a delusion propagated by savvy marketing and the victorious spirit of post-war USA. 50 years later, Gillian Flynn would revisit the domestic stage for a modern characterization of the suburbs in *Gone Girl*, a blunt instrument leaning heavily on irony and tone to make a biting social commentary about the psychological wear and tear brought on by the flatlining existence of suburbia. When read together, both novels make brazen and incendiary observations that undermine the veneer of domestic bliss in ways that, regardless of the expanse harbored between their respective publication dates, linger in the pantheon of best-sellers with stinging perpetuity.

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